THE CASE FOR BLACKFOOT POTTERY

By JOHN C. EWERS

ONE of the most perplexing problems to students of Blackfoot Indian material culture in the last half century has been this: Did the Blackfoot make pottery?

In 1892, George Bird Grinnell, a serious student of Blackfoot life, answered this question in a reserved negative. "It is doubtful if the Blackfeet ever made any pottery."[1] At the time he made this statement there was no evidence to the contrary in print. The American artist, George Catlin, had met some of the Blackfoot at Fort Union in 1832. Prince Maximilian, the careful German scientist-explorer, had spent a month in the heart of the Blackfoot country in the summer of 1833. The Canadian artist, Paul Kane, and the missionary priest, Father De Smet, had visited the Blackfoot on more than one occasion in the '40's. All had published their observations on Blackfoot culture in considerable and valuable detail. Yet the subject of pottery is not mentioned in any of their writings about these Indians.

Within the past half century a number of important descriptions of the Blackfoot, by fur traders who knew them well in the late years of the eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth Century, have been published. The majority of the best of these accounts, i.e., those of Alexander Henry the younger (published in 1897), of Charles Larpenteur (1898), of David Thompson (1916), and of Duncan McGillivray (1929), are silent also on the subject of Blackfoot pottery.

Nevertheless, considerable new evidence in the case of Blackfoot pottery has been brought to light during the past half-century, in the form of two pertinent manuscripts, one from the eighteenth century and one from the nineteenth, which were not published until the present century; in the form of testimony by Blackfoot Indians living in the present century regarding traditions of pottery making among their people; and in the form of new information on the practice of the potter's craft by neighboring tribes. All of this evidence is fragmentary. Much of it is circumstantial, susceptible to more than one interpretation. Yet all of this evidence serves to infuse new life into the case, and to make it worthy of reconsideration at this time. Let us follow the new developments since the time of Grinnell's 1892 statement.

The silence of the early writers on the subject of Blackfoot pottery seemed to some students to have been broken when, in 1908, the *Journal of Mathew Cocking, from York Factory to the Blackfeet Country, 1772–1773*, was published. In his Journal, Cocking stated that, on December 1, 1772, he came to twenty-eight of "Archithinue Natives" at a buffalo pound (probably somewhere between the Eagle Hills and the present Alberta-Saskatchewan border).

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[1] Grinnell, 1892, p. 202.

He remained with these Indians for several days and wrote a brief description of their camp life, which mentions their manufacture and use of pottery:

Their Victuals are dressed in earthen pots, of their own Manufacturing; much in the same form as Newcastle pots, but without the feet.[2]

Two months earlier (October 7, 1772) while en route westward, Cocking had noted also:

I found in an old tent-place belonging to the Archithinue Natives part of an earthen vessel, in which they dress their victuals; It appeared to have been in the form of an earthen pan.[3]

Cocking went to some pains to identify those Indians he met at the buffalo pound. The italics are ours:

This tribe is named Powestic-Athinuewuck (i.e.) Waterfall Indians. *There are 4 Tribes, or Nations, more*, which are all Equestrian Indians, Viz., Mithco-Athinuwuck or Bloody Indians, Kostitow-Wathesitock or Blackfooted Indians, Pegonow or Muddy-water Indians & Sassewuck or Woody Country Indians.[4]

Lawrence J. Burpee, editor of Cocking's *Journal*, was inclined to ignore the tribal distinctions made by Cocking in his identification of the Indians he met. Burpee speaks of them only as "Blackfeet" in his introductory commentary, and in an earlier introduction to the *Journal* of Anthony Hendry he points to Cocking's statements as conclusive refutation of Grinnell's position regarding "Blackfeet" pottery.[5] A number of more recent writers on the Blackfoot have accepted Burpee's interpretation of this point. We cannot follow them. Cocking seems to make it perfectly clear that the Indians he met at the buffalo pound were neither Bloods, Blackfoot, nor Piegans. The native term used to identify those Indians differs little from the name still given the Gros Ventre by the Cree Indians of the Rocky Boy's Reservation.[6] The Gros Ventre were frequently referred to in the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century fur trade of the northwest as "Fall Indians." Although we cannot accept Cocking's descriptions as direct proof of the existence of Blackfoot pottery in the 1770's, his comments are not without considerable value. It is probable that Gros Ventre and Blackfoot material culture were very similar at that time. Since the Gros Ventre made pottery, it is highly probable that the Blackfoot did also.

[2] Burpee, 1908, p. 111. [3] *Idem.*, p. 108.

[4] *Idem.*, pp. 110–111. [5] Burpee, 1909, p. 317.

[6] Recently the writer, in company with J. Willard Schultz, asked a small group of Cree Indians from Rocky Boy's Reservation, who were visiting the Museum of the Plains Indian, their names for the Gros Ventre, Piegan, Blood, North Blackfoot and Sarsi. Mr. Schultz, whose familiarity with the languages of the Northwestern Plains dates back more than a half century, was convinced that Cocking had identified these tribes correctly by their Cree names, as soon as he heard the terms given by our informants.

In the course of his field work among the Blackfoot tribes in the first decade of the present century, Clark Wissler collected traditions of Blackfoot pottery-making from two informants. At the time of their publication (1910), Wissler seemed to have no knowledge of Cocking's *Journal*, but he was thoroughly familiar with Grinnell's viewpoint. Wissler recorded his findings cautiously:

It is not certain that the Blackfoot ever made pottery, though some individuals claim such information to have been handed down to the present generation. An old woman had heard that cooking pots were once made of pulverized rock and some sticky material. She never heard of pots hollowed out of stone. A man had heard that pots were made a long time ago. They were fashioned of mud and sand. A bag of rawhide was filled with sand, greased on the outside and the pot shaped over it. The sand was then poured out and the bag withdrawn. The pot was filled with fat and hung over the fire to harden. When finished, it was tested by boiling water in it. Such pots grew gradually harder with use. They were supported by a rawhide cord passing around the rim. The cord had to be changed often. He also heard that pipes were made of clay and hardened by holding over the fire. During this operation they were always kept rubbed with fat."[7]

In a footnote to this statement Wissler referred to the mention of pottery in the myth of The Twin Brothers, which he and D. C. Duvall had collected:

Now at this time, the people cooked in pots of clay. These were shaped out of mud by the hands, and put in the sun to dry; then the kettle was rubbed all over with fat inside and out, and placed in the fire. When it was red hot, it was taken out, and allowed to cool. Such a pot was good for boiling.[8]

Then Wissler concluded:

Aside from these narratives, there is no evidence that pottery was made by the Blackfoot. That these statements may represent intrusive traditions is suggested by the seeming parallels among the Gros Ventre and certain striking agreements with processes employed by the Mandan and other village Indians.[9]

Wissler stated the case for the nomadic Plains tribes in general:

So far, the use of pottery vessels has not been fully proven for the Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, Sarcee, Blackfoot, Crow, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche and Cheyenne. Some of these have traditions of pottery, but definite statements by explorers are wanting, leaving the case as tentative."[10]

Wissler seems first to have become acquainted with Cocking's *Journal* through a secondary source, Agnes C. Laut's *The Conquest of the Great Northwest*. Miss Laut had been no more critical than Burpee in designating the

[7] Wissler, 1910, p. 26. [8] Wissler and Duvall, 1908, p. 43.

[9] Wissler, 1910, p. 26. The Gros Ventre reference here is not to Cocking but to a brief statement in Kroeber, 1908, p. 150: "Pottery is declared to have been made formerly of clay mixed with crushed rock." [10] *Idem.*, p. 45.

Indians met by Cocking at the buffalo pound as "Blackfeet." Wissler recognized in Laut's interpretation of Cocking's statement the definite mention by an early explorer that he had been looking for to confirm the traditional evidence he had collected on Blackfoot pottery making. In an often-overlooked appendix to his *Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians* (1912), Wissler cited Laut's reference to Cocking's mention of Blackfoot use of earthen pots for cooking utensils, and proceeded to abandon his doubts in the matter of Blackfoot pottery:

> Now all our traditional information from the Blackfoot, the information we doubted, seems to indicate that in the manufacture of pottery they employed a method of no firing, that is, the vessel was shaped, dried, and then rubbed with fat, after which it was put on the fire and used. Quite recently, Mr. Skinner secured data from the Menomini of the same tenor, but still more definite, leaving little room for doubt that we have here a rather widely distributed type of no-fired pottery.[11]

This was the status of the case for the next decade. The argument for Blackfoot pottery rested upon the traditional evidence of two informants, a statement in a myth, and the reference to pottery in Cocking's *Journal*, which seems to have been misinterpreted by Burpee and Laut, and through Laut, Wissler, as a reference to Blackfoot pottery.

New and very important evidence was introduced in 1923, when the manuscript of the soldier-historian, Lieut. James H. Bradley, written a half century earlier, was published by the Montana Historical Society. In the mid-1870's Bradley wrote of Blackfoot pottery:

> They made in early times a sort of rude kettle of moistened clay, shaped with the hands, dried in the sun and then burned in the fire. These kettles ordinarily held about two (2) gallons and were of cylindrical shape and usually of greater breadth than depth. They were replaced by vessels of tin, brass, copper and iron as fast as they were able to buy them of the traders and they are no longer manufactured. It is doubtful whether a single specimen has been preserved to the present day.[12]

Lieut. Bradley was the most scholarly historian of the territorial period in Montana. He was stationed, for five years prior to his death in 1877, at Fort Shaw and Fort Benton in the Blackfoot Country. He was an indefatigable student of Blackfoot history and culture, who numbered among his informants intelligent fur traders, priests and Government officials, some of whom had known the Blackfoot since the early 1830's. It is probable that one or more of Bradley's informants had seen Blackfoot pottery made. But unfortunately, Bradley did not cite his source of information.

Bradley's evidence is important in spite of its brevity. It mentions a method of pottery manufacture, the size, shape and use of the vessels, and indicates that pottery making had become a lost art among the Blackfoot

[11] Wissler, 1912, p. 285. [12] Bradley, 1923, p. 257.

before the 1870's, due to the general substitution of metal trade kettles for clay cooking vessels. This would seem to explain why no twentieth century Indian informant claims to have seen Blackfoot pottery made, and why most modern informants have no knowledge of Blackfoot pottery whatever.

That is the extent of the published information on Blackfoot pottery. However, considerable unpublished data have been collected in the field during the past decade bearing on the subject. In view of the poverty of the published testimony it would be well to cite this new evidence in full.

In the summer of 1935, Kenneth Kidd questioned six North Blackfoot informants about the former use of pottery by that tribe. Five of them declared that they had heard or knew of its manufacture by their people. Kidd obtained brief descriptions of two distinct methods of pottery manufacture said to have been employed by the North Blackfoot.

> According to some informants the pots were made of a white sticky clay, found in rocky places, which was moulded into shape and stood beside the fire to dry. . . . Such pots were used for boiling.
>
> The other tradition relates that a bag of the required size was made from buffalo skin. Sand (evidently clay and sand) mixed with water was plastered on the inner surface of the bag and allowed to dry in the sun. The skin cover was then removed. Sometimes a handle made from the neck-gristle of a bison was attached through holes made in the rim.[13]

Pretty Young Man, who related this second tradition, was a middle-aged man who had a keen interest in the history and culture of his people. Kidd regarded him as an intelligent and an honest informant.[14]

During the past three years (1941–44) we have questioned a considerable number of older Piegan and a few Blood Indians regarding the culinary utensils formerly used by their people. The majority of them had no knowledge of Blackfoot pottery. However, four of them gave fragmentary descriptions of the native pottery which are revealing.

Weasel Tail, a Blood Indian in his middle eighties, recalled that when he was a young man, Victory All Over Woman, an aged Blood, reputed to have been over one hundred years of age at the time, told him how the people of their tribe made pottery in her youth. That must have been no later than the beginning of the nineteenth century.

> She said that to make a cooking pot they first dug a hole in the ground, making the sides as round and smooth as possible. Then they took a flat stone and placed it in the bottom of the hole. Then they lined the hole with a thick layer of clay. Next they took a mixture of a certain red rock which had been broken into small pieces with a stone hammer, heated and again pounded until the rock was as fine as flour, and river sand or sand rock pounded fine, mixed with water into a dough. After the clay lining was

[13] Kidd, 1937, pp. 114–115. The author has kindly granted permission to cite this reference.

[14] Letter from Kenneth E. Kidd to the writer, Nov. 25, 1943.

smoothed and shaped with an elkhorn, this dough was put in the cavity and roughly plastered over the clay layer. When it began to dry out, two holes were punched in this inner layer opposite each other and near the top edges of the sides. Then a large stone, just the right size and shape to fill and form the inside wall of the pot, was placed in the cavity. Next a fire was built over the hole. It heated the stone very hot. After this firing had dried out the pot, it was removed from the hole by (1) digging away the top portion of the outer clay lining, (2) lifting the pot by the handle holes with the rock inside it, and (3) turning the pot over carefully and extracting the rock.

A second description of Blood pottery making was related by Mrs. Frank Racine, a middle-aged woman whose mother was a Blood Indian. Mrs. Racine said her grandmother had told her of Blood pottery making, as her mother before her had described it. Mrs. Racine believed that this was a description of the method of Blood pottery making in her greatgrandmother's time. That probably would have been during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The vessel was built up by hand. No mould was used. Then it was greased inside and out and placed over a fire to dry. This fire must not be too hot or the pot would crack. The vessels were quite thick and fragile. They were easily broken, so people had to be very careful with them. Two shapes of vessels were made. One was a cooking pot with a constriction near the top around which the handle was wrapped. The other was a flat dish.

Short Face, a Piegan in his middle seventies, told of a type of ceremonial pottery said to have been made by Chief Lodge Pole. He said that this aged chief of the Small Robes band died about 1894. Short Face declared that, though he had never seen any of Chief Lodge Pole's pottery, the old man once told him how he used to make it.

A sticky clay was obtained from around elk licks. The clay was mixed with a much smaller amount of sand rock pounded fine. The two were mixed with water into a dough. The dough was then put into a form made out of rawhide the exact shape desired for the outside of the dish. The clay was smoothed over the inside of the mould with the hands, to about an inch thickness. Then the whole thing was placed in the sun to dry. After it was dried, the dish was loosened from the rawhide, and the outside surface of the dish smoothed with a stone. Finally the outside was painted with red earth paint. These dishes were flat on the bottom. The sides were almost straight. Bottom and sides were about an inch thick. They were about 8″ across and about a foot high. These dishes were never placed on the fire, nor were they used to hold liquids. They were used only to hold dried meat or pemmican in serving ceremonial feasts. These dishes were not strong. They would fall apart in time. But they were much admired. Because they were so fragile much care was taken to preserve them from harm. For storage they were hung up in the lodge inside a rawhide slip cover gathered over the top with a drawstring. These dishes were always used by men.

Richard Sanderville (born in 1866), a mixed-blood Piegan, whose excellent

memory and knowledge of his people's past are widely recognized among the Indians on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, said of pottery:

I have been told that Piegan pottery was made of clay mixed with sand. It was shaped by hand. The pot was kept greased all over to prevent it from cracking, and hardened over a fire.

Probably the greatest weakness in the case for Blackfoot pottery lies in our inability to locate the corpus delicti—a genuine specimen of Blackfoot pottery. No writer on the Blackfoot has claimed to have seen a piece of Blackfoot pottery. However, two of our informants have said that they have each seen one vessel. Sanderville recalled:

I saw a cooking pot when I was a boy. It belonged to one of the wives of Many Horses, the Piegan chief, who was killed by the Gros Ventre in 1866. It was thick, flat-bottomed with straight sides, about 15 inches in diameter and about a foot high. It had two holes near the rim for a handle. When she moved camp she carried it in a laced rawhide container which was packed on the top of a packhorse's load.

The Blood Indian, Weasel Tail, stated

There used to be a shopkeeper in McLeod (Alberta), who kept a store on the south side of the street, at the east end of town. He bought up a lot of old Indian relics and kept them on view in his store. One of those relics was an old clay pot, found on the plains in the Blackfoot country. The last time I saw it was when I was about 28 years old (ca. 1885).

I saw that relic many times in company with other Indians. We used to look it over carefully and talk about it. I remember it clearly. It was about 12″ broad and about 8″ high. The sides sloped out a little from the bottom. It had two holes in the sides near the rim, but no handle in it when I saw it. The sides were a little thicker than the pencil you hold in your hand. (This was $\frac{5}{16}$″ thick.) It was the color of cement.

Our efforts to obtain further information about that vessel in the town of McLeod in the fall of 1943 met with no success.

Summary of the Direct Evidence on Blackfoot Pottery: Direct evidence in the case for Blackfoot pottery now rests upon Bradley's brief account of about seventy years ago, a statement in a myth, and traditions of Blackfoot pottery making obtained by three field investigators from some eleven Indians representing all three tribal divisions (Piegan, Blood and North Blackfoot), over the past four decades. To what extent is it possible to define the characteristics of Blackfoot pottery on the basis of this evidence? Since all accounts but one refer entirely or primarily to a cooking pot, we may consider it the most common article of Blackfoot pottery. Majority testimony indicates that it was made of a moist, sticky, clay paste tempered with sand; shaped with the hands (there is no mention of any tools); dried in the sun; rubbed all over inside and out with animal fat and hardened over a fire. The finished vessel was cylindrical in shape (i.e., flat bottomed with nearly perpendicular sides),

broader than deep, and of considerable thickness. It had two holes in the sides, opposite one another for insertion of a rawhide handle by which the pot was suspended, apparently from a tripod, over the fire. There is no mention of any surface decoration. That there may have been some variation in the form of the vessel and its method of manufacture is suggested by the minority testimony. Pulverized sand rock may have been used quite commonly for tempering material. There is some testimony from all three divisions that a mould of some description was used in shaping the vessel. Although there is little consistency in the description of the mould and its use, the testimony is too persistent to be ignored lightly. There is a single reference to a constricted rim cooking pot. The description of a mould-made, ceremonial serving vessel, cylindrical in shape, deeper than broad, by one informant, and the mention of a flat dish by another, are the only indications we have that the Blackfoot used pottery for purposes other than cooking. On the whole, these descriptions of Blackfoot pottery portray a thick, undecorated, friable ware, limited to a few elementary shapes.

The testimony throws some light on the time of discontinuance of pottery making by the Blackfoot also. It is apparent that the increased mobility of the Blackfoot pursuant to the acquisition of the horse did not drastically curtail the quantity output of pottery, for considerable pottery must have been manufactured for fully a century after horses were obtained. As Bradley has indicated, the furnishing of the Blackfoot with metal trade kettles must have been the primary cause of the abandonment of the pottery craft. Alexander Henry found kettles "scarce" among the Piegan in 1810;[15] while Culbertson estimated that there was about one kettle to every lodge in 1833.[16] The few datable descriptions of pottery making recently obtained pertain to that intervening period. It is very possible that the descriptions of the craft that have been obtained refer to its practice in a period of decadence not long before its virtual abandonment. Possibly Blackfoot pottery of an earlier period was somewhat less crude. It is probable that very little pottery was made after about the year 1825. When every household possessed a metal kettle that could be banged about over the plains for years without serious damage, the friable clay cooking pot had no further usefulness as an everyday utensil. That it may have survived for a number of decades as a form of ceremonial vessel, as indicated in Short Face's description of Chief Lodge Pole's pottery, is entirely plausible. The survival of objects once in common use, in the role of ceremonial equipment is not uncommon among the Blackfoot. Witness the ceremonial lance, and the wooden bowl which is still an integral part of the medicine pipe bundle.

Indirect Evidence from Neighboring Tribes: In 1892, when Grinnell expressed

[15] Henry and Thompson, 1897, p. 724. [16] Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

doubt that the Blackfoot had made pottery, little or no evidence had been published to indicate that pottery had been made by any of the nomadic tribes north and west of the horticultural peoples on the Missouri in the Dakotas. Since then the picture has altered materially. Some evidence of the former manufacture and use of pottery has been found among the majority of the nomadic tribes who were neighbors of the Blackfoot in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In addition to the eyewitness account of Gros Ventre pottery by Mathew Cocking in 1772, traditions of pottery making have been reported for the Gros Ventre,[17] Sarsi,[18] Kutenai,[19] Northern Shoshoni,[20] Arapaho,[21] Assiniboine[22] and Cheyenne.[23] The Calling River People, a band of the Plains Cree, have also claimed that their people formerly made and used clay kettles.[24] Lowie found no evidence for the former use of earthenware vessels by the Crow.[25] However, it has been suggested recently that the pottery-bearing Hagen Site, near Glendive, Montana, may be prehistoric Crow.[26]

Because of the very fragmentary nature of the published descriptions of Gros Ventre, Arapaho, Assiniboine, Plains Cree, and Northern Shoshoni pottery it is impossible to compare it with the pottery of the Blackfoot. As might be expected, because of the long association between the Blackfoot and Sarsi, descriptions of their pottery bear a marked similarity. Kutenai pottery seems to have been even more crude than either of them. On the other hand the excavated pottery materials from the Sheyenne-Cheyenne site,[27] and the Hagen Site[28] are definitely representative of greater skill in the potter's craft than anything that has been attributed to the Blackfoot. The Cheyenne wares are said to resemble pottery from Minnesota sites. Hagen Site pottery is very similar to that of the Mandan.

Recently Will and Hecker have described a type of crude pottery from the Upper Missouri River Valley in North Dakota. The village sites give no definite evidence of agriculture, and were occupied at a relatively early date. "Probably the occupants of these villages preceded the Mandans but could have been contemporary with the first Mandan occupation in the area."[29] The potsherds are described as

> . . . very crude appearing, grit tempered, well fired, woodland type with rim top incised or with punched decorations predominating. From the small size of the rim

[17] See footnote 9, this paper. [18] Sapir, 1923, Vol. 25; Jenness, 1938, p. 14.
[19] Turney-High, 1941, pp. 77–78. [20] Lowie, 1909, p. 177.
[21] Kroeber, 1902, p. 25. [22] Lowie, 1910, p. 12. [23] Grinnell, 1923, p. 236–239.
[24] Skinner, 1914, pp. 79–80, 82; Mandelbaum, 1940, p. 214. [25] Lowie, 1922, p. 212.
[26] Mulloy, 1942, pp. 101–102; Will and Hecker, 1944, pp. 34–35.
[27] Strong, 1940, pp. 373–374.
[28] Mulloy, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–38. Will and Hecker, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
[29] Will and Hecker, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

tops recovered it is impossible to determine the rim or body shapes of the pots. The arc of the few rim sherds recovered shows a rim top diameter of 8 to 10 inches which would mean a medium sized pot of bowl shape, or a very large pot of constricted neck type. The entire surface of the pot is roughened by apparent grass rubbing or pressing, and in many cases the rough surface shows that grass stems, seed heads or something of the sort had been imbedded in the clay. Some sherds show vertical strokes, others horizontal. The surface finishing of these pots is entirely different from any other culture in the area and a few of the sherds have the appearance of having been formed inside a grass basket but that method of pottery manufacture cannot be ascribed to the culture. Unlike the pottery of the historic village Indians which is smooth inside the inner surface of these sherds is slightly irregular. These sherds while having the appearance of a poorly constructed ware are still of a very good quality and were used in cooking as the pot black on the sherds shows. The sherds are of gray color tones apparently open fired and a large percentage appear to have been highly sanded before firing.[30]

This evidence of a different, cruder and perhaps earlier pottery than Mandan in the Northern Great Plains is stimulating. The suggestion that a basketry mould was used in the manufacture of some of it adds significance to our descriptions of Blackfoot mould-made pottery. Is it possible that the use of a mould in the manufacture of pottery is a trait of some antiquity and breadth of distribution in the Northern Great Plains? Is the Blackfoot pottery that has been described a survival of a simple and crude pottery tradition, or is it a terminal, decadant form of an earlier, better made, decorated pottery? What are the historical relationships among the several nomadic tribes north and west of the Mandan in the matter of ceramics? These are all questions that must await further archaeological research over a much wider area of the Northern Great Plains than has yet been explored. To date a limited amount of archaeological research has been done in the whole area, and the great majority of that has been confined to the villages of the horticultural tribes. While we need no longer doubt the existence of Blackfoot pottery, we would wish for better knowledge of some of its implications. It is in the hope that the information may be valuable to future workers in the field that this review of the case to date has been prepared.

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[30] *Idem*, pp. 36–37.

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