

The Voynich “Coat of Arms”

And Michael Voynich’s Flight from Siberia

(From [Voynichiana](#): documents, images, and research illuminating the lives of Wilfrid and Ethel Voynich and of Anne M. Nill, Wilfrid Voynich's assistant and Ethel's life-long companion after Voynich's death.)

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At some point as his rare book trade prospered Voynich began embellishing his business stationery and sale catalogues with an adaptation of the coat of arms of the Sessas, a family of Venetian printers active in the late 1400s into the late 1500s. He also made “SESSA, LONDON” his telegraphic address. He maintained these practices to the end of his days.

The Sessa coat of arms features a cat gripping a mouse (or rat) in its jaws¹:



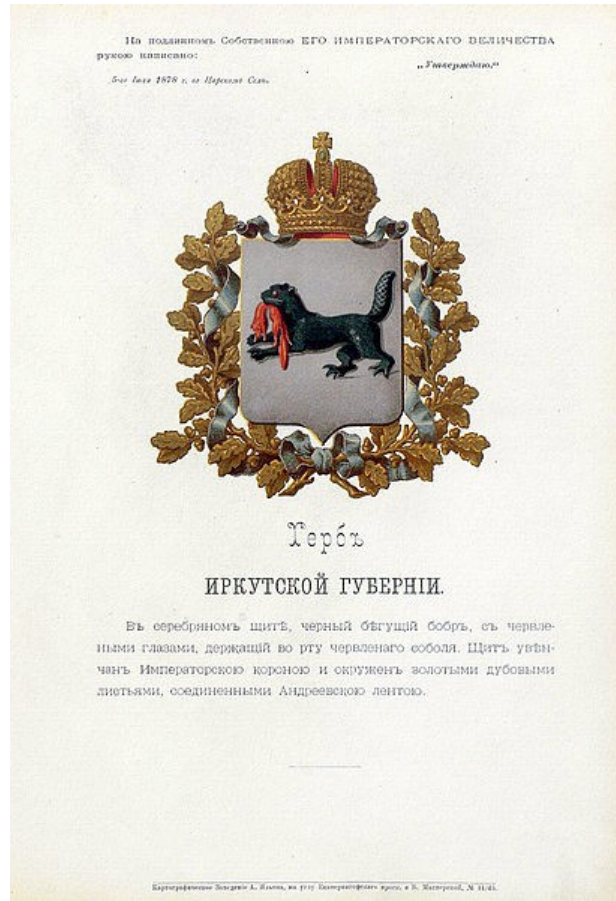
Voynich’s adaptation was a close copy of the version of the Sessa coat of arms above and changed little over the years. Sometimes he included the initials “WMV,” sometimes not. Unlike the Sessas, he seems never to have adopted any sort of inscription or motto. The version below, without initials, is from Voynich’s sale catalogue, “No. 31. An Illustrated Catalogue of Remarkable Incunabula, many with Woodcuts, and a Specimen of an Unknown Xylographical Press, Offered by Wilfrid M. Voynich [no date].” Save for its lack of initials, it is virtually identical to the Sessa coat of arms above:



There seems to be no genuine Voynich family coat of arms. But why would Voynich adopt that of the Sessas? What was it about that coat of arms that appealed to him?

¹ The Sessas developed ornate versions of their coat of arms, some of which included the Latin motto *Dissimilium Infida Societas*, “Association with those not alike [oneself] is treacherous” –a truth presumably illustrated by the fate of the mouse or rat. Voynich would have come across these versions.

The answer lies in Irkutsk in Eastern Siberia. Irkutsk was the province of Voynich's exile in the late 1880s. Since 1690 the Irkutsk Governorate has used one form or another of an emblem remarkably like that of the Sessas' coat of arms (the example below is from the *Coats of Arms of the Governorates and Regions of the Russian Empire*, published in 1880 by the Russian Imperial Ministry of Internal Affairs):



A Version from 1790:



The Irkutsk coat of arms shows a Siberian tiger (“babr”) holding a sable in its jaws, an appropriate symbol: Irkutsk was a major center of the Russian fur trade. But for Voynich, the tiger and its prey must also have seemed a poignant symbol of his own plight as prisoner of the Tsar, first in Warsaw, then in Siberia. When, early in his career as dealer in rare books, he came across the Sessa coat of arms he must have been stunned by its similarity to that of the province of his exile. What other emotions stirred in him then?

According to Voynich’s police file in Irkutsk,² he was arrested October 10, 1885 in Kovno, Russian Lithuania, for being an active member of the Polish socialist party *Proletariat*. He was taken to the Alexandrovsky Citadel in Warsaw and held there without trial for a year and a half; then by an order of the Tsar dated April 30, 1887, exiled - without trial - to Eastern Siberia to live and work under police supervision for five years.

The police records don’t tell us when he arrived in Irkutsk, but they do relate that on December 7, 1887 he was sent on to Tunká, a village in the foothills of the Eastern Sayan Mountains, 180 kilometers southwest of Irkutsk and not far from the Mongolian border. Life in Tunká, especially in the winter, must have been wretched, and Voynich did everything he could to get himself transferred back to Irkutsk, where there was a congenial colony of political exiles. On June 21, 1889 he was granted permission to return and serve as pharmacist in the Mikheyevsky Hospital in that city. (Voynich’s police file notes that he had been awarded the degree “assistant pharmacist” “with distinction” by Moscow University, the certificate of award signed by one Sklifosovsky and dated November 27, 1884.) After a time Voynich began making requests to be transferred from Irkutsk to Balagansk, a city to the north, ostensibly for reasons of health. He received permission to make the move on June 12, 1890.

And disappeared.

It’s likely that Voynich, having made plans to flee Siberia, had sought official transfer to Balagansk so that his absence from Irkutsk would seem unsuspecting, at least for a time. If so, the scheme worked. It took the authorities almost a month after granting him permission to relocate to Balagansk to realize that Voynich had gone missing. On July 6, 1890 the police in Balagansk sent a curt telegram to their brethren in Irkutsk that read: “There is no Voynich. Kindly make a search. Officer Malkov.” The next day, circulars marked “Secret High Importance” along with sixteen copies of Voynich’s photograph were distributed among the Irkutsk police calling on them to make an “urgent search” for Voynich. The entire force was put on alert.

After three weeks and “no Voynich,” the Governor’s Office demanded the Irkutsk Chief of Police “personally and throughout the ranks take energetic steps to search for Voynich, keeping in view the possibility that he is staying in the living quarters of state criminals in Irkutsk, some of whom are residing in cottages on the outskirts of the city.”

The search in Irkutsk and its environs continued for some time, but without turning up the fugitive.

Voynich ultimately reached London in the fall of 1890. His method of escape is unknown to us.

² Information on Voynich in the Irkutsk police records is summarized by V.P. Skorokhodov in *Istoricheskij Arkhiv*, Moscow, 1957, No. 4, “Khronika,” VII, pp. 244-245.