

References to Ginseng in the 17-th and 18-th Century Russian and West European Writings

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As it is generally known, ginseng (*Panax ginseng* C.A.M.) – one of the most important medicinal plants of the ancient Chinese medical world – has been known in China from time immemorial.^[5] In Russia and Europe, however, this economic plant has only been known since the early 1600's.

The history of the early knowledge of ginseng in Europe is rather well known and it will not be dwelt on here, but with one exception. In 1697, French scholar Burdelen, presented a rather general and superficial report about ginseng at the French Academy of Sciences and had the report published in 1719. Until recently it was generally believed that publication of Burdelen's paper was the starting point for European published literature on ginseng.^[2] This claim to firstness, however, can no longer be maintained, because in 1713, French Jesuit Jartoux published his findings on ginseng in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*.¹ Consequently, in establishing the starting point for European published literature on ginseng, the priority must be given to Jartoux because publication of his report preceded Burdelen by six years, and it was the first dependable and detailed source of information about ginseng for the entire Western Europe, which included: a description and a drawing of ginseng made from nature, determination of the plant's geographical distribution, a listing of its medicinal properties and a report on Jartoux's personal experience with ginseng, which he used as a tonic and invigorative remedy.^[6]

In Russia, however, the earliest reliable report on ginseng preceded the accounts of both Burdelen and Jartoux. In 1675, Spathary, an envoy from the Moscovite Court to the Chinese Imperial Court was sent on a diplomatic mission to China. Returning to Russia, in 1677, he delivered to Posol'skii Prikaz² a lengthy report which Baddeley^[1] calls for short, a *Description of China*.³ Written in old Russian and using the Church-Slavonic script, the manuscript is dated 1678. Consequently, this work has been already in existence for 300 years. The first, authentic report on ginseng in the European world is found in the 12-th chapter of the manuscript.⁴ Spathary's description of ginseng is ten lines long in the printed edition of the manuscript.⁵ The translation of the description in full is given below:

The [medicinal] roots and herbs they [the Chinese] have great many kinds, but the most precious and the most famous is the root ginseng which comes from [the locality] not far from the estuary of the Amur River. And they name it [ginseng] because it is suited and good for every person, as if it

contained the very essence of that person, and they call it [ginseng] ghin which in Chinese means ghin – a man. And they boil that root and give it to those who are weak because of the long illness and it [the remedy] gives them a great relief. Also, in many cases, it aids those who lie dying and they are cured. And if the root is given to a healthy man it causes great harm, for it increases body warmth and brings about an excess of blood in the body organs. They sell this root at a very high price; for a pound of that root they give three pounds of silver, and there is not one Chinese who does not have that root.

Spathary not only described ginseng, but he also brought a sample root into Russia. As a result, Russian folk medicine practitioners and then with their assistance European medical doctors were able to familiarize themselves with ginseng and its therapeutic uses.^[3]

Spathary's *Description* was eventually published in the printed format in 1910 by the Kazan' University Press.^[7] The work was analyzed, partially translated into English and incorporated into the second volume of Baddeley's fundamental work.^[1] However, the chapter containing the description of ginseng was neither translated nor reviewed by Baddeley. Consequently, the English translation offered here is apparently the first one done since the writing of Spathary's manuscript. It is hoped that this translation would add to the existing knowledge on the subject and would aid in establishing the chronology of European published literature on ginseng.

References

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- [3] GRUSHVITZKII, I.V., *Zhen'shen'* [The Ginseng]. 342 pp. 141 figs. 93 tables. Publication of the Far Eastern Branch, Siberian Division of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Vladivostok. 1961. (In Russian).
- [4] HILL-PAULUS, B., *Nikolaj Gavrilovic Spatharij (1636–1708) und seine Gesandtschaft nach China*. (= Mitteilungen d. Gesellschaft für Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens e.V. Hamburg, LXXI), 1–122 + LXVIII. Hamburg. 1978.
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- [7] SPATHARY, N.G., *Opisanie pervyia chasti vseleennyia imenuemoi Asii...* [A Description of the First Part of the World which is called Asia ...] Kazan' University Press. Kazan'. 1910. (In Russian).

Notes

- 1 The writer is grateful to the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens (Kew, England) for supplying him with a copy of this rare publication, and to the Harvard-Yenching Library (Harvard University, Cambridge, U.S.A.) for the access to necessary literature.
- 2 Posol'skii Prikaz is Office of the Foreign Affairs in the 17-th century Russia.

- 3 The full title of the manuscript is: *Opisanie pervyia chasti vseleennyia imenuemoi Asii v nei zhe sostoit Kitaiskoe gosudarstvo s prochimi ego gorody i provintzii*. This may be translated as follows: „A Description of the First Part of the Universe [World], which is called Asia, wherein lies the Chinese State with all its Towns and Provinces.“
According both to BADDELEY^[1] (pp. 209–210) and HILL-PAULUS^[4] (pp. 104–105), SPATHARY'S *Opisanie* is not an original work, but, for the most part, a translation of the Jesuit Martino Martini's famous work: *Novus Atlas Sinensis* ... Amsterdam. Blaeu. 1655.
- 4 The full title of the Ch. 12 is: *Kakoie u kitaitzov uchenie, i kakoie u nikh pismo i kak ikh pochitaiut, i kakoie u nikh dokhtorstvo, i kakim obrazom lechat i kakoie korenje upotrebliaiut*. This may be translated as follows: „What kind of learning is there in China, of what kind is the Chinese script, and how they gain their social status [in China], and what kind of medical art they have, and how they treat diseases, and what kinds of [medicinal] roots [herbs] they use.“
As stated by HILL-PAULUS^[4] (p. 115), the 12-th chapter of Spathary's manuscript was borrowed from the above mentioned MARTINI'S *Atlas*. However, the description of ginseng found in this chapter is not found in Martini's work. The question whether or not this description is original Spathary's one, needs further investigation and is open to discussion.
- 5 *Korenii zhe i trav u nikh vsiakikh mnozhestvo, a dorozhe vsekh i prekhvalneie koren' est' ghinzen, kotoryi roditsia ne podalieku ot ust'ia amury reki, i imenuiut ego tak, chto vsiakomu cheloveku on pristoit, akiby sushchei toi chelovek, i imenuiut ghin, chto pokitiaski imenuesia ghin, chelovek. I tot koren' variat, i daiut tem, kotorye slaby ot dolgoi nemoshchi i velikuiu pomoshch' podaet. Takozhde mnogazhdy i tem pomoshchstvuet, izhe prismerti lezhat i istzelevaiut, a chtozhe zdravomu cheloveku dat', gorazdo vredit, ponezhe umnozhit pary telesnyia i krov' um-nozhaet. Prodaiut onoi koren' vesma dorogo, za funt togo koreni daiut po tri funta srebra, i net takogo kitaitza, chto by nebylo u nego takogo korene* [6, page 43].