

TO: UTC and WG2

FROM: Ralph Cleminson and David Birnbaum (via Deborah Anderson, Script Encoding Initiative, UC Berkeley)

RE: Feedback on Early Russian Currency Symbols (L2/11-273 = N4208)

DATE: 24 April 2012

Below is feedback from two Cyrillic specialists on the Early Russian currency symbols proposal (L2/11-273 = N4208).

From Ralph Cleminson:

In terms of the handwritten tradition, as exemplified by fig.1, these are simply abbreviations. In particular, the де for деньга is IDENTICAL to the де for день (day), which is also a very common abbreviation (used in dates), which suggests that there is nothing distinctive about this. To this extent there is no case for encoding them as Unicode characters.

If, however, in typesetting a symbol was used which was distinct from the letters in which it originated, there would be a case for encoding it. It is implied that this is the case in Magnickij; however, the sign in fig.2 is just a blob of pixels, so if the evidence is there, I can't see it.

In the nineteenth-century handwritten specimens, the criterion again would have to be the distinctiveness of the sign: that there is a consistent difference in form, which matches this particular use, from other superscriptions and abbreviations. However, since the currency abbreviations are presented in isolation, there is no way of telling whether this is the case.

There is an exact analogy here with the use of currency abbreviations in England. The £ standing for "pound" diverged distinctively in shape from the L of general usage and came to occupy a separate compartment of the typesetter's case: therefore it is a different character. The d standing for "penny" did not (even though it may have been written superscripted and with dots or dashes under it) did not, and therefore remains a variant of the ordinary letter of the alphabet.

Therefore I think that on the basis of this proposal there may be a case for what they call "IMPERIAL ROUBLE SIGN", but that it has not been adequately demonstrated; there is no case at all for the other three.

From David Birnbaum:

I concur with Ralph's assessment, but with further reservations about figure #2. I don't see a blob of pixels. I see a clear lower-case "r", then a lower-case vertical "ou" ligature (I'm being lazy and not looking up the code point, but if what I'm writing isn't clear, please ask and I will), and a superscript "b" above the "ou". The "b" has a pokrytie over it. This looks like a column heading, and not a superscript "character" above a numerical value, but because the image has been cropped, perhaps I'm misreading.

I had also thought of Ralph's analogy to the "pound" currency sign, as well as the "cents" sign, a "c" with a vertical line through it. Where a symbol has become graphically distinct from its alphabetic origin, and in a stable way that is correlated with its function as representing a unit of currency, the case for characterhood becomes stronger. I don't think the case has been made persuasively here.

I should add, though, that I don't work on this period or with these types of materials, so I cannot say with confidence that there isn't paleographic justification for this proposal. I do not, however, see evidence of that sort in the proposal as currently documented. I remain agnostic about whether it can be found; I am more skeptical than not, but the "pound" and "cent" examples temper my skepticism.