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CRITICAL FORUM: ENCODING THE STATE—ON THE BUREAUCRATIC GRAPHOSPHERE

Peter the Great Turns the Page

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Abstract

The article surveys the changes Peter the Great (ruled 1682–1725) decreed in the form of bureaucratic documents, particularly the petition. It analyzes the manuscript of an eighteenth-century murder case to demonstrate these changes in practice.

Keywords: bureaucracy; Peter the Great; Sweden; scroll

Peter the Great is famous for his many reforms. He founded a capital city (St. Petersburg in 1703); he created an army and navy out of scratch; he founded the Senate, Twelve Colleges and Kunstkammer; he reorganized local and urban government. Less noticed are his reforms of the bureaucracy, which reached down to the very look of bureaucratic documents. The petitions that people submitted, the court cases they were embroiled in—all took on a new visual look under Peter.

Peter came to the throne at age ten in 1682 but only began to engage in government in the late 1690s. Remarkably, one of the first things he did was to turn his attention to bureaucratic documents by abolishing the use of scrolls. This was transformative. Under the tsars before Peter, bureaucratic record-keeping was done both in book format and scrolls; a variety of records (income and expenditure registers, land surveys, religious books) were written as books, but scrolls were also ubiquitous. They were the preferred form for correspondence, well-suited to the demands of Russia's far-flung Eurasian empire. Small and compact, they could easily be transported across distances in coachmen's saddlebags.[1]

Visually, scrolls in Muscovy were read vertically, with successive documents glued to the end of the preceding one to produce a roll. Text was written on one side, with the reverse used for notes by scribes and witness signatures; counter-signatures of supervising scribes were often written over the joining of two pages on the back. The front page was filled with graceful handwriting (*skoropis'*) with no spaces between words and only occasional white spaces between sections or documents. The compact prose began with a formal invocation to the tsar with his official title in the dative, followed by the petitioner identifying himself humbly. A petition of 1671 begins: "To Tsar and Sovereign and Grand Prince Aleksei Mikhailovich of all Great and Small and White Rossiia Autocrat your orphan the townsman of Shuia Vaska Gavrilov syn Ogryskov petitions." The body of a petition was infused with

[1] On the portability of scrolls: Nancy S. Kollmann, "Creating Bureaucracy to Conquer Distance and Time," in Michael S. Flier, Nancy Shields Kollmann, Daniel Rowland, and Erika Monahan, eds., *Muscovy and the World: The Empire and Its Limits. Essays in Honor of Valerie Kivelson* (Bloomington, IN, 2023), 167–84.

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self-abnegating language: petitioners styled themselves the tsar's "slaves" or "orphans" (depending on social class) and fervently beseeched: "tsar! Sovereign! have favor on me, have mercy on me! Grant me favor!"[2]

Peter I rejected both the physical shape of scrolls and the format in which petitions were written in them. In 1700 and 1702 he mandated that offices abandon scrolls in favor of book format, for the sake of efficiency and archiving. He complained that scrolls cannot be labeled; they cannot be stored on shelves in an orderly manner; they pile up in spare rooms, deteriorate from neglect and are eaten by mice. By contrast, he explained, notebooks can be properly labeled and bound together in volumes by date, region and/or topic; notebooks stand up on shelves in orderly rows, allowing easy archiving and ready retrieval.[3]

Over the course of his career Peter ordered that documents have clear, unambiguous information. In 1706 he mandated that judges sign documents in their own hands; in 1714 that all writers of petitions provide name and rank; in 1717 that all government documents include "year, month and date"; and in 1718 that all litigants, or a trusted substitute, sign their petitions in person.[4] These prescriptions adopt the model of Swedish petitions, reflecting his reliance on Swedish models for most of his other governmental reforms.[5]

Beyond the physical format of documents, Peter prescribed how the written page should look. Already in 1699 he instituted a lucrative stamp tax; all documents were to be written on "stamped paper" (*gerbovaia bumaga*). Thus we see a double-headed eagle in the upper right corner of most documents (see figures 1, 2, and 3). Again following Swedish practice, in the 1710s he mandated that documents should be written in sections, marked by numbered "points" (*punkty*). If appropriate, questions and the corresponding answers should be written in a grid (Figure 1).[6]

Peter gave particular attention to the petition, Muscovy's most commonly used documentary form.[7] In 1702 he announced a concise new official address for the tsar and prescribed that it be used in petitions: "The most powerful tsar, sovereign most merciful" (*Derzhavneishii tsar′ gosudar′ milostiveishii*). He took this title verbatim from Sweden. Peter specified that in enumerating one's request, the petitioner should not use the emotional appeals of Muscovite petitions, but conclude simply with name, place, date, year, and the phrase "Your Majesty's most lowly slave" (*Vashego velichestva nizhaishii rab*).[8] In 1723 he simplified the form and depersonalized the phrasing even more: the title of the monarch should be written at the top of the page, followed by open space in the Swedish

[2] S.I. Kotkov, ed., *Pamiatniki delovoi pis′mennosti XVII veka. Vladimirskii krai* (Moscow, 1984), no. 168, p. 192.

[3] *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii. Pervoe sobranie*, 45 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1830), vol. 4, no. 1803 (July 2, 1700), no. 1817 (December 11, 1700), no. 1901 (March 10, 1702), no. 1904 (March 19, 1702) (hereafter cited as *PSZ*). The General Regulation of 1720 (chaps. 43 and 44) prescribed specific archiving practices: *PSZ*, vol. 6, no. 3,534, pp. 155–56 (February 28, 1720).

[4] *PSZ*, vol. 4, no. 2,116 (August 12, 1706); vol. 5, no. 2,865 (December 8, 1714), no. 3,068 (February 15, 1717), no. 3,096 (July 26, 1717), no. 3,251 (December 8, 1718).

[5] For Swedish borrowing, see Claes Peterson, *Peter the Great's Administrative and Judicial Reforms: Swedish Antecedents and the Process of Reception*, trans. Michael F. Metcalf (Stockholm, 1979) and my "Peter the Great's Swedish Connection Revisited," in Russell Martin and Claudia R. Jensen, eds., *The Early Modern World: Essays on Russian and Eurasian History in Honor of Daniel Clarke Waugh* (forthcoming 2026).

[6] Stamped paper: *PSZ*, vol. 3, no. 1,673 (January 23, 1699). Numbered points: *PSZ*, vol. 4, no. 2,467 (January 16, 1712); *PSZ*, vol. 5, no. 3,197 (April 28, 1718), no. 3,251 (December 8, 1718), no. 3,261 (December 22, 1718); *PSZ*, vol. 7, no. 4,344 (November 5, 1723). For further details, see my "Peter the Great's Swedish Connection Revisited."

[7] In his survey of the archive of the Siberian Chancery, N.N. Ogloblin found thousands of petitions: *Obozrenie stolbtsov i knig Sibirskago prikaza, 1592–1768 gg.*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1895), pt. 1: chap. XIII; pt. 2: chap. XIV. On petitioning in Muscovy: Nancy S. Kollmann, "By Mercy Bound: Pardoning, Petitioning and Tsarist Power in Early Modern Russia," in Ulrike Ludwig and Quentin Verreycken, eds., *The Power to Pardon in Medieval and Early Modern Christian Europe* (Cologne, 2025), 55–71.

[8] *PSZ*, vol. 4, no. 1,899 (March 1, 1702).

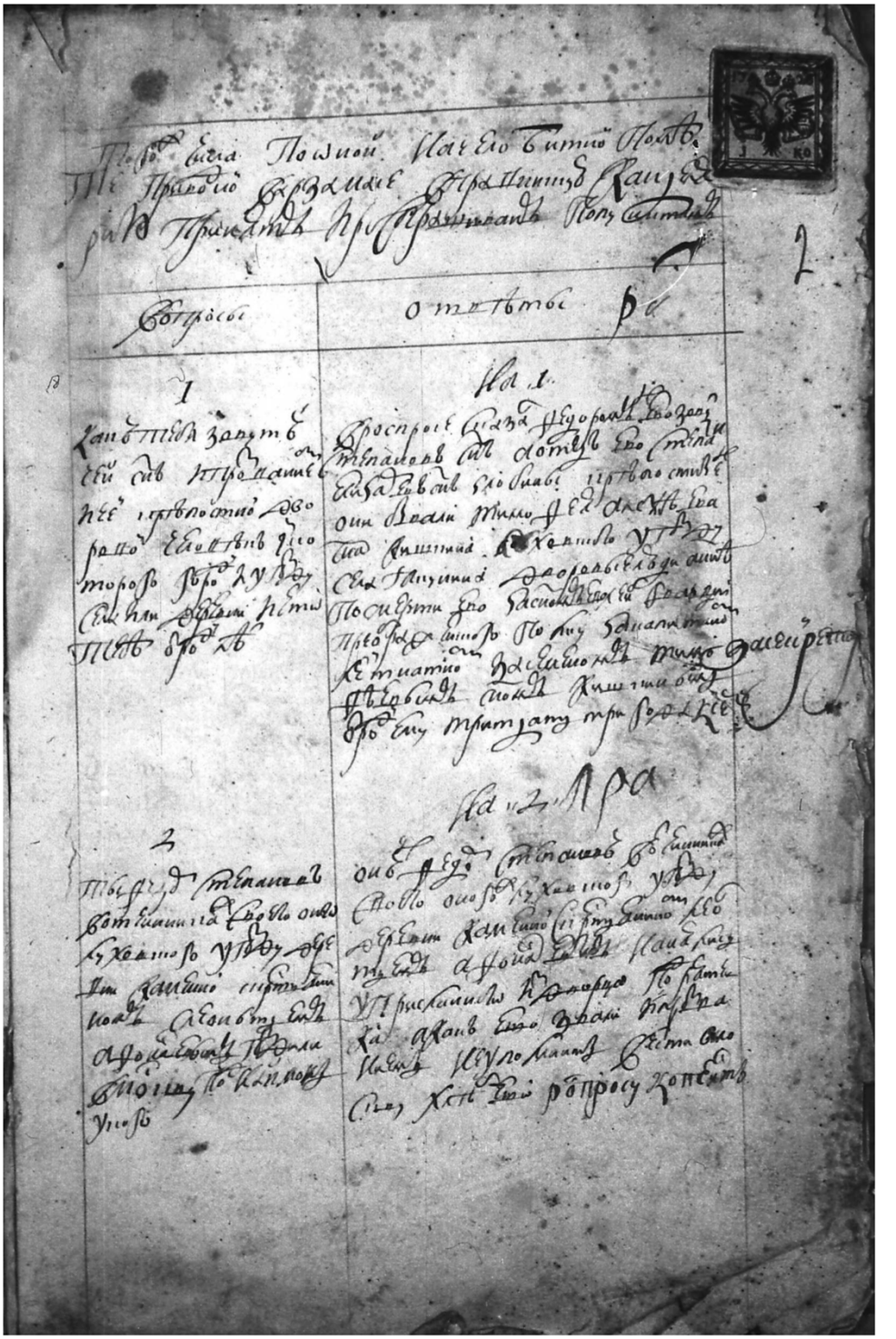


Figure 1. RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fol. 2r.

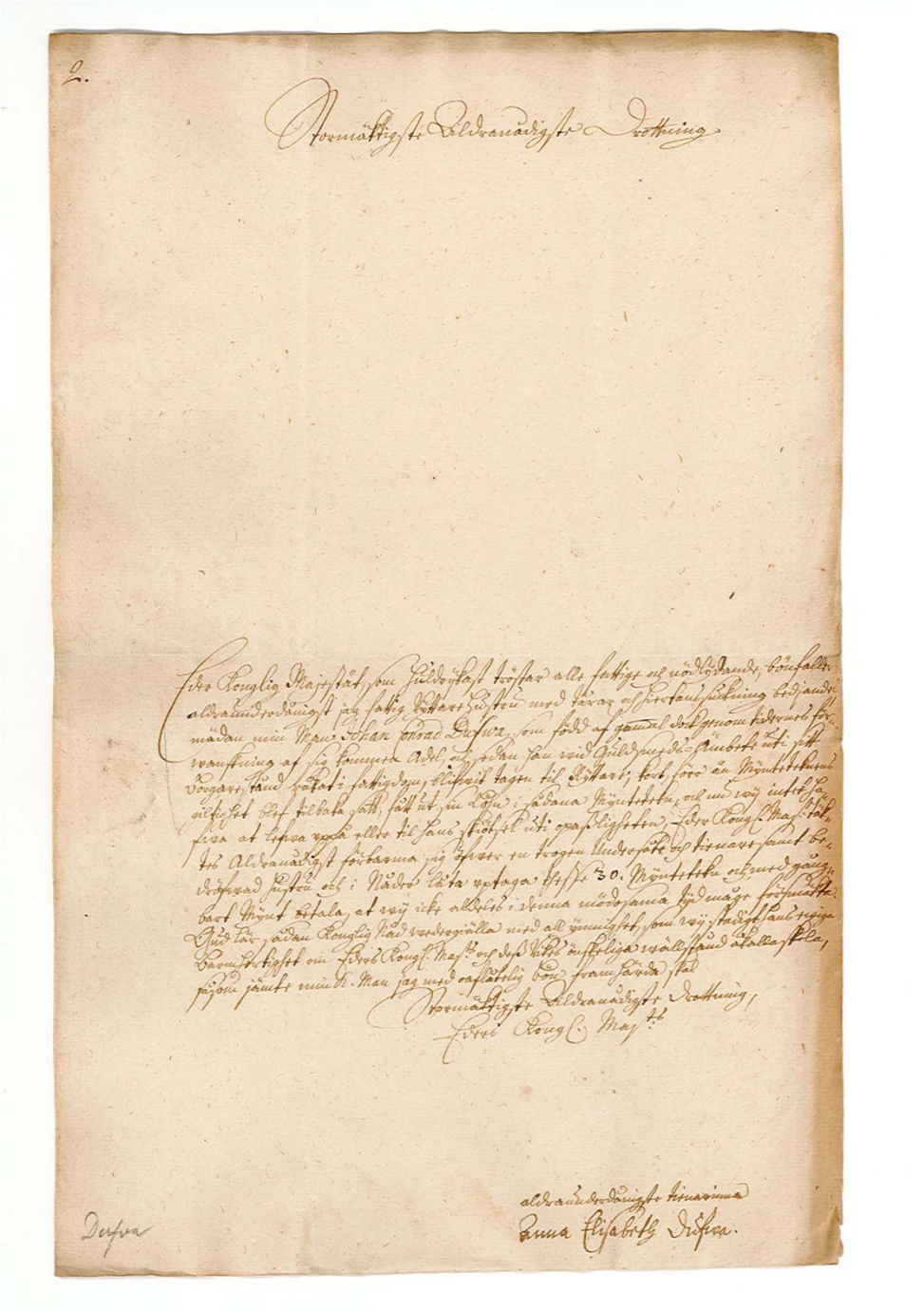


Figure 2. Riksarkivet Stockholm, Enskildas ansökningar och suppliker, volym 50.

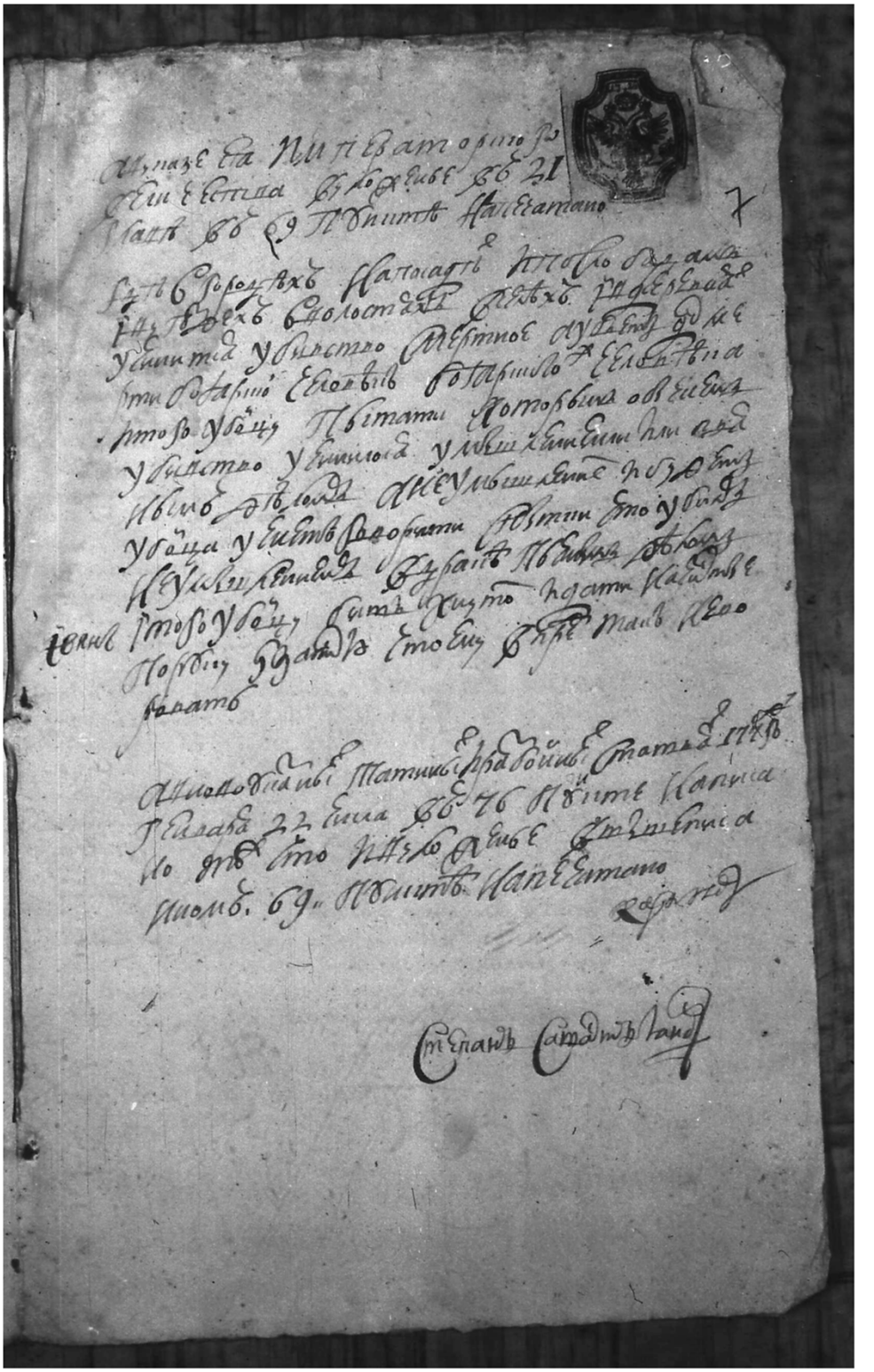


Figure 3. RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fol. 7r.

model (Figure 2). The text of the petition should identify who is suing whom, with no humble self-identification. The narrative should be written "point by point" and conclude simply, "I ask Your Majesty (*Velichestvo*) to resolve this my petition."[9]

The intent of the new Petrine page, then, was to use the visual to make information clear; "points," grids, and white spaces guided the eye to discrete bodies of information. This parallels what Simon Franklin has found in the proliferation of blank forms and passports in Petrine Russia: the state used graphic forms to shape a new way for subjects to interact with autocracy. The Petrine document was also horizontal, an eye-opening break from the past. Rather than the unending scrolls of Muscovy, here the reader paged through a book horizontally. Front and back of each page were used and each was paginated. Disturbing the intended clarity of the page, however, were scribal interventions.

As in Muscovy, great care was taken to authenticate documents: senior scribes double-checked texts and signed off on them, as did responsible officials. But while in Muscovy countersignatures were on the back of a scroll, here the only option was the face of the pages themselves. In a murder case of 1727, for example, we find signatures scattered throughout the text.[10] The presiding judge, Maior and Assessor of Arzamas Province Fedor Zasetskoi, for example, signed on almost every page ("Fedor Zasetskoi," "Maior Zasetskoi"), attesting to his participation in interrogation and torture sessions, in the verdict, and other stages of the trial.[11] His signature is bold and dark, even as he squeezed it in with quick, cramped strokes (Figure 3).

Chancery undersecretary Stepan Sevastianov, by contrast, wrote at least six of the pages in the case and signed them at their conclusions in a light, graceful hand (*Podkantseliarist Stepan Sevastianov*), once dividing the three words over two pages (see figures 3, 4).[12] Twice "Aleksei Dorofeev" signed, in a bolder but graceful hand, noting that he "had read the protocol aloud" to the judge.[13]

The most high-ranking bureaucrat, "*Zasekretar'* Ivan Karaulov," checked the document after all the pages were written and all others had signed. He left his name throughout the pages, drawing the reader along horizontally. In a block-like hand with flourishes on below-the-line letters, Karaulov inscribed the three words of his name and title in the margins of folios 2r, 3r, and 3v, one word per page (see figure 1). For the next three recto pages he divided his title into syllables (*zase-kre-taria*) and put one syllable each in the margins of folios 4r, 5r, and 6r. The eye pauses on folio 7r where he concluded his signature with "Ivan" in the left and "Karaulov" in the right margins of the page (Figure 4). Finally, on the verdict page, folio 8r, he signed his name and title in full: "*zasekretaria* Ivan Karaulov" (see figure 3).

These many signatures, often squeezed in with flourishes and overlapping letters, interrupt the reader's concentration on the text of the court case and undermine the intended clarity of the new Petrine page. But they underscore the horizontality of Petrine documents, as they draw the reader into finding Zasetskoi's bold scrawl page after page or piecing together Karaulov's syllables and name across margins. These counter signatures give the document a tremendous vitality, as the reader needs to search out, look back and forth, and track the progress of the unfolding case.

This might not have been Peter the Great's primary intent; he might have cared more about making documents more objectively informative in their wording and more visually clear in their presentation. But all this countersigning was the bureaucracy's way of policing

[9] A definition of trial procedure, "O forme suda," included this petition outline: O.I. Chistiakova, ed., *Rossiiskoe zakonodatel'stvo X–XX vekov*, 9 vols. (Moscow, 1984–1994), 4:455–56 (November 5, 1723). On the Swedish origins of that document: D.O. Serov, *Sudebnaia reforma Petra I. Istoriko-pravovoe issledovanie* (Moscow, 2009), 336.

[10] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnikh aktov (RGADA), fond 419, delo 242 (February 20, 1727), 8 folios.

[11] RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fols. 1v, 4v, 5, 5v, 7v, 8r.

[12] RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fols. 3v, 6r, 7r, 8r.

[13] RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fols. 4r, 7v.

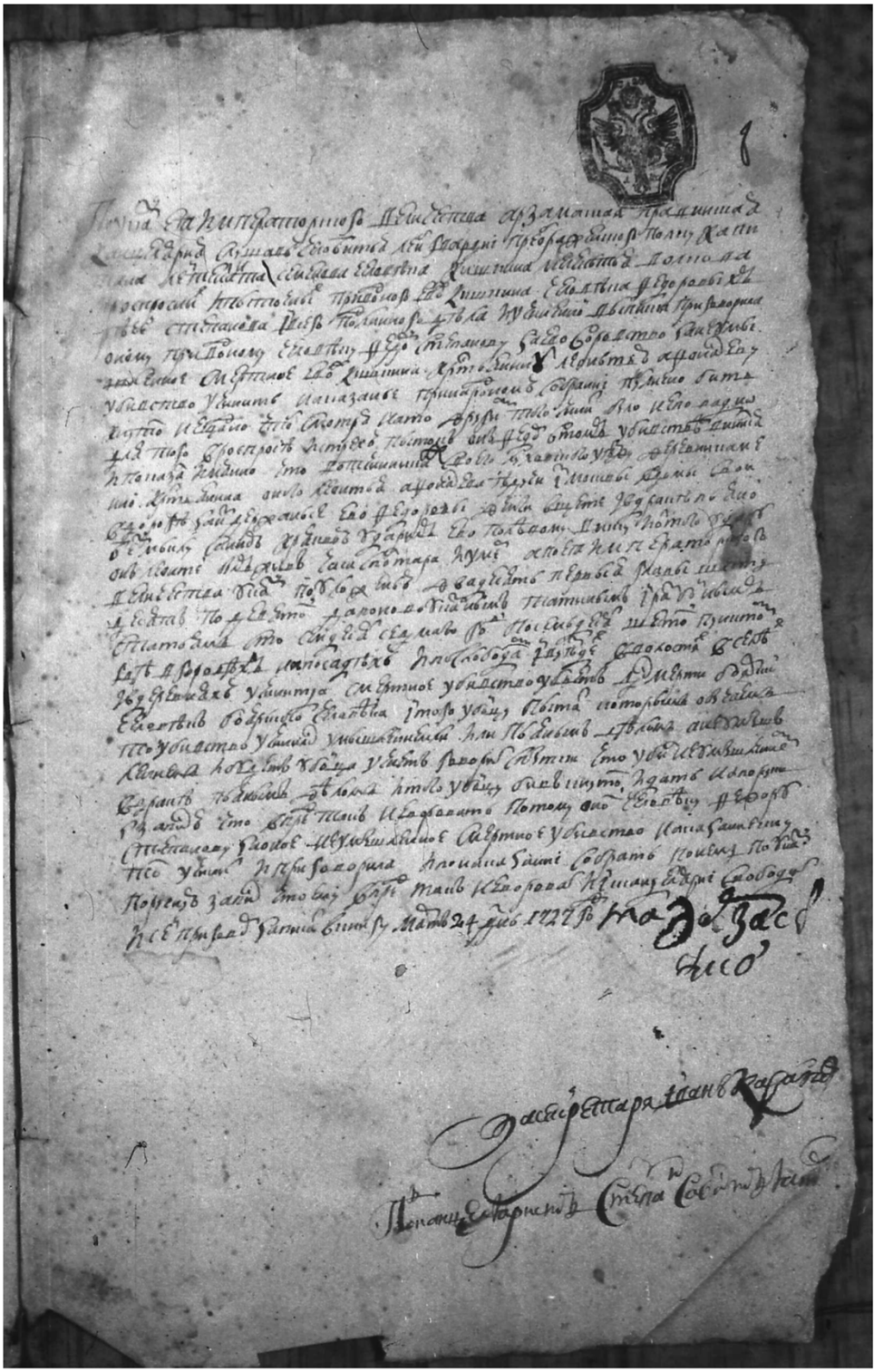


Figure 4. RGADA, f. 419, d. 242, fol. 8r.

officialdom; each signer was taking responsibility for his work and attesting that he was present in court and in the office. For the reader, such countersigned case files identify a hierarchy of officials up front, not hidden at the joints and blank space on the reverse of a Muscovite scroll. Peter the Great made his new paperwork not only horizontal, but also visually human.

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