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## Eating with the hands: imperial knowledge and the making of the five-finger dish “beshbarmak”

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**Тірек сөздер:** Бешбармақ / бишбармақ; этнографиялық түсінік; империя және ұғым; отарлық жіктеу; империялық эпистемологиялар; дене практикалары; асты қолмен жеу

**Ключевые слова:** Бешбармақ / бишбармақ; производство этнографического знания; империя и знание; колониальная классификация; имперские эпистемологии; телесные практики; употребление пищи руками

This paper examines how the term *beshbarmak* (bishbarmak) emerged through early processes of incorporation of the Qazaq steppe into Russian imperial structures. It argues that beshbarmak should be understood not as the name of a pre-existing dish, but as a category produced through imperial practices of observation, administrative saturation, and the classificatory imperative. The term entered the historical record in contexts shaped by prolonged co-presence and sustained interaction between imperial outsiders and colonized actors within a narrow frontier setting in the Orenburg region. In such contexts, where local food practices had to be rendered nameable and intelligible, early accounts foregrounded observable practices—most notably the consumption of meat seasoned with salt by hand—rather than stable recipes or locally grounded names for dishes. Through descriptive naming, these practices were gradually endowed with the appearance of cultural specificity and came to be associated with particular groups, including Qazaqs, Bashkirs, and Tatars. More broadly, using the case of beshbarmak, the paper examines how embodied food practices of local populations were made legible within imperial regimes of knowledge.

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## «Тамақты қолмен жеу»: империялық ұғым және «бешбармақ» түсінігінің қалыптасуы

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Мақала Ресей империясы кезінде «бешбармақ» терминінің пайда болу тарихына арналған. Бұл ұғым орыс тілді әдебиеттерде Ресей империясының Қазақ даласын отарлауының бастапқы кезеңдерінде пайда болды. Алайда бұл терминді ас атауы деп түсінуге болмайды. Оны орыс тілді материалдардағы сипаттама деп қарастырған жөн. Бастапқыда шекаралық аймақтарда, соның ішінде Орынбор өлкесіне байланысты материалдарда айтылды. Отарланған аймақтармен өзара қарым-қатынас барысында башқұрт, татар және қазақтың дәстүрлі тағамдары да (ет тағамдары) түрлі әдебиет бетінде суреттеле бастады. Алайда оның атауы мен дайындалу тәсілдеріне аса назар аударылған жоқ. Материал авторлары тұздалып, қайнатылған етті қолмен жеу тәсіліне тоқталды. Етті бес саусақпен ұстайтын сыртқы сипатына қарай «бешбармақ» атауын ойлап тапты. Бастапқыда Ресейдің шекаралық әрі әкімшілік және бақылау, құжаттау пункті саналған Орынбор өлкесінде қолданылды. Орыс құжаттарында бұл ас – қолмен, бес саусақпен ұстап жейтін, ұсақтап туралған, тұздалған, қайнатылған ет (негізінен қойдың еті) деп суреттелді. Бауыр мен бүйрек араласқан, майға қуырылған ет деп сипаттайтын (қуырдақ) мәліметтер де бар. Оны мерекедегі ас немесе қонақжай дәстүрдің белгісі деп түсіндірген. «Бешбармақтың» қазақша мағынасы «бес саусақ». Қазақ дәстүрінде «бес саусақ» деп аталатын тағам жоқ. Ресей империялық дәстүрінде пайда болған «бешбармақ» термині біртіндеп түрлі қолданыстарда етек жая бастады. Әрине бұл атау нақты бір мәдениеттің аты емес, сипаттауға ыңғайлы түрі болып шықты. Міне осылайша «бешбармақ» терминінің пайда болу тарихы империялық ұғымның кейбір сипаттамаларды тұрақты қолданысқа енгізгенін, отаршыл билік әлеуметтік және мәдени дүниелерге өз қолтаңбасын қалдырғанын көрсетеді.

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## «Едят руками»: имперское знание и создание пятипалого блюда «бешбармак»

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В статье рассматривается, каким образом бешбармак (бишбармак) оформился как категория в ходе ранних процессов включения Казахской степи в структуры Российской империи. Показывается, что этот термин следует понимать не как наименование блюда, а как категорию, произведенную в рамках имперских практик наблюдения, административного освоения и классификационного императива. Он вошёл в исторический оборот в контекстах, сформированных длительным сосуществованием и устойчивым взаимодействием между представителями империи и колонизируемыми акторами в пределах узкого регионального пространства, сосредоточенного вокруг Оренбуржья. В этих условиях, когда локальные пищевые практики подлежали описанию, ранние источники акцентировали внимание не на устойчивых рецептах или локально закреплённых названиях блюд, а на наблюдаемых практиках – прежде всего на способе употребления вареного мяса, приправленного солью, руками. Посредством описательного именованного такие практики постепенно наделялись видимостью культурной специфики и начинали соотноситься с определёнными группами, включая казахов, башкир и татар. В более широком аналитическом контексте, обращаясь к кейсу бешбармака, статья показывает, каким образом телесно укоренённые пищевые практики локальных сообществ становились «читаемыми» в рамках имперских режимов знания.

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### Introduction

*Beshbarmak*<sup>1</sup> is often presented as a shared culinary heritage among Turkic-speaking peoples of the former Soviet space, particularly those historically associated with nomadic pastoralism. Such interpretations usually rest on two assumptions: that the name of the dish derives from the expression “five fingers,” referring to the manner of eating by hand, and that it designates a meat-based food regarded as culturally characteristic. These claims, however, are rarely examined in relation to the historical circumstances under which the term itself entered the written record.

The historical foundations of this narrative rest almost exclusively on Russian-language sources produced during the imperial period by administrators, scholars, and observers operating within colonial contexts, rather than by the communities whose food practices they described. A close reading of these materials shows that references to the so-called “five-finger dish” (*bishbarmak* / *beshbarmak*) originate from a narrow regional and administrative setting. Most early descriptions were produced in, or were strongly shaped by, observations made in the Orenburg region,<sup>2</sup> which from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries functioned as

<sup>1</sup> In Russian-language sources produced during the colonial period, the name of the so-called “five-finger dish” appears in multiple variant spellings, most commonly *bishbarmak* (бишбармак) and only rarely *beshbarmak* (бешбармак). These forms were used across accounts of food practices associated with Qazaqs and Bashkirs, and only occasionally with Tatars. During the Soviet period, particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward, the spelling *beshbarmak* (бешбармак) became increasingly common in popular publications, gradually displacing earlier colonial-era variants.

<sup>2</sup> Because a significant portion of the materials analyzed in this study were produced in or routed through what contemporaries referred to as the *Orenburg region* (*Orenburgskii krai*), it is necessary to clarify how this term is used here. In this article, the Orenburg region is treated as a historical and analytical category rather than as a stable administrative unit. In the eighteenth century, it encompassed an extensive frontier space stretching from the Volga–Kama basin to the Tobol and Ishim river systems, and from the southern Urals to the Syr-Darya, the Aral Sea, and the Caspian coast [Pistolenko 1939: 2]. Over the nineteenth century, this space underwent repeated administrative reorganization, including the separation of territories into the Omsk oblast, Samara governorate, Ufa and Orenburg governorates, and later the Turkestan region; further subdivisions followed with the creation of the Ural and Turgai oblasts in 1869 and the abolition of the Orenburg Governor-Generalship in 1881. By the late nineteenth century, *Orenburgskii krai* no longer existed as an administrative entity and survived primarily as a historical designation [Stolpyanskii 1906: 12]. Contemporary observers emphasized the fluidity of this frontier: despite formal divisions into *uezdy*, boundaries remained poorly defined in practice, while nomadic mobility further blurred administrative distinctions. Tens of thousands of Qazaqs formally assigned to the Turgai oblast, for example, continued seasonal migrations within the Orenburg governorate, settling among Cossack detachments and *stanitsas* in districts such as Verkhneuralsk, Cheliabinsk, and Troitsk [Lobysevich 1891: 24]. In this sense, the Orenburg region functioned less as a fixed territory than as a shifting frontier shaped by military lines, trade routes, seasonal movement, and administrative experimentation—conditions that structured how cultural practices, including food, were observed, named, and recorded.

a key imperial frontier and administrative hub for governance, observation, and documentation. Within this space, Qazaq, Bashkir, and Tatar populations, among others, were incorporated into a shared framework of imperial governance. Across these regionally specific and internally diverse accounts, *bishbarmak* appears not as a dish defined by a stable recipe or culinary technique, but as a *descriptive category* emphasizing modes of consumption – most notably, eating meat with the hands.

Imperial-period sources related to Bashkir populations describe *bishbarmak* with particular consistency as a preparation combining meat and dough, in which finely chopped meat is served together with *salma* (small pieces of unleavened dough), rather than as a meat-only dish. At the same time, the explanation of the term itself remains unstable: while some accounts link the name to the practice of eating with the hands, others associate it with manual techniques involved in the preparation of dough, especially *salma* [Lepekhin 1772: 105, 107; Nazarov 1890: 171, 178, 182, 185; Rudenko 1925: 81–82].

In pre-Soviet ethnographic descriptions concerning Tatar populations, *bishbarmak* appears even less clearly defined. In some accounts the term is absent altogether; in others it is described as rare, secondary, or interchangeable with alternative names, such as *naryn*, depending on the manner of consumption [Georgi 1799: 14; Encyclopedic Lexicon 1836: 63].

Colonial-period descriptions of Qazaq food practices display a different, yet equally variable, pattern. In the earliest sources from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, *bishbarmak* is consistently described as boiled meat (most often lamb) finely chopped, salted, and eaten by hand [Levshin 1820; Levshin 1832; Neizvestnyy 1840; Grachev 1859; Kazanov 1867]. From the mid- to late nineteenth century, however, *bishbarmak* increasingly appears as a festive dish defined as a fried preparation made from various meats, frequently including fat, liver, or kidneys, and often treated interchangeably with *kuurdak/kaurdak* [Meyyer 1865; Krasovskii 1868; Kostenko 1870; Narody Rossii 1879; Krasnov 1887; Starikov 1890; Golovachev 1902]. Some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors went further, explicitly glossing *bishbarmak* as an expression designating a ritualized gesture of hospitality (namely, the host’s act of feeding the guest by hand), which required interpretation and translation for a Russian-reading audience [Zeland 1885; Sedelnikov 1903; Ryazanov 1925].

Taken together, these materials suggest that *bishbarmak* functioned in imperial discourse as a flexible descriptive term rather than as the name of a clearly bounded culinary tradition. Its meaning shifted across time, place, and genre, reflecting the conditions under which eating practices were observed, translated, and recorded. While the etymology of the term appears, at first glance, self-explanatory – “five fingers,” seemingly referring to the practice of eating by hand – linguistic evidence complicates this assumption. In both Bashkir and Tatar, “*bish barmak*” primarily denotes the literal meaning “five fingers” rather than functioning as a conventional name for a specific dish [Osmanov 1966: 82; Uraksin 1996: 72]. In Qazaq, moreover, the equivalent expression for “five fingers” is *bes sausak*, which is not used as the name of a dish [Énciklopediĭa 2017: 646]. This asymmetry points to a disconnect between locally embedded food practices and the etic labels through which they were rendered legible in imperial documentation.

### Methodological approach and sources

This study adopts a historical and interpretive approach to examine how food-related practices were observed, described, translated, and classified within Russian imperial documentation. Ethnographic descriptions are treated as situated texts shaped by administrative, scholarly, and editorial contexts, rather than as transparent representations of local food cultures. The analysis combines close textual reading with contextual interpretation to trace how embodied practices of eating were rendered into lexical forms and descriptive categories.

The source base consists primarily of Russian-language materials produced during the imperial period between 1731 and 1917, with particular attention to ethnographic documentation generated through academic expeditions. These sources include expeditionary reports, travel accounts, administrative writings, and later lexicographic publications, many of which were produced in or circulated through the Orenburg region. Taken together, they offer insight into the ways food practices associated with Qazaq, Bashkir, and Tatar populations were made legible within imperial frameworks of knowledge. The study also draws on publications issued by learned societies, as well as reports from trade and diplomatic missions, which situate ethnographic descriptions within the practical contexts of governance, diplomacy, and frontier administration. In addition, periodicals and shorter ethnographic articles published in the imperial press are incorporated to examine how particular descriptions circulated, accumulated authority, and acquired evaluative meanings over time.

*Methodologically*, these materials are approached as part of a documentary process that shaped how food-related practices were recorded, classified, and circulated in imperial contexts.

## The main body

### Frontier encounters and shared meals

In late August and early September of 1730, a delegation of eleven representatives from the Junior Jüz<sup>3</sup> of the Qazaqs arrived in Moscow and St. Petersburg via Ufa, delivering a written petition from Abul Qayir Qan.<sup>4</sup> The document requested an oath of allegiance to the Russian crown on behalf of all Qazaqs, a move undertaken without consultation with the elders and sultans of the Junior Jüz or with the qans of the Middle and Senior Jüzes<sup>5</sup> [Erofeeva 2007: 237–239; Abdirov 1997: 256; Lapin 2010: 57–61]. The petition initiated a prolonged period of diplomatic engagement that extended far beyond a single ceremonial exchange. In response, Empress Anna Ioannovna dispatched a mission to the Qazaq steppe, led by Alexey Ivanovich Tevkelev, which reached Abul Khair Khan's headquarters in October 1731 after a journey of more than four months. Russian representatives remained in the territory of the Junior Jüz until December 1732, maintaining continuous contact through negotiations, correspondence, and subsequent reciprocal delegations that circulated between the steppe, Ufa, and St. Petersburg until early 1734 [Erofeeva 2005: 10–13; Kraft 1897: 24–26; Gorshenin 1998: 126].

<sup>3</sup> The Jüz (qaz: Жүз) is a distinct region that is economically and geographically separate from other areas, and is inhabited by a group of Qazaq tribes. While historical documentation is limited, studies on Qazaq history have identified the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as the period when the Qazaq Jüzes began to coalesce into three distinct entities: the Senior Jüz, the Middle Jüz, and the Junior Jüz [Mukanov, 1974: 26].

<sup>4</sup> Abul Qayir (c. 1680–1748) emerged as a pivotal figure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century history of Qazaqstan, renowned as the Qan of the Junior Jüz who pledged allegiance to Russia. At the Qaraqum Qurultai, he was chosen as Qan of the Junior Jüz and later gained recognition as the senior Qan for exceptional merits [Erofeeva 2005: 399–401].

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that this period corresponded with a phase of weakening for the Qazaq Qanate, which was undergoing a difficult phase due to debilitating conflicts with the Jungars for almost a century and internal strife among the Qans of each Jüz. This request for an oath of allegiance stemmed from a complex interplay of historical situations and the ambitions of Abul Qayir. Owing to its territorial location, the Junior Jüz historically had sub-regional relations with subjects of the Russian Empire, such as Bashkirs, Kalmyks, and Yaik Cossacks. Relations were intricate and contradictory. With Bashkirs, whose nomadic zones directly bordered the summer pasture areas of the Junior Jüz's Qazaqs, relations soured due to differing political courses and the ambitions of representatives on both sides, leading to endless raids. Abul Qayir's involvement was primarily a personal matter, as he was invited by a group of Bashkir tarkhans and batyrs to act as a legitimate monarchical symbol (to become a qan). Regarding Kalmyks, in the west-north bordering territories, hostility prevailed due to their relations with the Jungars, creating tension between the peoples. On the other hand, with the Yaik Cossacks, the primary point of contention was the river Yaik. According to the Qazaqs, they proclaimed, 'Until the Yaik dries up, we will not leave, as our ancestors owned it for centuries [Abdirov 1997: 256]. Furthermore, the threat from the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates on their southern borders added to the complexity, with decent tribes of the Junior Jüz maintaining constant territorial contact over the centuries. Finally, Abul Qayir, aiming to elevate the symbolic nature of the qan's role beyond customary law and strengthened his lineage through a novel system, strategically sought allies and patrons beyond the Qazaq steppes [Erofeeva 2007: 237 - 239; Lapin 2010: 57–61].

These extended imperial encounters were not confined to formal negotiations. They involved repeated episodes of co-presence, including hospitality, gift exchange, and shared meals. Such practices formed a routine component of frontier governance and elite interaction, serving both symbolic and practical functions: affirming relationships, signaling respect, and facilitating communication in contexts marked by linguistic and cultural difference. The duration and density of contact between Russian officials and Qazaq elites created multiple occasions in which everyday practices, including eating, were observed, noted, and compared. Food thus entered documentary records not as a primary object of political concern, but as part of the social infrastructure of sustained imperial interaction.

It was within these contexts of prolonged encounter and repeated commensality that food practices first became visible as objects of description in imperial sources. The focus here is therefore not on reconstructing the culinary origins of a dish, but on examining the conditions under which certain practices were noticed, described, and recorded. Shared meals functioned as moments of social mediation, in which differences in preparation, taste, and modes of consumption became legible to observers and intermediaries. These encounters provided the settings in which descriptive terms could begin to circulate—initially as situational explanations, and only later as seemingly stable labels within imperial documentation.

### Imperial expansion, frontier administration, and the making of Orenburg as a site of description

The oath of allegiance sworn by Abul Qayir Qan to the Russian crown marked a decisive reorientation of imperial policy toward the southeastern frontier. What had previously been a secondary concern became a primary strategic priority: securing Russia’s borders, expanding trade routes into Central Asia, and stabilizing imperial authority in a region characterized by mobile populations and intermittent violence. Contemporary observers repeatedly noted raids on merchant caravans and frontier settlements, as well as the capture of people who were subsequently sold in Khiva and Bukhara, reinforcing imperial anxieties about insecurity and the limits of state control [A.B. 1938: 131]. These concerns prompted a broader reassessment of eastern policy, building on earlier proposals commonly attributed to Peter the Great, who emphasized the strategic importance of the southeastern borderlands for Russia’s commercial and geopolitical future [Kirilov 2002: 206; Izbasarova 2000: 65]. Within this imperial vision, the Orenburg region was increasingly imagined as a gateway to Asia, complementing St. Petersburg’s role as Russia’s “window to Europe” and serving as a key conduit for the expansion of trade with Central Asia and beyond.

This strategic shift culminated in the establishment of the Orenburg Expedition on 10 May 1737, later institutionalized as the Orenburg Commission. Its mandate extended well beyond military fortification. The commission was charged with founding a new city at the mouth of the Or River, surveying the surrounding territory, mapping routes across the steppe, identifying mineral resources, and evaluating sites for mining and industrial development in Bashkiria, while simultaneously promoting settlement, agriculture, and trade [Vitevskiy 1890: 219].

From the outset, Orenburg was conceived not only as a defensive outpost but as a commercial interface between the Russian Empire and Central Asia. To this end, special trading infrastructures were created, including *gostinye dvory* and *menovye dvory*, and regular fairs were established, transforming Orenburg into a major node of long-distance exchange. Throughout the eighteenth century, Orenburg played a pivotal role in sustaining caravan trade between Russia and Asian markets. Semi-annually, caravans from Central Asia, Iran, and India traversed the Qazaq steppe to converge on Orenburg, maintaining an influx of goods for nearly six months each year [Shkunov 2002: 20–22]. By the mid-eighteenth century, stable caravan routes linked Orenburg with Bukhara and Khiva, with journeys typically lasting between one and a half and two

months. These routes passed directly through the territory of the Junior Jüz, rendering Qazaq participation in caravan trade structurally indispensable. Qazaqs were actively embedded in this transit economy, supplying livestock and animal products, renting pack animals, and providing essential services as camel drivers and caravan guides. Given their superior knowledge of steppe routes, caravans could scarcely function without Qazaq assistance, and in some lineages such services became a permanent occupational specialization.

Market relations developed most intensively in the borderland auls adjacent to the Orenburg Line, where economic interaction unfolded at a subregional level and everyday contacts were far denser than administrative sources typically recorded [Lapin 2010: 50–52]. From the early nineteenth century onward, it became customary for line-dwelling populations, including Qazaqs, to attend the numerous fairs of the Orenburg governorate to sell livestock, acquire manufactured goods, and exchange information about everyday life. By the mid-nineteenth century, the center of commercial gravity increasingly shifted into the Qazaq steppe itself, where Qazaqs functioned as the principal buyers and Tatar merchants as the primary sellers. Seasonal fairs spread across the steppe by the 1860s and played a central role in internal trade until the gradual replacement of fair-based exchange by itinerant commerce toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The construction of the Orenburg Line (a chain of fortresses and defensive works)<sup>6</sup> reconfigured patterns of movement across the steppe, effectively concentrating trade and transit within administratively visible corridors. The defense of this line required substantial manpower, leading to the expansion of the Orenburg Cossacks, whose numbers and territorial holdings grew significantly over the nineteenth century. Unlike the Ural Cossacks, the Orenburg Cossack Host was formed largely through state initiative as part of a broader project of military colonization aimed at consolidating imperial control over the Volga–Ural region and creating a strategic base for further expansion into Central Asia. Together with Tatar merchant communities, Cossack settlements formed a dense social infrastructure that shaped the rhythms of movement, exchange, and interaction along the frontier.

This commercial landscape was profoundly shaped by imperial settlement and population policies. From the 1740s onward, the government encouraged the resettlement of Qazan Tatars in the Orenburg region, recognizing their experience in trade with Central Asia and their religious and cultural proximity to Muslim societies of the region. As direct participation by Russian merchants in Central Asian trade declined, owing to insecurity, restrictions on non-Muslims, and the risk of enslavement, Tatar merchants increasingly assumed the role of intermediaries, handling the transport, sale, and crediting of goods on behalf of Russian partners. Their settlement along key routes, including the *Novomoskovskaya road* and the Orenburg Line, contributed to the formation of durable trading communities that structured everyday commercial interaction.<sup>7</sup>

By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Orenburg had become one of the largest and most demographically diverse governorates of the Russian Empire, encompassing vast territories historically inhabited by Bashkirs, Qazaqs, and other nomadic groups. Population growth was rapid: from approximately 282,000 inhabitants in 1744 to over two million by 1850, with Russians, Bashkirs, and Tatars forming the largest segments of the population. Although official censuses undercounted nomadic populations and excluded military personnel, Cossacks, and seasonal migrants, contemporary observers noted persistent Qazaq mobility into and through the Orenburg region, facilitated by the absence of a strict cordon system and by rental arrangements

<sup>6</sup> The construction of the first fortress, Verkhneyaitsk, in the upper reaches of the Yaik River (The Ural) was completed by the end of the year. From 1735 to 1740, more than 80 fortresses, outposts, and redoubts were established, surrounding Bashkortostan, effectively making it an inland region of Russia.

<sup>7</sup> See Katanayev 2007: 156–178; Koksharov 2002: 4–10; Abdirov 1997: 285; Fedosova 2000: 25; Kortunov 2004: 138–140.

with settled populations.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore likely that the presence of Qazaqs in the Orenburg area exceeded what was reflected in official records.

Within this administratively dense and ethnically heterogeneous frontier, Tatars emerged as particularly influential intermediaries, shaping everyday practices of communication, trade, and hospitality between imperial officials and steppe populations.

Beyond its strategic and commercial functions, Orenburg also operated as a colonial contact zone in which imperial outsiders—including administrators, officers, merchants, missionaries, and scholars—encountered steppe populations in sustained and routinized ways. For many of these actors, Orenburg constituted a primary site of contact with Qazaqs and other nomadic groups, and thus a setting in which interpretive frameworks and classificatory practices took shape. Knowledge about steppe societies, including Qazaqs and Bashkirs, did not precede these encounters but emerged through them, shaped by institutional contexts, intermediary roles, and the power asymmetries characteristic of the frontier.

Within this environment, diplomacy unfolded not only through decrees, reports, and formal negotiations, but also through extended face-to-face encounters structured by ritualized practices of hospitality. Shared meals formed a routine component of such interactions and were embedded in their political and social choreography. Practices observed in these settings were therefore more likely to be noticed, recorded, and circulated than forms of everyday domestic consumption that lay outside the scope of administrative visibility.

The concentration of early references to *bishbarmak* around Orenburg should be understood against this background. Reports, diaries, and historical-ethnographic accounts produced in, or routed through, the frontier circulated within imperial institutions, where repetition across genres (administrative correspondence, expeditionary reports, and later compilations) conferred authority on particular descriptions. Local and situational observations made in Orenburg and its immediate surroundings were readily generalized into representations of entire populations, especially when they recurred in official encounters.

A revealing example appears in Peter Rychkov’s *History of Orenburg*, which describes a ceremonial dinner attended by the head of the Orenburg Commission, V. Urusov, and a group of Qazaqs led by the eldest sons of Abul Khair Khan. Rychkov notes that during the dinner he personally witnessed on 22 August 1739, “seventy-four people were seated at another table. For the guests, chopped meat and beer were served, as was their custom, outside the gates. During dinner, they toasted to good health with cannon fire” [Rychkov 2002: 88]:

*Seventy-four people were seated at another table. For the guests, chopped meat and beer were served, as was their custom, outside the gates. During dinner, they toasted to good health with cannon fire.*

Such accounts illustrate how specific food practices (here, the serving of chopped meat in a ceremonial context) acquired heightened visibility and mnemonic force within administrative encounters.

In this sense, Orenburg functioned as an administrative and epistemic filter through which locally situated practices were transformed into seemingly representative cultural facts. The repeated appearance of *bishbarmak* in descriptions of elite interaction, ceremonial meals, and frontier hospitality helps explain why the term came to be treated as a well-known dish in imperial literature. Its prominence derived not from intrinsic cultural centrality, but from its recurring association with encounters that held particular significance for imperial observers. Through

<sup>8</sup> See Sultangalieva 1990: 24, 58, 64; Sultangalieva 2002: 43, 49; Zobov 1994: 3–6; Troynitskii 1904: 11; Kabuldinov 2010: 278–279.

processes of documentation, repetition, and circulation within authoritative channels, the label acquired a generalized status, increasingly detached from the specific contexts in which it was initially observed.

### “Russian savoury meat”: the first documentary trace

The earliest traceable appearance of the term later rendered as *bishbarmak* occurs not as the name of a defined dish, but within a situational description embedded in frontier encounters. A key source is the diary of John Castle,<sup>9</sup> an invited member of the Orenburg expedition, who travelled in the Qazaq steppe in the mid–1730s. Castle’s account records an episode in which he was invited to partake in what was described to him as a “Russian dish,” a framing that immediately marked the food as an object of cross-cultural translation rather than as a locally grounded culinary designation. Upon tasting the dish, Castle noted that it consisted of finely chopped meat, lightly seasoned with salt, which he identified using the term “*bishpermark*.” His description is worth citing in full, as it captures both the observational uncertainty and the descriptive nature of the naming [Castle 1998: 15, 41; Castle 2014: 64]:

*On the 5<sup>th</sup> huius<sup>10</sup> I was invited very early to dine with Kuttel Mohamersin Schuffel Jaghold (Kutli Mohammed mirza), who promised to treat me to a Russian dish, which I was very curieux about tasting; when I arrived through, nothing appeared apart from their ordinary so-called Bishpermark,<sup>11</sup> or finely chopped horsmeat. It was merely strewn with some salt...*

Rather than presenting *bishbarmak* as a stable culinary object with a fixed recipe, Castle’s entry points to an interpretive encounter in which a familiar practice was rendered intelligible through descriptive approximation. The dish is introduced first through an anticipatory label (“a Russian dish”) and only subsequently identified, somewhat tentatively, by means of a local descriptor. The reference to salt is particularly noteworthy in this context. Numerous eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts describe boiled meat among steppe populations as typically consumed with little or no salt, with salt used sparingly or reserved for other purposes.<sup>12</sup> Later nineteenth-century sources continue to associate *bishbarmak* with salted and finely chopped meat, suggesting that salt became a recurring element within imperial descriptions of the dish [Levshin 1820: 153; Bolshoi 1822: 51].

Taken together, these materials do not permit the reconstruction of a single culinary “origin” or the identification of a clearly bounded dish. Rather, they point to the moment when observed practices (encountered in contexts of hospitality, shared meals, and sustained imperial interaction) entered documentary circulation as descriptive terms shaped by the interpretive frameworks of Russian imperial writing.

### Translation, interpreters, and descriptive naming

The entry of *bishbarmak* into imperial documentation cannot be separated from the conditions of translation through which frontier encounters were mediated. Communication between Russian officials and Qazaq elites in the eighteenth century rarely took place directly. Instead, it depended on interpreters (*tolmaches*)<sup>13</sup> operating within multilingual chains, most commonly

<sup>9</sup> John Castle’s meticulously kept diary, despite exhibiting some biases in the author’s writing, offers a comprehensive overview of the productive forces in the region and the material, spiritual, and family life within Qazaqs of the Junior Jüz [Matviyevskiy 1958: 143].

<sup>10</sup> July

<sup>11</sup> Bish-barmak (five fingers)

<sup>12</sup> See Falck 1786: 540–552; Bardanes 2007: 186; Krasovskii 1868: 39; Haruzin 1889: 250; Shutikova 2004: 29; Radlov 1989: 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Tolmach/es* (*sing.*: толмач, *plur.*: толмачи) were individuals who could translate the oral speech of the different groups in the Russian Empire into Russian, while translators were government-approved specialists who performed written and oral translations from one language to another [Osypova, 2020, p. 11].

Tab. III.



Fig. 1. Reception of the traveler John Castle in the yurt of Abul Qayir Qan [Castle 1784: Tabl. III].  
1-сур. Саяхатшы Джон Каслді Әбілқайыр ханның қабылдау сәті [Castle 1784: Tabl. III].  
Рис. 1. Прием путешественника Джона Касла в юрте хана Абулхайра [Castle 1784: Tabl. III].

involving Tatar as an intermediary between Qazaq and Russian [Kraft 1897: 38–39]. While written correspondence among Tatars, Qazaqs, and other Turkic-speaking groups often relied on Chagatai Turki,<sup>14</sup> oral communication followed different linguistic conventions, further complicating everyday exchanges. This divergence between written and spoken language underscores the interpretive burden placed on intermediaries and helps explain why explanation through visible practice (rather than precise lexical translation) often proved the most effective means of communication in frontier settings.

<sup>14</sup> The Chagatai Turki (or Central Asian Turki) served as a widely used written language for official correspondence from the 16th to the 19th centuries across regions including Central Asia, Qazaqstan, East Turkestan, the Volga region, the Crimea, and others. Abul Qayir Qan’s 1730 letter to Empress Anna Ioannovna, written in Chagatai Turki, exemplifies this [Beyssembiev 2021: 93–97].

Historical evidence suggests that *tolmaches* functioned as cultural mediators as much as linguistic translators. Their role involved anticipating potential misunderstandings and rendering local practices intelligible within conceptual frameworks familiar to Russian interlocutors [Osypova 2020: 10; Izbasarova 2000: 69]. This mediating function was particularly pronounced in situations where no readily equivalent lexical item existed or where a given practice lacked a stable, singular name. Food, encountered primarily in settings of hospitality and diplomacy, was especially susceptible to this mode of descriptive translation. In such contexts, interpreters could explain how a dish was prepared or consumed, translating practice into an observable and communicable form.

Within such multilingual and asymmetrical communicative environments, it is therefore plausible that the designation later recorded as *bishbarmak* emerged not as a direct translation of a locally used dish name, but as a descriptive label anchored in a visible mode of consumption. Eating with the hands, “with five fingers,” offered an immediately observable and easily verbalized feature. Crucially, this descriptor did not denote a unique or exceptional practice; hand-eating was widespread across the region. Its documentary salience lay not in cultural specificity, but in explanatory convenience. By foregrounding how food was eaten rather than how it was named in local usage, interpreters and observers transformed a situational explanation into a repeatable label capable of circulating in written accounts.

This descriptive logic is reinforced by eighteenth-century ethnographic materials that associate the dish with hospitality, celebratory occasions, and ritualized practices of relationship-building. Publications produced by academic expeditions of the Russian Empire frequently note practices such as feeding guests by hand. A work edited by Johann Gottlieb Georgi similarly observes that Qazaq hosts fed guests with their own hands and prepared the well-known *bishbarmak* [Georgi 1785: 549]:

*Kirghiz (that is, Qazaq) people do not cultivate crops or gardens, and their mostly barren steppe has few edible roots. Their daily diet consists of boiled meat, typically without salt. Like we do daily consume the bread. They prepare the popular ‘Bischbarmak,’ known as the five-finger dish, using sheep meat and other.*

Later imperial descriptions retrospectively naturalized this descriptive process by presenting *bishbarmak* as a transparent compound “five” plus “fingers” and treating this explanation as an etymological fact. Nineteenth-century authors repeatedly linked the name to eating by hand. For example, Levshin explained:

*The most famous Kirghiz (that is, Qazaq) dish, called ‘Bishbarmak’ (беш-бармак), is prepared from meat that is finely chopped and mixed with pieces of fat. ‘Bish’ (беш) means five, and ‘barmak’ (бармак) means finger (s). The name of the dish accurately reflects its way of consumption, which is to eat it with one’s five fingers [Levshin 1832a: 39].*

Two aspects of this formulation warrant attention. First, Levshin characterizes *bishbarmak* as “the most famous” dish rather than as a representative or national staple of Qazaq cuisine. This phrasing suggests that he was not describing the locally used category of *et*, but rather a dish that had become particularly visible within the contexts he observed. Second, Levshin explicitly cautioned readers that his account was based on personal experience. As an imperial official whose interactions with Qazaqs were largely confined to Orenburg and adjacent frontier zones, his observational horizon was necessarily limited. Within this setting, the perception of *bishbarmak* as a “famous” dish is best understood as a reflection of its repeated appearance in joint meals between Qazaq elites and Russian administrators, rather than as evidence of its centrality in everyday food practices.

Taken together, these accounts reveal about the conditions under which imperial knowledge was produced. *Bishbarmak* entered the documentary record not as a locally used name conveyed through translation, but as a descriptive label generated at the intersection of multilingual

mediation, visual observation, and the administrative imperatives of frontier governance within the Russian Empire.

### Editorial mediation and the expansion of ethnic attribution

The stabilization and subsequent expansion of *bishbarmak* in imperial discourse cannot be explained solely by frontier encounters or the repetition of observation. An equally significant role was played by editorial mediation – that is, the processes of translation, compilation, and republication through which ethnographic materials were reshaped for imperial audiences. Materials produced during eighteenth-century academic expeditions were rarely circulated in their original form. Instead, they were translated into Russian, edited in accordance with prevailing scholarly conventions, and incorporated into authoritative compilations that extended their circulation well beyond the specific contexts in which observations had been made.

A particularly instructive example is provided by the publication history of Johann Gottlieb Georgi’s ethnographic work. In the original German-language edition of 1785, Georgi described food practices among the Qazaqs in terms that emphasized hospitality and everyday subsistence, noting that guests were fed by hand and that boiled meat constituted a central element of the daily diet. In this version, *bischbarmak* appears as a descriptive label linked to Qazaq practices and explained through its association with hand-eating, without systematic attribution to other groups [Georgi 1785: 549]. The term functions here less as a fixed culinary category than as an explanatory gloss intended to render observed practices intelligible to imperial readership.

The situation changes in the Russian translation and revised edition published in 1799 by the Imperial Academy of Sciences and Arts. This edition introduced a range of editorial interventions, including expanded ethnic attributions and additional descriptive detail. *Bishbarmak* is now presented as a dish consumed not only by Qazaqs, but also by Bashkirs, Qazan Tatars, and Orenburg Tatars, and is further described as finely chopped, fatty, boiled meat eaten by hand [Georgi 1799: 14, 105, 134]. This redistribution of the term across multiple populations reflects not new empirical observation, but the reorganization of earlier material in line with imperial classificatory practices that grouped diverse frontier populations within shared administrative and descriptive frameworks.

Such editorial transformations were not exceptional. Expeditionary accounts originally composed in German, Latin, or other European languages were routinely adapted in Russian editions through abridgment, expansion, and reclassification, often to enhance coherence, comparability, and practical usefulness for imperial administration [Falck 1786: 549; Polnoye sobranie 1818: 5–22]. In this process, descriptions rooted in specific contexts of observation could acquire a broader scope, while distinctions tied to particular encounters were attenuated. Terms that initially functioned as situational descriptors were thus able to circulate as apparently general cultural referents through their repeated inclusion in edited compilations, encyclopedic entries, and later reference works.

The widening association of *bishbarmak* with multiple populations thus illustrates a broader process through which imperial knowledge was fixed and circulated within the Russian Empire, transforming situational descriptions into stable documentary categories. Editorial mediation enabled a descriptor generated in frontier encounters to move across authoritative genres, gradually loosening its connection to the narrow settings of administrative interaction in which it had first appeared. By the early nineteenth century, repetition across translated editions and compiled works endowed the term with an appearance of ethnographic self-evidence. What began as an explanatory label came to function as a conventional marker of “traditional” food culture, retrospectively presented as characteristic of several Turkic-speaking populations.

### Afterlife: dictionaries, evaluation, and ethnization

By the mid-nineteenth century, *bishbarmak* had entered the genre of reference literature, including encyclopedias and dictionaries, where earlier situational descriptions were reformulated as lexical entries. This shift marked a transformation in the term's documentary status. No longer tied to specific frontier encounters or the circumstances of their initial observation, *bishbarmak* appeared as a recognizable loanword associated with the food practices of imperial borderland populations. In this form, the term acquired a greater degree of semantic fixity, along with an evaluative dimension shaped by its placement within authoritative classificatory genres.

An early example can be found in the *Entsiklopedicheskii leksikon* of the 1830s, which defines *bishbarmak* as a dish of finely chopped meat and fat known among Russians, Tatars, and “Kirghiz” (that is, Qazaqs), while glossing its name as meaning “five fingers” [*Entsiklopedicheskii leksikon* 1836: 63]:

*Bishbarmak is a dish made of finely chopped meat and fat that is known by Russians, Tatars, and Kirghiz people (that is, Qazaqs) and revered as a delicacy. The name of this rough dish means five fingers.*

Significantly, the entry incorporates evaluative language by characterizing the dish as “rough dish” (*gruboe*). Such phrasing situates *bishbarmak* within a hierarchy of taste that distinguished imperial norms from the practices of frontier populations, framing the dish not simply as different, but as culturally marked.

This evaluative dimension becomes more explicit in Vladimir Dal's Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language. Writing from the perspective of an official with direct experience in Orenburg during the 1830s and 1840s, Dal defined *bishbarmak* through its literal meaning (“five fingers”) and noted that in the Orenburg region the expression “tastes like a *bishbarmak*” functioned colloquially as a comment on poorly prepared food [Dal' 1863: 75]:

*Beshbarmak is referred to as a “five-fingered dish” among the Bashkirs and Qazaqs. It is made of boiled and chopped meat, usually lamb, with various additions. In the Orenburg region, people used to say that badly prepared food was “like a Bishbarmak, hash!”*

Here the term operates not only as a culinary designation but also as a metaphor with negative connotations, illustrating how a descriptor originating in frontier encounters could be absorbed into everyday imperial speech as a marker of cultural distance. This semantic shift coincided with the consolidation of imperial administration in the region and with the increasing classification of local populations as *inorodtsy*, a legal and administrative category in the Russian Empire applied to non-Russian frontier groups, whose practices were routinely evaluated against metropolitan standards of refinement and taste.

At the same time, the dictionary tradition contributed to the ethnization of the term. Through repeated inclusion in encyclopedias and reference works, *bishbarmak* was increasingly presented as an ethnic dish associated with particular populations, most often Qazaqs, Bashkirs, and Tatars, despite its earlier emergence as a descriptive label rather than a locally grounded culinary name. Orthographic variation (*bishbarmak*, *beshbarmak*, *besbarmak*) persisted into the late imperial and Soviet periods, even as assumptions about ethnic association became more entrenched in reference literature.

While the Soviet and post-Soviet trajectories of the term lie beyond the scope of this article, the imperial processes of lexical fixation, evaluation, and ethnization traced here clarify the documentary foundations that later enabled *bishbarmak* to circulate as a seemingly self-evident “national/traditional dish” within subsequent classificatory frameworks.

## Conclusion

Taken together, this trajectory reveals how everyday embodied practices of consumption were reclassified within imperial discourse as an apparently stable culinary category through modes of description and circulation.

*Bishbarmak* did not originate as the name of a clearly defined, locally bounded dish, but entered the written record as a descriptive label produced within Russian imperial frontier encounters, often in moments of direct contact and explanation. Rather than crystallizing through the fixation of a recipe or the recognition of an indigenous culinary term, the label emerged from repeated attempts to render observable practices (most notably the consumption of meat by hand) intelligible to imperial observers confronted with unfamiliar forms of hospitality.

Early imperial sources employed *bishbarmak* flexibly, referring not to a stable dish but to visible modes of eating and hospitality, with meanings that shifted across time, place, population, and genre. This process was shaped by translation and mediation, particularly through intermediaries (tolmaches), who played a crucial role in converting embodied practices into descriptive terms that could circulate within Russian administrative and scholarly texts. In this sense, the name privileged what could be seen, compared, and explained to outsiders, especially under conditions where translation itself structured understanding, rather than locally meaningful culinary categories.

As contingent observations moved through reports, ethnographic descriptions, editorial compilations, and reference works, they were gradually detached from the circumstances of their production and reconstituted as generalizable cultural referents. Editorial and institutional processes transformed a situational explanatory label into an ethnographic “fact,” redistributing it across multiple populations and contexts. By the nineteenth century, dictionaries and encyclopedias fixed and evaluated the term, attaching it to specific ethnic groups and embedding it within imperial hierarchies of taste. At this point, a descriptive label rooted in frontier observation acquired the authority of classification, allowing a visible mode of consumption to stand in for cultural difference itself.

This case thus demonstrates how imperial systems of knowledge converted situated practices into durable objects of comparison, shaping not only how food was named, but how mundane acts of eating were transformed into markers of social and cultural difference.

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