

TRANSLATION/TRADUCTION

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*The Sixteenth-Century "Account of
Muscovy" Attributed to Don Felippo Prenestain*

Introduction

In his critical survey of travelers' accounts of Russia to 1700, Friedrich von Adelung includes one rather curious entry for 1575.¹ He writes that there is in the Vatican Library an Italian description of Muscovy attributed to an Austrian envoy named Johann Pernstein. However, since there is no other record of any such envoy's having visited Russia in 1575, Adelung concludes that the said Johann Pernstein is actually Phillip Prenestain, who was allegedly sent by the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II; to the court of Ivan IV in 1579 and whose name appears on a number of Latin and Italian accounts of this Imperial diplomatic mission to Moscow. Both the date 1575 and the name Johann Pernstein are the result, according to Adelung, of simple scribal error.²

Adelung's explanation for the existence of one and the same manuscript under two separate dates and two different, albeit related,³ names is appealing because of its simplicity. One can even find an additional piece of evidence to support Adelung's conclusion. Each of the known copies of the manuscript (including the 1575 version) ends not only with the date but also the place of writing, which in all cases is Łowicz, Poland (Lovitio in Polonia).⁴

Adelung's attempt to attribute the "Account of Muscovy" to Phillip Prenestain fails, however, before a lack of evidence that any Prenestain-Pernstein ever conducted a mission to Russian soil. The negative evidence is, on the other hand, quite conclusive. First of all, there is no mention in Russian diplomatic sources from the period of anyone with the name Prenestain (or

1. *Kritisch-Literarische Übersicht der Reisenden in Russland bis 1700, deren Berichte bekannt sind* [hereafter *K-LU*], Vol. 1 (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1960), pp. 286-87.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

3. In addition to Pernstein and Prenestain, several other variant forms of the name are known, including: Peresten, Pernisten, Pernister, Pernestan, Prenistan, and Prenistain. *Ibid.*, p. 312, n. 348.

4. Located some fifty miles west of Warsaw.

variant thereof). Second, the official correspondence between Ivan IV and Rudolph II clearly shows that there were no Imperial envoys at all in Russia between February, 1576, and 1580. Rudolph wrote Ivan in January, 1577, informing him of the death of his father, Maximilian II, in October of the previous year.⁵ In September, 1577, Ivan dispatched the *dvorianin* Zhdan Ivanovich Kvashnin to Vienna to reaffirm the friendship between himself and the new emperor and to ask Rudolph to send his envoys to confirm the cordial ties between their two countries.⁶ In March, 1580, Ivan sent a letter to Rudolph in which he wrote as follows: "Your envoys, my dear and beloved brother, have, I know not for what reason, not come. And you, our dear brother, might write back to us, telling us why your envoys have been delayed and have not visited us yet."⁷ Rudolph acknowledged Ivan's letter in October of the same year, saying that he had indeed designated envoys to leave for Moscow but "some died, some became ill and were thus unable to travel."⁸

If not Prenestain, who then was the author of this mysterious account and what were the circumstances surrounding its writing? The first to address himself to this question was the historian N. M. Karamzin. In his *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskago* he writes that the years 1573 to 1576 were marked by a flurry of diplomatic activity between Maximilian II and Ivan IV over the Polish question. Maximilian was intent on placing his own son, the Archduke Ernest, on the Polish throne, and he tried assiduously to enlist the support of Ivan for his candidate. These efforts of Maximilian culminated with the arrival in Russia in late November, 1575, of the "distinguished Austrian dignitaries," Hans Kobenzl and Daniel Printz.⁹

In his description of the lavish reception given the Imperial ambassadors by Ivan, Karamzin notes that he has seen an excerpt from an Italian account of this mission attributed to Giovanni Pernstein. Then he adds: "In the original, it is likely, there was no name of the author; but someone who had heard of Herberstein, sent to Russia [earlier] by Maximilian I, inserted [the name] Pernstein: however, this Giovanni is Hans Kobenzl: not only the date (1575), but all of the historical circumstances without a doubt refer to his [Kobenzl's] embassy."¹⁰

Although Karamzin's derivation of "Pernstein" from "Herberstein" is unconvincing, and takes no account of the fact that the real Pernsteins were

5. *Pamiatniki diplomaticheskikh snoshenii s Imperieiu Rimskoiu* [hereafter *PDS*], Vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: V Tip. II Otd-niia Sobstvennoi E. I. V. Kantseliarii, 1851), pp. 714-18.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 718-25.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 769.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 819.

9. N. M. Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskago*, 12 vols. in 3 + index (St. Petersburg: V Tipografii Eduarda Pratsa, 1842-44), III (IX), 141.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 98, n. 440. Adelung does not accept Karamzin's explanation and dismisses it with what, we feel, are basically irrelevant arguments. (*K-LU*, p. 287).