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Rituals of Herb-Gathering in M. Velyakov's Manuscript of the 1890s: Transformation of Tradition

Abstract. This paper analyzes a manuscript from the 1890s ascribed to M. Velyakov. The manuscript contains a heterogeneous mix of botanical, medical, and household information: it includes several copies of herbals,¹ extracts from medical books, recipes, a catalogue of books on botany, household notes, and so forth. A section of Velyakov's manuscript concerns details of herb-gathering: *"Prayers regarding the collection of herbs and instructions on how to pick them"* (f. 134r—136r). It contains a list of canonical prayers, non-canonical prayers and charms (*"How to approach the herb," "About picking herbs and digging up roots," "An answer to the picking of herbs," "A general prayer for herbs," "A general charm for herbs"*) as well as a description of the herb-picking rite on St. John's Day and *"Detailed instructions on how to gather herbs."* Such sections were not typical of the Russian herbal tradition of the 17th—18th centuries. Therefore, the Velyakov manuscript data is here analyzed in the context of oral and written traditions.

Keywords: fern, herbal, herb-gathering, manuscript, oral tradition, prayer.

In the Manuscript Department of the Russian State Library (RSL 722—779), there is kept an unique manuscript in octavo (14,6 × 10,4 cm). Its details are as follow: 162 folios, cursive, with a leather embossed cover of the size bigger than the inner book; the beginning and the end of the manuscript are absent. There is an owner's record on the f. 118r: *"Bream fish movement on the 4th, 12th and 20th of May as noted by Ivan Dmitriev Mekhov in 1874 in the town of Rybinsk, and copied by M. Velyakov on June 26, 1890 in the town of Rybinsk."* The whole manuscript and the text of this inscription are in the same hand. Thus, it can be inferred that a certain M. Velyakov who had been a resident or a visitor of Rybinsk (Yaroslavl Province) compiled and rewrote this miscellany.

The content of the manuscript is heterogeneous, but in general it contains botanical and household information: it includes several copies of herbals, medical recipes, household notes, a catalogue of books on botany, pharmacy prices, and so forth.

I analyzed the section of Velyakov's manuscript concerning details of herb-gathering: *"Prayers regarding the collection of herbs and instructions on how to pick them"* (f. 134r—136r). Such sections were not typical of the Russian herbal tradition of the 17th—19th centuries. Usually, instructions and verbal formulas following herb-gathering were included in the texts on particular herbs. Otherwise, the books of this type have a general formula to pick any herb. However, the herbals of the 19th century show a tendency to expand the lists of the prayers while gathering herbs. Verbal formulas following the process appear in these articles, where they did not exist before. Along with this, texts on some new herbs not mentioned previously emerged. They also contain spells for herb gathering. Velyakov's collection represents the highest point of this trend.

Here is the listing of features in the part of the manuscript describing the peculiarities of herb gathering:

- 1) List of canonical prayers.
- 2) Description of ritual herb gathering on the Feast of St. John.
- 3) Non-canonical prayer on *"How to begin herb gathering."*
- 4) Spell for herb-gathering (Answer to the question, *'How does one pick herbs?'*).
- 5) Description of ritual herb gathering: *"Detailed instruction on how to gather herbs."*
- 6) Non-canonical prayer *"About picking herbs and digging up roots."*
- 7) *"General prayer for herbs"* (a canonical prayer before starting anything).
- 8) Spell for herb gathering: *"A general spell for herbs."*

Thus, this part of the manuscript contains a list of prayers (No. 1), the four texts of spells and prayers on herb gathering (Nos. 3, 4, 6, 8), one canonical prayer (No. 7), and two descriptions of the ritual herb gathering (Nos. 2, 5). These are the texts I will analyze.

The list of canonical prayers consists of the following texts:

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- The Morning Prayer (*“Through the prayers of our holy fathers, God, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on us. Amen.”*).²
 - Christ’s Prayer (*“Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on us.”*).
 - The Trinitarian formula (*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”*).
 - Prayer to the Holy Trinity.
 - Lord’s Prayer.
 - Psalm 90—A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God.
 - Psalm 50.
 - The Symbol of Faith.
 - The Prayer before starting anything (Velyakov’s text No. 7 *“General prayer for herbs”* was compiled on the basis of this prayer).

As far as the author knows, herbals of the 17th—18th centuries did not include particular lists of prayers for herb gathering. Notes on certain canonical prayers are found only in the texts on peculiar herbs (see: Ippolitova 2008: 142—143), with the Lord’s Prayer, Prayer to the Holy Mother of God, Prayer to the Holy Spirit, *“Lord, have mercy,”* Psalm 50, The Symbol of Faith, the Trinitarian formula, Christ’s Prayer, the Troparion of the Annunciation, *“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.”* Psalms 90 and 108 (Lipinskaya, Leontyeva 1998: 427, 428, 436, 437), and the Trisagion (Strakhova 1988: 42), are mentioned in a few lists. A single text on the plant *adamova golova*³ in a manuscript from the town of Tobolsk in the 18th century predicts the transformation of the herbal’s tradition. This manuscript prescribed saying the whole set of prayers before starting to gather herbs: Christ’s Prayer, *“Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee,”* Prayer to the Holy Spirit, Lord’s Prayer, *“Lord, have mercy”* (12 times), Psalm 50, The Symbol of Faith, *“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee,”* etc. (Glinkina 2004: 115—116). This list has much in common with the set of Orthodox morning prayers (Pravoslavnyy molitvoslov 1993: 4—10). Thus, various herbals mention all the prayers from Velyakov’s list, except for the Morning Prayer and the prayer for good beginning. In this regard, it can be assumed that Velyakov’s list was created mainly on the basis of these herbals. At the same time, it includes the common prayers and psalms known to every Orthodox believer.

In addition, in the Slavic folk culture, canonical prayers were often used as a universal symbolic defense. The most popular prayers

were the Prayer to the Venerable Cross, Psalm 90, Lord's Prayer, and "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee" (Belova, Levkievskaya 2004: 278).

Non-canonical prayers and incantations. This part of Velyakov's manuscript contains four texts of this type (non-canonical prayers and incantations); all of them are meant to be read while gathering any herb.

The structure of text No. 8 *A general spell for herbs* is both the most simple and traditional. It includes two formulas: 1) an appeal to God and Mother-Earth for a blessing, and 2) an appeal to the herb with a request that it be useful to the person and to all Christians. The incantation ends by tacking "Amen" and the direction that the text should be read three times.

Text No. 4 *Answer to the question 'How to pick herbs'* has a similar structure. It begins with a formula referring to the sacred persons and Mother-Earth for the blessing, followed by a remark about the need to read Psalm 90 while gathering herbs. Once again, there is an appeal to Mother Damp Earth with a request that Mother Damp Earth provide an herb "to help" a person. The text ends with the usual spell tack "A key and a padlock and ten angel seals to this deal." The innovation in this text of the herbal tradition is a list of the sacred persons: "Ivan and Maria, Ioakim and Anna, Adam and Eve."

While the second and third pairs are well known biblical characters, the names John and Mary, each going back to the name of the respective saint, in this case, are rather correlate with an herb wood cow-wheat (*ivan-da-marya* (literally *John-and-Mary*) in Russian) (see: Kolosova 2004; Kolosova 2009: 162—169).

Text No. 6 *About picking herbs and digging up roots* consists of the prayer introduction, the motif⁴ of the world creation, and an appeal to sacred persons for a blessing in picking herbs and digging up roots.

This text has a more complicated structure, that includes an introduction consisting of two prayers ("In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen" and Christ's Prayer), as well

as a blessing formula that is repeated twice: firstly, it is addressed to St. Nicholas and then to the angels, Saints, and sanctifiers. *Amen* performs the function of the tack of the spell.

The text has a perfect analogy in the Herbal of the second half of the 18th century (Schuk. 1901), it is not a late innovation. The text of Schukin's Herbal is more complete; it continues with an appeal to Mother Earth and concludes with the brief Trinitarian formula (Schuk. 1901: 14).

Finally, the text of No. 3 *Prayer on how to come upon an herb* is the most extensive. It includes:

- The prayer introduction (“*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*”),
- The motif of the world creation,
- Appeal to an herb with a request for a blessing to gather it (with a motif of herb's origin from earth and sky),
- Charming of the herb for the favor of the person,
- Motif of the herb's origin from the earth pillar, life-giving cross, God, earth,
- Appeal to Mother Earth for the blessing to gather herbs,
- Repeated charming of the herb for the favor of the person.

When comparing the structure of the texts one can see that the element they have in common is an appeal to the **sacred characters** and / or **Mother Earth** through asking for a blessing. This is not something new; this piece was characteristic of the herbals of the 18th—19th centuries and of the oral tradition (in a slightly different form) as well.

“Gospodi, blagoslovi menya seyu dobroyu travoyu” [“*God, bless me by this fine herb*”] (RSL. 722-521, 3r—3v)

“Gospodi, blagoslovi, i ty, Mat-syraya-zemlya, blagoslovi siyu travu sorvati” [“*God, bless, and you, Mother Damp Earth, bless me for taking this herb*”] (F.VI.16, 1).

“Nebo—batka, Zemlya—matka. Matushka-Zemlya, otchego ty dobra? Imey polzu dlya menya” [“*Sky is the father, Earth is the mother. Mother Earth, why are you so kind? Be useful for me*”] (Field:Lobova; Anikin 1998: 309).

In the texts Nos. 3 and 8, there is the motif of an **appeal to the herb** and **charming of the herb** for the favor of the person. It is typical both for the manuscript and the oral tradition.

"Ty esi mat-trava travam vsem <...> soblyudi mya, raba Bozhiya im-yarek, ot diyavolskogo mechtaniya, i pakosti, i vsekh zlokoznennykh navet ikh, i ot supostat moikh, zlo myslyaschikh na mya, cheloveka." [*"You are the mother-herb for all the herbs <...> protect me, servant of God, so-and-so, from the devilish desires and filth, all their insidious slanders, and from enemies having wicked thoughts about me as a human-being."*] (RSL. 722-521, 2r—3, late 17th century).

"A ty, mat-trava, ot Boga sotvorena, ot zemli rozhdena byt mne, rabu Bozhiyu, na polzu rabam i rabynyam" [*"And you, mother-herb, created by God, born by earth to be for me, servant of God, useful for servants male and female"*] (V. 1896: 3).

"Be you, silent herb, useful for all purposes" (Toporkov 2010: 90, No. 1a).

"Na chto ty ugodna, na chto prigodna, na to ya tebya i беру" [*"What are you suitable for, what are you pleasing for, for that purpose, I take you"*] (Korovashko, Korepova 1997: 52, No. 214).

The motif of the **herb's origin** is found in both oral and manuscript sources. In both types of sources, this origin is associated with God and the earth:

"Ty esi mat-trava travam vsem, ot Boga sotvorena i ot zemli rozhdena" [*"You are the mother-herb for all the herbs, created by God, born by earth"*] (RSL. 722—521, 2v—3r, late 17th century).

"Ot Boga zeliye, ot zemli korenije" [*"The potion is from God, the roots are from earth"*] (Vel. 26, 279v, second quarter of the 18th century).

"Ot zemli trava, a ot Boga lekarstvo" [*"The herb is from earth, the cure is from God"*] (F.VI.16, 1).

"Ot boga travka, ot zemli koreshok, ot solnyshka tsvetok. Na chto ty ugodna, na chto prigodna, na to ya tebya i беру. Zemlya mati,

blagoslovi travku brati" [*"The herb is from God, the root is from earth, the flower is from the sun. What are you suitable for, what are you pleasing for, for that purpose, I take you. Mother-earth, bless me for taking this herb"*] (Korovashko, Korepova 1997: 52. No. 214).

The mention of the *"earth pillar"* and *"life-giving cross"* is known only, so far, from text No. 3 of Velyakov's manuscript.

The motif of the **world creation** in the text fragments describing herb gathering is known only by the abovementioned P.I. Schukin's manuscript:

"Osnovanie Bozhie, osnoval est Gospod Bog nebo i zemlyu vsyakim dobrym ugodiem" [*"Foundation of God, Our Lord founded the heaven and the earth and fill them with good useful things"*] (Schuk. 1901: 14).

This motif can be found not only in text No. 6, but also in text No. 3, where it appears in a slightly different verbal expression:

"Sam Gospodi, sam Iisuse Khristos sotvoril nebo i zemlyu, sotvoril more, vodu i vsyakiya veshchi" [*"God himself, Jesus Christ himself created the heaven and the earth, created a sea, water and different stuff"*].

This fragment can be interpreted in two ways. One can suppose that the motif was either inserted in text No. 3 under the influence of text No. 6 or was derived from other sources. In general, the appearance of this motif is quite reasonable. All the herbs relate to the act of world creation, and, because of it, the very fact of their existence is sanctified by the divine presence.

Thus, Velyakov's manuscript contains extensive texts compiled on the basis of the verbal formulas inherent to herbals.

Instructions on how and when to gather herbs. Velyakov's manuscript includes two detailed instructions on how to gather herbs. The first one (see No. 2) apparently compiles descriptions of ritual actions from the herbals concerning different species. The following quotation is typical:

"i kotoraya trava chem brat, sama yasno v svoey opisi pishet, a ne vsyakaya brat so vsem vyshepisannym" ["and how to pick each herb is described by the same herb in its description, but one shouldn't pick any herb with all instructions abovementioned"].

Certain motifs derived from Velyakov's text under analysis have direct analogies in other herbals.

For example, St. John's Day (June 24) and the Day of Saint Agrippina (in Russian tradition it has the vernacular name of Agrafena Kupal'nitsa (the Bather), June 23) are mentioned in herbals as the proper days for gathering about 30 plant species. The association of herb gathering to the time of day is typical for more than 20 plants mentioned in herbalists (Ippolitova 2008: 131—132).

The herbals plainly state about the plant *plakun*:⁵

"bes toya travy inyya nikakiya travy ne rvuttsa, a khosha i vyrvesh, pomochi net" ["Without that herb, no other herb may be picked up. Even if it would be gathered, it will not help"] (Muz. 10927, 7v., No. 11).

The ritual actions of when a person should encircle an herb with a chalk line or a line of seeds before digging it out or dragging it through some holed object are also described in different herbals (Ippolitova 2008: 154—161; Ippolitova 2015).

Various herbals include some other motifs similar to ones from Velyakov's manuscript:

– To dig out roots sunwise:

"A terebit tu travu, stav protiv solntsa litsem" ["And pick this herb facing the sun"] (an herb *oreshik*,⁶ the end of the 18th century, Muz. 4492, 51v., No. 87).

– To make sure that a plant is not shadowed when a person picks it up:

"A kak eya stanesh imat, ot solntsa steni ne navodi" ["When you will gather it do not hide it in the shadow of the Sun"] (a herb *tsemravnaya*, the end of the 17th century, Uvar. 114, 6v.).

- To gather luminous herbs at night:

“Est trava, imya ey levuppa, soboyu mala, v den eya ne naydesh, iskat eya v noch, na ney dva tsveta: odin zheltoy, drugoy krasnoy—v noch, chto sveschi, goryat” [“There is an herb named levuppa, it is small, you cannot find it in the daytime, seek it out at night. It has two colors: one is yellow, the other is red; they shine at night as candles”] (the end of the 18th century, Muz. 4492, 13v., No. 26).

- To use some precious fabric while herb-gathering (however, this does not necessarily include aquatic plants, like in Velyakov’s manuscript). For example, the herb *polotaya niva*⁷ should be gathered with clean hands, washed in clean water, and wrapped in clean cloth. The root of the herb named *verba*⁸ should be winded round with silk and “*scorlat*⁹ or *aksamit*¹⁰ rag or something golden, and be carried with a rag of velvet, atlas or kamka”¹¹ over it (“*skorlatnym loskutkom, ili aksamitom, ili zolotnym kakim, i nest loskutom barkhatnym, ili otlasnym, ili kamchazhnym*”) (17th century, RSL. 722-521, 3).

- To be clean (Ippolitova 2008: 137).

- Herbals include recommendations on how to roll some herbs in wax:

“A nosit tot tsvet v chistom vosku s soboyu” [“And carry this flower in clean wax”] (an herb *sirindarkh kheruz*, Q.VI.33, 3, No. 6); *“Kto tsvet ego nosit pri sobe s voskom v chistote, togo cheloveka stanut vsyakiya lyudi lyubit i pokaryatisya emu”* [“Who carries its flower clean in the wax that man would be loved by everybody, and everybody will bow to him”] (*adamova golova*, 33.14.11, 33, No. 71).

The only motif that has no analogies in herbals of the 17th—18th centuries is the recommendation to gather herbs with a candle or fire. This motif will be considered further because the second of Velyakov’s instructions on how to gather herbs also includes it.

This second text is entitled *Detailed instruction on how to gather herbs* (see No. 5). It is of great interest in the context of the manuscript tradition of the 17th—18th centuries because the latter does not include descriptions of such length nor of such detail.

Here is a description of a magical ritual gathering of special, magical plants, the ones *"kotoryya dnem ne mozžno videt, a v noshchi, kak svecha gorit"* [*"that could not be seen in the daytime and flame as a candle at night"*]. Possibly, the use of the names of these plants was deliberately forbidden in the text.

This instruction can be divided into two parts: preliminary magical actions at Easter and the ritual itself on the Eve of the Day of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. Preparations for the ritual begin on Holy Saturday, when it is necessary to take a candle and go to the church service. The behavior of the person making the ritual should fulfill certain conditions: he should not look back, should talk with no one, stand in the service *"with fear and awe,"* think of nothing but have *"the prayer in his mouth and zeal for the Lord."* During the burial rite one should light a candle and make sure that it has not been extinguished during the entire service. The next day, with the same candle, one should go by the beginning of the Easter service and before the procession around the church begins, light a candle again and make sure that it does not go out. Then, he has to go back to the church and stand in the same place where he had stood before with the implementation of the same conditions as on Saturday. After the service, he should bring a candle home and hide.

The next stage of the ritual begins on St. John's Day. One should wake up at midnight, take three magical objects (a lighted candle from the Easter service, an aspen stick with bark peeled off, and a clean towel) and go to the place for herb gathering. When the necessary herbs are found, one should endure the *"fear and horror,"* do not look back and do not move. When the fear passes, one needs to kneel down facing the east and pick off the leaves from the herb in turn from the bottom up *"sunwise."* While picking leaves up, one should squeeze each leaf by a separate finger, one leaf by one finger of his right hand. Then, the towel should be spread out with the leaves put on it. At the end, a towel should be folded and knots made for the number of leaves. The text of the instruction ends with this, and it seems to be incomplete or defective. We can only guess how an aspen stick and a candle should be used. The further implementation of the herb gathered with so many difficulties also remains unknown.

Similar (but not complete) instructions began to appear in herbals and medical manuals starting with the 19th century. We know three examples of this kind, all of which come from fern descriptions.¹²

The herbal by Ivan Biryukov (the 2nd quarter of the 19th century) tells about the herb named *paporat chornaya*.¹³ It recommends going to the forest on June 24 (i.e. on the Day of John the Baptist), finding the *paporat*, encircling around it, laying the white linen beneath it, and keeping this grass very tightly bound. When it blossoms, one should cut off the flower and put it into wax. This time can be very scary, but a person should endure the fear, and not move, until the first cock-crowing. Only *paporat* blossoms have 12 leaves; its flower is under a leaf and is similar to the flower of a bird cherry. When it sheds its blossoms, there will be something dustlike in their place. This plant was recommended for use in treasure-hunting (F.VI.16, 10, No. 89).

In the old-Believer herbal from the collection of P.V. Maltsev, from the end of the 19th century, there is a description of the plant named *paport* with the “red flower, when it shines small sparkles or candles flame on the top.” This *paport* blossoms for 33 minutes visibly and 3 minutes invisibly. The one who possesses this flower would know everything, all the hidden treasures would be open to him, he would listen to thoughts of all the people, understand all languages, the characteristics of all animals and plants. One should go to gather the *paport* with a crucifix, the Gospel or Psalter and a root of the *plakun* herb. After coming to the place one should encircle with a cross for 3 steps around, read certain prayers, put the crucifix and the Gospel by both sides of the plant, sit near it inside of the circle, and look at it constantly in order not to miss the bloom when three flowers blossom like a candle. When it sheds its blossoms, one should make a sign of the cross over the flowers, say the prayers and “Amen” and tie the flowers to the root of the *plakun* herb. After that, a person should wait for “white light or the daylight” and then come out of the circle (Malts. 792, 2v—3v).

In 1861, A.N. Afanasyev published selected texts from a medical manual of the 19th century. One of them was a text about the magical plant *chornaya paporot*, which blossoms on the Eve of John the Baptist’s Day, at midnight and “*flames and burns as fire.*” In order to get

the flower of this plant, one should take a sliver burnt at both ends on the Eve of St. Basil's Day (December 31), a candle-end that was used by a priest during the festive service and wax or a candle-end from the Altar icon of the Mother of God at Easter.¹⁴ A person should take these objects and go for the herb *paporot*, lay clean paper or linen beneath, encircle with a sliver and wait for the bloom, overcoming fear. After blossoming, the flower will fall to the linen; it should be swept away with a feather and closed with it in wax, otherwise devils would carry it away. While picking up the flower, a person should read prayers, not talk to anybody and not look back. The possessor of the flower will know where the treasures are hidden, will gain honor, and the possibility of becoming invisible, etc. (Afanasyev 1861: 72—74).

In my opinion, the authors of these texts have not borrowed from each other, though they may have several motifs in common. Their subjects, in contrast to the first instruction on how to gather herbs, are not connected to the manuscript tradition but rather to the oral one. Most likely, each of these texts is based on the oral transmissions about the fern known to the compilers of these manuscripts (Velyakov's collection, Biryukov's and Maltsev's herbals, the manuscript possessed by A. Afanasyev). A more detailed comparison of these manuscripts with folk records on blossoming fern could make it possible to trace the local traditions each of these texts dates back to.

In summation, my study points to the list of canonical prayers from Velyakov's manuscript being based mainly on data from herbals and including mostly well-known prayers and psalms. The non-canonical prayers and spells from Velyakov's collection are compiled on the basis of traditional herbal formulas, but are more extensive. One instruction on how to gather herbs compiles descriptions of the ritual actions originated from the herbals' texts about different plants. The other one is not typical of the herbals and goes back to the oral beliefs on fern blossoming and gathering.

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Notes

1. Hereafter, the word *herbal* is used to designate 'a book describing and listing the properties of plants.'
2. Hereafter, the author provides a literal translation of the analyzed text.
3. The literal translation of *adamova golova* from Russian is *Adam's Head*. Hereafter, unless otherwise specified in the further footnotes, the botanical name and / or English equivalent of the Russian name of the plant is not provided due to the insufficient data provided by manuscript sources.
4. Hereafter, the word *motif* is used to designate a formulaic unit of narration, an elementary structure within the rituals and prayers.
5. This vernacular name of a plant is a derivative of the Russian verb *plakat* 'to weep.'
6. From the Russian word *oreh* 'nut.'
7. Literal translation of *polotaya niva* from Russian is 'weeded field.'
8. Literal translation of *verba* from Russian is 'pussy willow,' but the described plant is not a species of the genus *Salix*.
9. Old Russian word *scorlat* stands for a sort of French cloth red-colored initially.
10. Old Russian word *aksamit* stands for precious fabric with golden and silver threads in warp, thick and nappy as velvet.
11. Old Russian word *kamka* stands for silk, colored, inwrought fabric.
12. These texts describe different species of fern, but all of them refer to the folklore image of this herb.
13. In Russian, *chornaya* means 'black,' and *paporat* is a vernacular name of a fern.
14. Recall the Velyakov's instruction, which mentions the candle taken at Easter.

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