

THE LEGITIMATION OF THE IMAGE OF THE SAINT: ON THE ISSUE OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE RELICS OF ALEXANDER NEVSKY*

Alexander Nevsky has been regarded as the national symbol of Russia in different epochs, and this fact alone sets him apart in the Russian historical memory. For a long time, almost until the 18th century, he had been deemed, first and foremost, a holy monk. As he was revered as venerable, it meant the existence of the wonderworking relics. The veneration of relics comprised a significant aspect in the cult of Alexander Nevsky during the late medieval period. Such an attitude towards the relics of the Saint was typical of the medieval culture¹. In the 18th century the image of Alexander Nevsky started undergoing changing towards its secularization, yet the religious significance of his relics remained intact. The transfer of the relics from Vladimir to St. Petersburg in 1723–1724 played a symbolic role in the legitimation of the new capital². The exhumation of the relics in 1922 was turned into an antireligious manifestation which sparked a massive public response. The major argument against their authenticity was the fragmentary state of the relics. Instead of the mummified remains of the saint there could be seen several separate bones³. Although it was possible to conduct

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¹ См. об этом: *Head T.* Hagiology and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800–1200. Cambridge, 1990; *Lenhoff G.* The Martyred Princes Boris and Gleb. A socio-cultural Study of the Cult and the Texts. Columbus, 1989; *Miller D.* Saint Sergius of Radonezh, his Trinity Monastery, and the formation of the Russian identity. DeKalb, 2010. P. 72–104; etc.

² *Шенк Ф. Б.* Александр Невский в русской культурной памяти: Святой, правитель, национальный герой (1263–2000) / Авторизованный пер. с нем. Е. Земсковой и М. Лавринович. М., 2007. С. 130–141.

³ *Стиридонова Е. К.* Вскрытие мощей Александра Невского в 1922 году (по материалам периодической печати) // Александр Невский и Ледовое побоище: Материалы научной конференции, посвященной 770-летию Ледового побоища. Санкт-Петербург, 7 апреля 2012 г. СПб., 2014. С. 155–159.

their expert examination in the Soviet period, when the relics were kept in the Museum of the Religion and Atheism, it wasn't done. At present, after the relics have been handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church, they are honoured. Thousands of pilgrims annually visit the Trinity Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky Lavra with a view to paying tribute to the relics of Alexander Nevsky. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to suppose that the above mentioned problem is insurmountable. The relics of Alexander Nevsky can't be examined but the written sources describing their long existence are available to us. Their analysis can shed light on this knotty problem.

The issue of the authenticity of the relics of Alexander Nevsky dates back to the events of the 15th century. It was also of relevance for the ensuing periods — both in the 16th and 17th century. Despite the solid historiography devoted to the veneration of Alexander Nevsky, the history of his relics has not been specially studied. The history of the shrines and reliquaries, where the remains of Alexander Nevsky were kept, is closely connected with it. Several contradictory opinions have been expressed about the issue, yet they haven't clarified it, but rather made it even more complicated as the researchers often don't treat the information in the sources critically⁴. Therefore, it is reasonable to study the history of the relics of Alexander Nevsky on the basis of all available sources, as far as possible.

Alexander Nevsky died in 1263 in Gorodets, having taken a monastic vow before the death. His body was taken to Vladimir, where it was buried in the cathedral of Nativity monastery. It should be stressed that the decision to bury the Prince of Vladimir in the monastery cathedral was not typical of the 13th century. Traditionally, since the time of Andrey Bogolyubsky, i. e. since the second half of the 12th century, it was the Assumption Cathedral which was the burial place for the Princes of Vladimir. It's also worth emphasizing that there had been only one case when a representative of the family took a vow before Alexander Nevsky. It was Maria Shvarvovna, Alexander Nevsky's grandmother, the first wife of Vsevolod III. Having recovered after a long illness, she built a convent, took a veil, was buried there and, thus, laid the foundation for the necropolis of the Princesses of Vladimir. It goes without saying that the necropolis of the Princess' Convent of Moscow in the Kremlin Ascension Convent came into being with reference to the Princess' Convent in Vladimir.

Therefore, the burial of Alexander Nevsky in the monastery was the continuation of the tradition set by Maria Shvarvovna at the beginning of the 13th century. The tradition was later carried on by Alexander Nevsky's son — Daniil Alexandrovich, who was buried in Danilov Monastery in Moscow. Unfortunately, it is not known which members of the family of Princes of Vladimir were buried in Nativity monastery, but in the 16th century there were three stone tombs there, besides the one of Alexander Nevsky⁵. So, it goes to show that Nativity monastery was used as a necropolis, either for the Princes or for the bishops.

The invention of the relics of Alexander Nevsky is usually dated 1381. It was described in so called Vladimir recension of his «Life», compiled in the 16th century and included in the Dormition set of the Great Menaion Reader. Judging by the text of Vladimir recension, it

⁴ See, for example: *Бегунов Ю. К., Сапунов Б. В.* История мощей и рак святого благоверного великого князя Александра Невского // *Князь Александр Невский: Материалы научно-практических конференций 6 декабря 1989 г. и 10–11 сентября 1994 г.* СПб., 1995. С. 85–90.

⁵ *Сиренов А. В.* Описи древних гробниц в рукописных сборниках XVII века // *История в рукописях и рукописи в истории: Сб. науч. тр. к 200-летию Отдела рукописей Российской национальной библиотеки.* СПб., 2006. С. 409.

can be concluded that the text was created after the canonization of the Prince in the Council of 1547. The description of the first miracles of the relics of Alexander Nevsky was included there. The first miracle dates to the time of the Battle of Kulikovo. A certain sacristan had a vision of the two old men in Nativity Cathedral, who called upon Alexander Nevsky to come to his relative's assistance and help Prince Dmitry confront the enemies. When Alexander Nevsky rose from his coffin, the vision disappeared — and both the old men and the holy Prince became invisible. After the sacristan notified the local clergy of it, they dug out the relics of Alexander Nevsky, uncovered them, found intact and solemnly put in a reliquary on the surface of the ground. Then more miracles through relics occurred, mostly — miraculous healing⁶. In the recension of «The life of Alexander Nevsky» made in 1591 by Iona Dumin, the former archmandrite of Vladimir, there were added some details to the story of the uncovering of the relics of Alexander Nevsky: the main role was given to the metropolitan, who acted in accord with the Grand Prince⁷. As in 1380 there was no metropolitan in Moscow and metropolitan Cyprian arrived in north-east Russia only in 1381, the invention of the relics of Alexander Nevsky should be dated 1380 or 1381⁸.

However, it is not possible to agree with this date. To begin with, the details added by Iona Dumin were not based on any sources. Iona stylistically embellished the text, elaborating on it in a number of places. As far as the above mentioned episode is concerned, he wanted to overplay its public significance by pointing out that the metropolitan and the Grand Prince were involved in it. Moreover, the mere news about the invention of the relics of Alexander Nevsky at the end of the 14th century is wide open to criticism. According to the recension made in Vladimir, the author was told about it by a priest of the Cathedral of Saint Demetrius Prokopii, who learn it from his father Ivan. Therefore, it could be inferred that the uncovering of the relics of Alexander Nevsky, an event of paramount importance for the veneration of the Saint, passed unnoticed in Nativity monastery itself. It also seems strange that the relics were found underground. In the 12th–13th centuries Princes were buried in white sarcophagi put on the surface of the ground. When the cathedral of Nativity was demolished in 1930, there were discovered two tombs of white stone with the remains of bones, which, in all probability, in the 16th century used to stand in the arcosolia, not below the ground.

Undoubtedly, Alexander Nevsky was buried in the same way. So, there was no need to «uncover» his relics. All they had to do was to remove the stone lid off the sarcophagus or to move the sarcophagus itself to a more convenient place (for example, from the arcosolium of the southern gallery to the south-west of the cathedral, where the tomb used to stand in the 16th century). Nonetheless, it was essential for the religious veneration to stress the fact that the saint was honoured locally, which usually involved the «invention» of the relics followed by the miracles. The author of the recension made in Vladimir resorted to the story of a priest of the Cathedral of Saint Demetrius as it best suited the contemporary perceptions of the beginning of the local veneration of the saint. In the actual fact, there was no «invention» of the relics of Alexander Nevsky in the 14th century.

The reliable information about the relics of Alexander Nevsky emerged only at the end of the 15th century. In the compilation of the chronicles (Sokrasheny Svod) made in 1493

⁶ Мансикка В. П. Житие Александра Невского. Разбор редакций и текст. СПб., 1913. Вторая пагинация. С. 27.

⁷ Мансикка В. П. Житие Александра Невского... С. 104.

⁸ See also: *Стецюра Т. Д.* Святой благоверный князь Александр Невский // Александр Невский. Государь, дипломат, воин. М., 2010. С. 502–503.

under the year 6999 (1491) the fire in Vladimir was mentioned, as a result of which the relics of Alexander Nevsky were burnt⁹. Later on this was also pointed out in *Voskresenskaya Chronicle*¹⁰. It should be noted that the chronicler used the word «body», not «relics» and didn't refer to Alexander Nevsky as Saint.

Yet, half a century later Alexander Nevsky was canonized and joined the list of the other most revered Russian Saints. The Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy, the official work of historiography produced in the 50–60s of the 16th century, included an elaborate story of the miraculous rescue of the relics of Alexander Nevsky in the fire of 1491, which was followed by a first-person narration about a miraculous healing of a royal courtier through the relics. It took place when the Tsar visited Nativity Monastery during his military expedition to Kazan. It is known that Ivan IV was in Vladimir in December, 1550, and in July, 1552. Thus, the description in the Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy should refer to either of those visits. The author of the narration about a miracle accompanied the Tsar to Nativity Monastery and during the service noticed a crack in the tomb of the holy Prince. When he touched it, the sore on his hand disappeared¹¹. Afterwards, in the 70s of the 16th century, this text was copied and included in the Illustrated Chronicle of Ivan the Terrible (Litzevoy Svod). Of special importance is the fact that the authorship of the narration was mentioned there¹².

It was the Tsar's confessor Andrey, the prospective metropolitan Afanasii, a close associate of the young Ivan IV at the time¹³. Andrey-Afanasii, who came from the clergy of Transfiguration Cathedral in Pereslavl-Zalessky, must have been well aware of the relics of Alexander Nevsky as Vladimir and Pereslavl-Zalessky then were part of the same Suzdal Diocese. It is also important that Andrey-Afanasii was convinced of the rescue of the relics in the fire of 1491. In the middle of the 16th century the religious veneration of Alexander Nevsky served Ivan IV from an ideological viewpoint very well. Alexander Nevsky and Vladimir the Great, who baptized Russia, were his canonized ancestors. This played a significant role for the eastern hierarchs as far as the establishment of the title of the Tsar was concerned. As it is known, the coronation took place in 1547, whereas the confirmation from Constantinople was sent to Moscow only in 1561. In the meantime it was necessary to justify the rights of Moscow ruler to the title of the Tsar. The existence of the holy ancestors was deemed valid argument; therefore the veneration of Alexander Nevsky was emphasized at the state level.

In 1591 the former archimandrite of Nativity monastery Iona Dumin, who became the archbishop of Vologda in 1589, with the blessing of the Patriarch Job compiled a new recension of «The life of Alexander Nevsky». A few years before, most probably, in 1589, Ivan Dumin while editing the text of The Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy resorted to *Voskresenskaya Chronicle*. He ascertained that the texts described differently what happened to the relics of Alexander Nevsky during the fire of 1491. Iona removed the page with the description of the fire from *Voskresenskaya Chronicle* and replaced it with the copied text

⁹ Никаноровская летопись. Сокращенные летописные своды конца XV века // ПСРЛ. М.; Л., 1962. Т. 28. С. 291.

¹⁰ Продолжение летописи по Воскресенскому списку // ПСРЛ. СПб., 1859. Т. 8. С. 221.

¹¹ Степенная книга по древнейшим спискам. М., 2008. Т. 2. С. 270.

¹² It was noted by P. G. Vasenko (*Vasenko П. Г.* Кто был автором «Книги Степенной царского родословия»? // Журнал Министерства народного просвещения. 1902. Декабрь. С. 289–306).

¹³ Летописный сборник, именуемый Патриаршею или Никоновскою летописью // ПСРЛ. СПб., 1901. Т. 12. С. 230.

from The Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy¹⁴. The time of the editing of «The life of Alexander Nevsky» should be stressed — 1591, so, exactly 100 years had elapsed since the fire of 1491. M. Isoaho believes that the motive for the new recension was the victory of the Russian army over Sweden in 1590¹⁵. We suppose that it was far more significant for the former archimandrite of Vladimir to prove the miraculous rescue of the relics of Alexander Nevsky in the fire of 1491. In his new recension Iona listed the miracles which occurred through the relics in the second half of the 16th century.

In the 17th century the relics of Alexander Nevsky were damaged at least one more time, which was documented. During the exhumation of the relics in 1922 there was found a note. Its whereabouts at present is not known, but three photos of the document are available. One is a glass plate negative kept in the manuscripts department of the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences (BAN) (the collection of reproductions, inv. 2, № 75), the second one (from the private collection of S. F. Platonov: National Library of Russia. F. 585. № 7058) — a print from a different negative; the third one (The Central State Film and Photo Archive of Saint Petersburg Dr. 1125) — a glass plate negative made by V. K. Bulla, where a note of the 17th century was shown together with the act from 24, June, 1917. The text of the note was published, although not accurately, in the book by O. Y. Vasilieva and P. N. Knyshevsky¹⁶. It seems reasonable to publish it again and to accompany it with the photo of the note of the best quality from the negative in the collection of the Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The size of the note is approximately 8,5×5,5 sm, it was written in half-uncial script of the 17th century on laid paper, which bespeaks its contemporaneity. This is the text of the note, but the Cyrillic figures have been replaced with the Arabic ones and the old-fashioned characters — with the modern letters: «189 May, on the 20th day, the relics of the Faithful Saint Prince were gathered after the fire in the church, when all the icons got burnt» (Pic. 1). It can be inferred that in May, 1681, there was a fire in Nativity monastery, which spread to the cathedral. As a consequence, the interior of the cathedral was burnt but the fragments of the relics had survived.

Therefore, over the centuries the relics had been rescued from the fires several times while the ancient Nativity cathedral couldn't withstand the fire. How could it have been? In order to answer the question, it's necessary to establish what the cathedral reliquary was like. It is certain that on the 1st of July, 1697, the relics of Alexander Nevsky were solemnly put in a new gilded wooden reliquary, which had been specially made for the purpose in Moscow and the expenses were covered by the sacristan of the Patriarch, Bogolep Yakovlev. It was in that reliquary that the relics were transported to St. Petersburg in 1723. For the occasion of the first event of putting the relics to a new reliquary a solemn speech was written, where there was a reference to the missive of Patriarch Adrian to Metropolitan of Suzdal Ilarion, entrusted with the process of removing the relics. The former reliquary was characterized in the missive as being decayed and having lost its beauty¹⁷. Since the new reliquary was put, the former one had never been mentioned again.

¹⁴ Сиренов А. В. Степенная книга. История текста. М., 2007. С. 307–308.

¹⁵ Isoaho M. The Image of Aleksandr Nevskiy in Medieval Russia. Warrior and Saint. Leiden; Boston, 2006. P. 356–357.

¹⁶ Васильева О. Ю., Кнышевский П. Н. Красные конкистадоры. М., 1994. С. 185.

¹⁷ Сиренов А. В. Патриарший ризохранилище Боголеп и два памятника монастырской книжности конца XVII в. // Очерки феодальной России. М., 2003. Вып. 7. С. 253. — It's quite possible that the stone tomb

T. P. Timofeeva, who specially addressed this question, drew attention to two circumstances. First of all, at the beginning of the 19th century the place in the cathedral where the reliquary used to stand before 1723 was marked with a special metal railing in the form of the tomb — a sort of a cenotaph. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that a wooden tomb with fragments of the relics of Alexander Nevsky was mentioned in the monastery records — at first only one, afterwards two. It should be stressed that at the beginning of the 19th century they didn't exist in the monastery. Furthermore, in the monastery donation records (*vkładnaya kniga*) of the 17th century, where there were listed donations from different people towards the decorations of the relics of Alexander Nevsky, an old reliquary, which had been in the cathedral before 1697, was invariably referred to as a coffin, whereas a new one, which was put on the 1, July, 1697, was called a reliquary.

We believe that on the basis of the above mentioned observations T. P. Timofeeva comes to a reasonable supposition: that before 1697 the relics of Alexander Nevsky had been kept in the white stone sarcophagus¹⁸. In different copies of the biography of Alexander Nevsky the object where his relics were kept was called either a coffin, or a reliquary. Therefore, both the copyists and the readers didn't differentiate between the words. However, donations records (*vkładnaya kniga*) were monastery documents. It was crucial there to distinguish between a mere stone coffin and a reliquary of high artistic merit, decorated with the precious stones. As far as ancient tombs in the cathedrals of Vladimir are concerned, another observation should be added, which was made on the analysis of the lists of tombs drawn in the 16th–18th centuries. Reliquaries were specially noted in those lists. Thus, after 1645 the remains of Prince Georgii Vsevolodovich were marked as being kept in the reliquary, not in the coffin. As for the relics of Alexander Nevsky, they were described as being kept in the reliquary only in the list of the end of the 17th century. Consequently, the idea of T. P. Timofeeva, who assumed that the relics of Alexander Nevsky had been kept in a white stone sarcophagus before they were put in a new reliquary, should be supported. It was the sarcophagus that protected the relics from the fires, or, at least, made it possible for the fragments to have survived.

Therefore, the obscure story of the relics of Alexander Nevsky can be clarified to a certain extent. To begin with, the description of the «invention» of the relics in 1380–1381, narrating how they were dug out from below the ground, should be classified as unreliable. This story was taken down by a hagiographer from Vladimir with reference to an oral report of his contemporary. In other words, even in the 16th century it was regarded as historical memory. All the more so, we have no reason to believe that it reflected a historical fact. In all probability, Alexander Nevsky was buried in a white stone sarcophagus, which was put in the cathedral. At any rate, there were three more similar sarcophagi in Nativity cathedral in the 16th century, albeit anonymous.

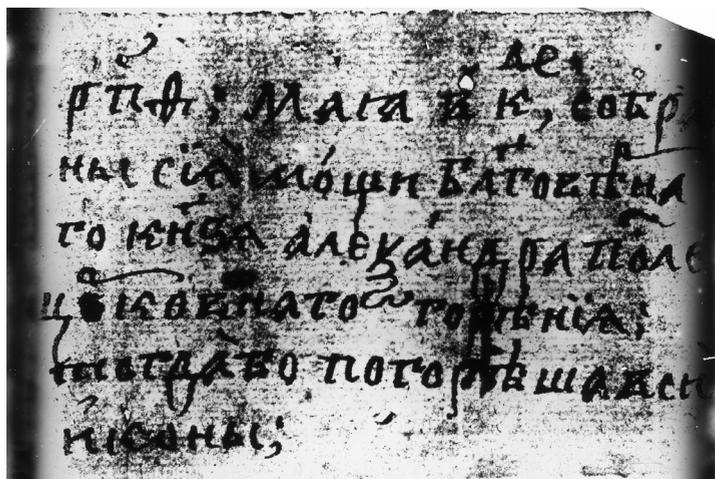
It is quite likely that the relics of Alexander Nevsky had been kept in a stone coffin until they were put in the reliquary on the 1, July, 1697. The cathedral had been burnt several times but the sarcophagus remained intact. This engendered debates concerning the integrity of the relics of Alexander Nevsky. The outsiders often thought that the relics had perished in

in the 17th century had a decorative layer similar to the one made on the reliquaries for saints in Assumption cathedral in the 19th century.

¹⁸ *Тимофеева Т. П.* К вопросу о так называемой гробнице Александра Невского // <http://rusarch.ru/timofeeva8.htm>; condensed version of the article: *Тимофеева Т. П.* Владимирские гробницы и раки Александра Невского // Владимирский Некрополь. Владимир, 2002. Вып. 5. Князь-Владимирское кладбище. С. 90–95.

the fire (for example, in the fire of 1491). However, the local monastery tradition insisted on their survival. In the middle of the 16th century when the canonization of Alexander Nevsky was regarded as an argument for the legitimacy of the royal title of Ivan IV, the story of the miraculous rescue of the relics in the fire of 1491 was included in The Book of Degrees of the Royal Genealogy.

Yet, the reality must have been different. From the note about the fire of 1681 it is obvious what was done in the monastery once another fire was over: they tended to collect all the surviving fragments and continued the practice of their veneration. It goes without saying that their number gradually reduced. The sarcophagus was also deteriorating. The Tsar's confessor Afanasii in 1550 spotted a crack (in the lower part of the tomb) wide enough to put a hand there. By 1697 it had become decrepit, which was pointed out by Patriarch Adrian. Not surprisingly, the old tomb of Alexander Nevsky was no longer mentioned anywhere after 1697, and in the 19th century it was necessary for the monastery to make cenotaphs. The old tomb was beyond restoration after the relics were put in a new reliquary. A similar situation occurred in the 16th century in Assumption Cathedral of Vladimir with the tombs of Princesses of Vladimir: when it was attempted to remove them to a new cathedral, they came apart. During the archaeological excavations in Nativity monastery in 1997–1998 there were discovered fragments of a stone sarcophagus in the arcosolium of the southern gallery. It was assumed that the archaeologists had found the tomb of Alexander Nevsky, which is quite probable, all the more so because the galleries of the cathedral were built at the end of the 12th century, according to the recent findings¹⁹. After the relics were removed to a new reliquary in 1697, the former one had to be preserved — that was the case after removing of the relics of other Saints of Vladimir: Princes Georgii Vsevolodovich (1645), Andrey



*Fig. 1. The note from the relics of Alexander Nevsky. 1681
(Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences (BAN).
The collection of reproductions, inv. 2, № 75).*

¹⁹ Глазов В. П., Иоаннисян О. М., Зыков П. Л., Повелихин А. В. Раскопки собора Рождественского монастыря во Владимире // Археологические открытия 1997 года. М., 1999. С. 81–82.

Bogolybsky and his son Gleb (1701). It could have been put in the only arcosolium of the southern gallery, not far from the reliquary.

The conclusion of the article is that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the relics of Alexander Nevsky. Obviously, there had been mistaken attributions of the burial places in the mediaeval monastery practice or combining fragments of different relics in one tomb etc. However, as far as the relics of Alexander Nevsky are concerned, they are unlikely to be the case of deliberate fake.

At present, when the traditional role of the relics of Alexander Nevsky has been revived in the cultural environment of Russia, the debates concerning their authenticity (in particular, in the internet resources) have also re-emerged, taking the same forms as in the pre-revolutionary period.

Данные о статье

Исследование выполнено при поддержке гранта РФФИ, проект № 16-18-10080

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Заголовок: Легитимизация образа святого: о подлинности мошей Александра Невского

Резюме: Статья посвящена истории мошей Александра Невского. Автор полагает, что рассказ об обретении мошей в 1481 г. не соответствует действительности. В реальности мощи Александра Невского находились на поверхности земли в каменной гробнице с момента погребения до 1697 г., когда их торжественно переложили в специальный реликварий. Каменный саркофаг спасал останки Александра Невского во время многочисленных пожаров. В статье публикуется записка, вложенная в гробницу Александра Невского в 1681 г. В ней рассказывается о том, что после очередного пожара остатки мошей были собраны вместе. Таким образом, есть все основания считать мощи Александра Невского подлинными.

Ключевые слова: мощи Александра Невского, история России XV–XVII вв., почитание святых, древнерусская культура, историческая память

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Author: Sirenov, Aleksey Vladimirovich — Doctor in History, St. Petersburg State University, Institute of History, St. Petersburg, Russia, a.sirenov@spbu.ru

Title: The legitimation of the image of the Saint: on the issue of the authenticity of the relics of Alexander Nevsky

Summary: The article is devoted to the history of the relics of Alexander Nevsky. The author assumes that the description of the «invention» of the relics in 1481 didn't reflect the reality. In the actual fact, the relics had been kept on the surface of the ground in a stone tomb since the funeral until 1697, when they were solemnly put in a special reliquary. The stone sarcophagus protected the relics of Alexander Nevsky against numerous fires. The article cites and publishes the note put in the coffin of Alexander Nevsky in 1681, which told that after a fire the fragments of the relics had been collected together. Therefore, the relics of Alexander Nevsky should be deemed authentic.

Keywords: the relics of Alexander Nevsky, Russian history of the 15th–17th centuries, veneration of saints, Old Russian culture, historical memory

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