
Restoring Books and Faith: The Siberian Old Believer Skete as a “Territory of Salvation”

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The article deals with non-verbal ways of reproducing and transmitting the Old Believer culture of desert-dwelling, going beyond the study of book restoration as a purely technical operation. The studied case is a Siberian skete of Old Believer Wanderers founded in the 1830s and still active today, with its library of handwritten and printed books in Church Slavonic Cyrillic. The skete’s approach to managing its book collection and the methods of book restoration employed by its inhabitants are used as a tool for initiating peasants into the monastic tradition and are examined in the context of the social history of a taiga settlement. The visible traces of paper, binding, and cover repairs, as well as corrections and additions to prayer and didactic texts, are assessed in terms of their alignment with the symbolism of the Christian book and the skete dwellers’ self-perception as guardians of the “territory of salvation” of ancient books and of the true faith. Methodologically, the study is based on the mediative approach to religion (B. Meyer) and the practices of analyzing the material and visual aspects of religious books (M.P. Brown, T. Lentes).

Keywords: Old Believer book culture, religious reading culture, popular eschatology

Реставрируя книги и веру: Сибирский старообрядческий скит как «территория спасения»

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Статья посвящена невербальным способам воспроизводства и трансляции старообрядческой культуры пустынножительства и восполняет пробелы в изучении книжной реставрации как исключительно технической операции. В качестве объекта исследования выбран действующий сибирский скит староверов-странников (основан в 1830-е годы) и его библиотека рукописных и печатных книг на церковно-славянской кириллице. Скитской способ управления книжным фондом и методы ремонта книг его обитателями характеризуются как взаимосвязанные инструменты приобщения крестьян к монастырской традиции и рассматриваются в контексте социальной истории таежного поселения. Видимые следы ремонта бумаги, переплетов и обложек, исправления и дополнения молитвенных и учительных текстов оцениваются с точки зрения их соответствия символике христианской книги и представлениям скитников о себе как хранителях «территории спасения» древних книг и истинной веры. В методологических решениях исследование базируется на медиативном подходе к религии (Б. Мейер) и практиках изучения материально-визуальных аспектов религиозных книг (М.П. Браун, Т. Лентес).

Ключевые слова: старообрядческая книжность, религиозная читательская культура, народная эсхатология

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Исследование выполнено за счет гранта РФФ № 23-78-10119 «Исторические информационные ресурсы в исследовательской инфраструктуре: модели репрезентации, анализа и интеграции данных по региональной истории», <https://rscf.ru/project/23-78-10119/>.

THE Taiga Old Believer *sketes* are some of the most restricted religious institutions in Russian history. The people who went there to live “according to the

faith of the fathers” and “to die under the icons” always measured their interactions with the outside world. Therefore, the admission of researchers becomes a long and never-ending exam. All the time one needs to confirm one’s knowledge of the history of Old Believers’ faith, avoiding any potentially dismissive intonation in relation to their adherence to their rituals. One needs to know how to read an ancient manuscript using the Church Slavonic Cyrillic alphabet without giving a reason to doubt the pure scientific interest in their book collections.

Such a desire to protect themselves from unwanted visitors and contacts is often seen only as a form of monastic asceticism, but seeing an Old-Believer dwelling in the context of the history of church schism and Russian colonization of the taiga outskirts of Siberia helps to explain its origins in a broader way. First of all, this was required by the skete’s role as a “mediator” between high book culture and ordinary believers, crucial for the denomination which existed as a conglomerate of communities, each of which considering itself a true defender of “church antiquity,” and its eschatological identification as the only true ones. Therefore, the sketes had to be protected as places of concentration of liturgical, statutory and doctrinal books “untouched” by Patriarch Nikon’s reforms and training of Old Believer leaders capable of using those books to combine from them their “canons of sacred texts”¹. The sketes needed the support of the local population in this case. While building relations with peasants living nearby, the sketes used both the shortage of priests and churches in the region and folk traditions of gift exchange: they performed occasional services for the peasants (baptisms, weddings and funeral services); explained the meaning of Christian holidays and the rules of fasting; and acted as arbitrators in conflicts. In return, they received labor assistance and warnings about the upcoming inspections of the authorities.

Today, this network of religious centers and connections, which is an alternative to official Orthodoxy, is almost completely destroyed. The sketes decreased in number and size, with people who read poorly and write even worse in Church Slavonic Cyrillic prevailing among the skete inhabitants. Nowadays it may seem that such taiga settlements might be of interest to researchers only as an obsolete culture whose

¹ The term is used in relation to a stable corpus of texts characterizing the doctrine and worldview of any Old Believer group: Crummy, R. (2011) *Old Believers in a Changing World*, p. 23. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press; Guryanova, N. S. (2017) *Handwritten collections and the design of the ideology of the Old Believer movement*. Novosibirsk: In-t Istorii SO RAN (in Russ.).

extinction was miraculously avoided. At the same time, the fact that the monks' ranks were replenished by their relatives, confident that their mission was to preserve a place to pray for the whole world, along with the constant restoration of skete books, prompts us to look more thoroughly at their circumstances. For instance, what is hidden behind the repairing of sheets of ancient manuscripts with modern paper and restoring ancient texts with a ballpoint pen? Can these actions be treated as natural for communities that delegated the right to serve the ceremony creed for peasant monks and combined the Greek term *Skētis* / Σκητις in the name of their place of residence and the folk semantics of the Russian verb "to wander"?² Or still, given the almost 350-year history of the Old Belief, they should be regarded as a tool of "preserving" religious authority, as a kind of compensation for the new generation of taiga monks' inability to recreate the authors' "works," adapting the ideology of the Old Believers' reclusive way of life to modern realities?

These issues are quite traditional and relevant with research in the history and modern condition of the Old Believer skete communities in different parts of Siberia³. Nonetheless we have to state that the research interest in intertwining the "old" and "new" concentrates on the study of polemic writings, exegetical practices and skete daily routine. A similar situation remains in Russian academic and reference literature, dedicated to the Old Believer book collections: traces of the "old restoration" are recorded rather than systematically analyzed⁴.

We believe that the topic of book restoration has been undeservedly ignored, and it is of the utmost importance when studying sketes with a predominantly peasant population (in other words, the study of practices of handling religious books by people who are not experienced in religious reasoning). The paper considers it using the materials of a book collection belonging to a current Old Believer monastery located

² V. I. Dahl accurately marked the semantic transformation of the Greek "Skete" in the Russian "Skit" as adaptation (*prinorovlenie*).

³ Pokrovskij, N. N., Zol'nikova, N. D. (2002) *Old Believers-chapels in the East of Russia in the 18–20 centuries: Problems of creativity and public consciousness*. M.: Pamjatnik iistoricheskoi mysli (in Russ.); Storozhenko, A. A. (2019) "Old Belief monasteries of the «Yenisei meridian» in the 20th century: Origins, traditions and current state", *New Research of Tuva* 1: 4–15 (in Russ.).

⁴ Logunova, E. A. (2017) "On the question of the historiography of the study of the Siberian Old Believer binding", *Bulletin of Tomsk State University. Series "Cultural Studies and Art History"* 26: 165–172 (in Russ.).

on the right bank of the River Ob, around 100 km to the north of the city of Tomsk, home to the oldest university in Siberia⁵.

The taiga skete was founded in the 1830s by inhabitants of the European part of Russia, who considered themselves stranniki (wanderers), the branch of the Old Believers whose doctrine is based on the theses in the coming of the Antichrist, suppression of the imposed priesthood and the right to perform public prayer, the sacraments of baptism and repentance to the laity who have passed the rite of passage “into wandering”⁶. In the second half of the 19th century, financial support from the Volga region merchants provided economic stability, and its leaders’ polemical treatises gained them renown among their coreligionists. Although the period of intellectual flourishing was relatively short (from the late 19th to the first third of the 20th century), the taiga community was able to substantiate the refusal to use money in its “canon of sacred texts”, and reformat the ties with the “benefic” laity on this basis; their families became treasurers of the skete finances and intermediaries when selling taiga wild plants. The combination of the religious authority of the skete inhabitants with the economic interests of the Soviet village allowed the skete to survive throughout the turmoil of the 20th century and preserve its “book treasures”, the ancient Russian manuscripts and printed books and publications of illegal Old Believer publishing houses⁷.

The time period of the remaining signs of restoration (from the 17th to early 21st centuries) allows us to describe them in two aspects: general Old Believer and the historical, associated with the monastic community of Old Believers (wanderers). This essay explores how the Old Belief legitimized the transformation of an ordinary lay reader of Christian books into a competent monk interpreter through mastering the old Russian culture of book restoration and approving new techniques in the guise of indisputable traditions.

⁵ Previously, the area was part of the Tomsk district, today it is the northeastern and northern territories of the Tomsk and Kemerovo regions of the Russian Federation.

⁶ It is something in between baptism and taking of monastic vows and includes the ritual destruction of personal documents, passports and sometimes banknotes as a sign of belonging to the “world of Antichrist”.

⁷ The characteristics of the library and the current state of the community are given in: Dutchak, E. E. (2022) “Siberian Skete Library From the Perspective of Slavia Orthodoxa”, *Siberian Historical Research* 4: 12–32 (in Russ.).

Materiality of religious books: the theoretical frameworks of the study

Despite the fact that the relation of restoration works to the creed, social composition and the Old Believer way of life were not previously considered as an independent matter for research, there was some occasional consideration of this aspect when investigating other matters. For example, to demonstrate the preservation of ancient Russian techniques of manuscript design or state the fact of book repair using uncommon materials—copybooks, wallpaper, posters, etc⁸. This largely illustrative and practical approach goes back to the pre-revolutionary historiographic tradition of a separate study of the intellectual and material life of the Old Believers and, consequently, to the attention primarily towards the ideological content, rather than the physical forms of the texts existing in their environment.

Nevertheless, field archeographic research initiated in 1959 by academician M.N. Tikhomirov revealed an extremely diverse textual culture and the distinctive ritualism of Old Believers. This created the basis for cooperation between historians, philologists, ethnographers and art historians, and the main result was the proved thesis that not only reading and interpretation but also the practice of storing an ancient handwritten and printed book ensure the faith's successful resistance against the aggressive influence of external environment.

It is significant that the question of the “physical incarnations” of the Old Believer book culture was raised in different ways by international and Russian researchers, but almost simultaneously in the 1990s. While considering “Old Believer piety” as a kind of popular religion, R. Crummy noted that ordinary village Old Believers treated the ancient book as a sacred object, which does not always imply understanding of its content⁹. E.I. Dergacheva-Skop and V.N. Alekseev proposed the term “living, flowing libraries”, describing the importance of passing a religious book from hand to hand and its daily opening and reading¹⁰.

⁸ See, for example: Pozdeeva, I.V., Erofeeva, V.I., Shitova, G.M. (2000) *Cyrillic editions of the 16th century—1641. The finds of the 1971–1993 archaeological expeditions received by the Scientific Library of the Moscow University*. M.: Izd-vo MGU (in Russ.).

⁹ Crummy, R. (1993) “Old Belief as Popular Religion: New Approaches”, *Slavic Review* 4: 700–712.

¹⁰ Dergacheva-Skop, E. I., Alekseev, V.N. (1992) “Old Believers’ Libraries of Siberia (problems of reconstruction)”, in N.N. Pokrovskii, R. Morris (eds) *Traditional spiritual*

The studies of the last decades objectively expand this line of study since they recorded the following picture. For example, it turned out that educated monasticism plays an important role in the crystallization of Old-Believer creeds, but even without it, the boundaries between consents and interpretations can remain stable. This discovery shifted the focus of the study from the ideological heritage of the Old Belief to the narratives that appear during significant actions and communications for the religious community—divine services and congresses-councils, when communicating with local authorities, missionaries and scientists, due to everyday contacts with their “heretical environment”¹¹. Appeal to the daily routine enabled differentiating two ways of modulation the rules of interaction with coreligionists/gentiles and cultural tradition in General: this happens through concepts and images of the Apocalypse and the corpus of their interpretations of the early Christian, old Russian and Old Believer authors in the written text, and in everyday life through the description of the “proper” and the taboo of the “sinful”.

It is the latter that justifies the question of non-verbal forms of maintaining culturally significant behavioral patterns. The absence of such studies reconstructing the order of actions with an old book already unsuitable for sacred service and reading suggests filling this gap. In our opinion, the analysis of the methods of book repair, whose recovery from the destructive impact of time is considered mandatory by various Old Believer denominations, should be conducted along with the study of social factors, which affect the thoughts about their own creed.

In theoretical and methodological terms, such problems can be justified within the framework of two approaches. The first is associated with research in the field of the history of reading; the second with the study of mediation practices, “sensual forms,” and modes of “mediation.” In our opinion, they can be considered complementary: within the framework of the theory of mediation, the key role of media for religion is affirmed, and the history of reading articulates the basic tools for understanding a specific medium (printed or handwritten book) in the processes of social dynamics and the formation of religious identity. In this sense, the methodological problem of the study can be outlined as follows: how certain ways of using media (in our case,

and material culture of Russian Old Believers settlements in Europe, Asia and America, pp. 125–130. Novosibirsk: Nauka (in Russ.).

¹¹ Smiljanskaja, E. B. (ed.) (2012) *About their land, their faith, the present and their experiences in Russia in the XX–XXI centuries: towards the study of biographical and religious narrative*. M.: Indrik (in Russ.).

the preservation of community libraries) are approved as practices of religious mediation.

Both approaches focus on the tactile and visual aspects of working with a book. Media as sensory forms can “entail different material affordances and different corporeal effects and possibilities for signification for their users and beholders”¹². Similarly, for the classics of the history of reading (R. Chartier, R. Darnton), the materiality of the text is the factor that, in the long-term historical perspective, determines the mobility and variability of the connections between the work itself and the methods of its fixation and perception, and in the short-term, it acts as a tool of “programming” to whom, how and why it should be read “here and now”¹³. Because of this, the study of the external look of the book, for example, bookbinding practices becomes essential when posing such questions. As an example of what kind of horizons this can open when studying Old Believers, we offer the study of T. Lentes where the external appearance of prayer books is considered as a key to understanding the changes in the Christian culture of prayer and the ways of sequencing the inner world of the believer¹⁴.

We believe that the Siberian wanderer’s skete serves as an ideal research platform for demonstrating how the techniques of recreating the original appearance of Christian books fulfilled the task of translating and codifying the ‘canons of sacred texts’ while simultaneously preserving its status as a ‘territory of salvation’ in the eyes of the rural community. The acquisition, storage, and preservation of ‘pre-reformation’ manuscripts and printed books helped such monks maintain a connection with their skete as a place of salvation for Christian souls—both their own and those of their secular fellow believers. How the processes of building a skete community influenced its library management and the selection of books for restoration, and why Christian book restoration became the foundation for dogma renewal—these questions will be explored in the next two sections of our paper.

¹² Meyer, B. (2020) “Religion as mediation”, *Entangled Religions* 11 (3): 21.

¹³ Darnton, R. (1982) “What is the History of Books?”, *Daedalus* 111 (3): 65–83; Chartier, R. (2008) “People’s Readers” and Their Reading from the Renaissance to Classicism”, in *History of Reading in the Western World from Antiquity to Ours*, pp. 339–358. Moscow: “Izd-vo FAIR”.

¹⁴ Lentes, T. (2006) “Prayer books”, in F.-J. Arlinghaus (ed.) *Transforming the Medieval World: Uses of Pragmatic Literacy in the Middle Ages*, pp. 239–258. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

Restoring the Books, or Skete Library Management

The compiling of skete libraries is one of the mysterious aspects of the Siberian reclusive lifestyle. The question of how large, heavy books (such were the publications of the Moscow publishing house) were delivered to illegal sketes located at the far ends of swampy or mountainous taiga is far from being the most difficult one. In each case, police reports and the memoirs of accidental skete visitors and inhabitants allow us to reconstruct the ways and routes of delivery.

Debates periodically occur relating to some other questions: which exact books did a skete need to become a religious center comparable in influence to the churches and monasteries of the official Orthodox Church, and how the dogmatic rejection of priesthood and the majority of the sacraments manifested itself in the process of book selection. We can suggest some more issues: what measures a skete community took to manage its constantly growing library compiled of ageing and dilapidated books, restore them in due time, and protect them during police raids. We will try to answer these questions by examining the history of the skete of Old Believers (wanderers), the central figures of our research. In order to do this, three types of materials were studied: formal correspondence of officials (1848–1985), interviews with the skete inhabitants (since 1987), and visual and verbal information from their books.

Any skete could withstand competition with official Church institutions on the sole condition that the divine service conducted there was based on the books intended for church prayer. This led to their striving to have complete sets of books (published before 1653) for liturgies and those regulating daily and festive services. Additionally, the wanderers are an exception among all the Old Believers who rejected the priesthood. It is considered that they were not at all interested in this very kind of pre-reformation books and managed quite well using small-format manuscripts, often self-manufactured, with cell prayers, biographies of monks, and teachings about ascetic life¹⁵. This conclusion is based on the peculiarities of the wanderers' creed which made them radical in their views and very closed in their way of life. The wanderers set themselves apart in

¹⁵ Dergacheva-Skop, E. I., Alekseev, V. N. (2003) "Archaeographical research of Siberia in the second half of the 60s – early 70s and the formation of collections of handwritten and old printed books: From the history of the first Novosibirsk archaeological expeditions", in E. I. Dergacheva-Skop, V. N. Alekseev (eds) *The Book and Literature in Cultural Context*, p. 124. Novosibirsk: GPNTB (in Russ.).

the 1760s, observing mandatory withdrawal from the world captured by the Antichrist¹⁶. This allowed them to determine “wandering” in search of a place inaccessible to “godless power” as the fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecy about the Church hiding at the end of times in the “sensual desert”.

Therefore, the conclusions of modern researchers on the lack of the wanderers’ interest in books for church services are based on the materials of the second half of the 19th century, namely court procedural documentation on the capture of “people without passports”, who called themselves “wandering pilgrims”, and research by pre-revolutionary historians¹⁷. The above mentioned materials describe the property of individual fugitives moving around the country without heavy luggage, but not the book collections in a stationary settlement. We were able to arrive at such a conclusion when we first visited the skete in 1987 and saw the early printed Menaia and Apostles and handwritten Octoechos and Triodions in the monastic cells. A search of the archives for data on the early history of the skete confirmed that its library was formed from the date of its foundation and repressive actions by the authorities could not prevent it. Thus, in 1848, during a police raid in the “forests of Tomsk district”, 17 people were arrested and 55 printed and manuscript books were seized¹⁸. In 1874, a police squad sent to verify rumors of a revived monastery and 80 “vagrants without documents” gathered there, found a “well-arranged community — with a forge, metal workshop, windmill, bread supplies, horses and a library”¹⁹.

The repeated destruction of cells and removal of books did not bring any results that time either, and as early as in 1890–1910 the polemical messages of the heads of the skete community, who cited the rules of ecumenical and local assemblies and compositions of early Christian authors, were copied by Old Believers of the Russian

¹⁶ This program of salvation, presented in the works of the monk Euthymius (the founder of the denomination) and his disciples, was named the doctrine of escape; hence the term “escapists,” their other name, which was given to the followers by the authorities. See: Mal'tsev, A. I. (1996) *Old Believers-wanderers in the 18th — the first half of the 19th century*. Novosibirsk: Sibirskij hronograf (in Russ.).

¹⁷ Shhapov, A. P. (1906) “Zemstvo and the raskol’”, in A. P. Shhapov, *Works* In 3 vol. Vol. 1, pp. 505–579. Saint-Petersburg.: Izd. M. V. Pirozhkova (in Russ.); Pjatnickij, I. K. (1912) *The Wanderer Sect and its significance in the schism*. SPb: I. L. Tuzov (in Russ.).

¹⁸ “Case about the capture of dissenters Osipova, Anna without a surname and others”, *State Archive of Tomsk region*. F. 3. Op. 54. D. 261 (in Russ.).

¹⁹ “About the false bishop and schismatic Nikita Ivanov (aka Vikhlyaev)”, *State Archive of the Tomsk region*. F. 3. Op. 4. D. 763.

North²⁰. These data explain the variety of books, which are still in the possession of the skete inhabitants. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the skete library was formed according to a deliberate plan or that book selection was always consistent and rational. In our case, for example, it is important to take into account the fact that the skete community was formed during three migration waves, and the nature of each influenced the choice of books and management of the library. In particular, the purposeful purchase of books for church services is associated with the first and largest migration wave, the relocation of peasants, commoners and petty merchants from Kazan, Yaroslavl and Kostroma provinces in the 1850s-1910s. From a formal point of view, this movement became part of a general movement of the taxable population to the East, which the Russian academic tradition usually considers in the context of the state solution to the land shortage problem in European provinces and the geopolitical project of “a big Russian nation”²¹.

However, we consider that the reasons behind this movement should be sought not in the policy of the colonization of marginal territories, but in the events that caused dramatic changes in the daily lives of the urban and rural inhabitants of the Volga region and provoked them to assess what was happening emotionally and in eschatological logic. Such a reaction was caused by the destruction of the way of life of serf villages during the great reforms of 1855–1881²² which coincided with a large-scale ecological crisis in the region and a sharp increase in child mortality²³.

Against this background, the activity of astronomical communities, which made popular scientific discoveries of comets²⁴ and the All-Russian Census in 1897²⁵ were treated as quite distinct apocalyptic omens. These all caused a new impetus to the apocryphal predictions

²⁰ *Spiritual literature of the Old Believers of Eastern Russia in the 18th-19th centuries* (1999), pp. 548–551. Novosibirsk: Sibirskij hronograf (in Russ.).

²¹ See: Dameshek, L. V., Remnev, A. V (eds) (2007) *Siberia as part of the Russian Empire*, pp. 42–75. M.: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (in Russ.).

²² Smykov, Ju.I. (1984) *Peasants of the Middle Volga region during the period of capitalism (socio-economic research)*. M.: Nauka (in Russ.).

²³ Vishlenkova, E. A. (2005) “Don’t drink water from the Boar!’ (The environmental crisis in Kazan in the 19th century)”, *Rodina* 8: 94–96 (In Russ.).

²⁴ Mel’nikova, E.A. (2011) “*An Imaginary Book*”: *Essays on the history of folklore about books and reading in Russia*, pp. 107–116, 150–159. Saint-Petersburg: Izd-vo Evropejsko Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge (in Russ.).

²⁵ Novikov, I. (1898) “Raskol and sectarianism in the Tomsk Diocese in 1896–97”, *Tomsk diocesan vedomosti* 10: 15–22, 11: 6–14, 12: 12–17 (in Russ.).

about the Easter of 1912 as the date of the end of the world and facilitated preaching by Siberian wanderers among the inhabitants of the Volga region on the need for urgent repentance and relocation to the taiga skete or its surroundings²⁶.

The subsequent inflow of a peasant workforce and merchant funds allowed the skete to arrange for the delivery of books purchased through intermediaries in the central provinces. The books were sent by rail, horse and water transport to Tomsk, where they were stored until winter, and then again were transported by trusted people on skis to the taiga customers. As a result, not only were all single and group cells equipped with old-printed books for the daily service cycle and monastic reading, but the skete inhabitants, fond of writing, also received books from the Old Believers' scriptoria, collections of Church laws, the works of the Church fathers and old Russian writers, and the works of respected leaders of the Old Believers.

The second migration wave of the 1920s-1930s brought Ural and Siberian Old Believer peasants, belonging to less radical branches of the Old Believers, to the taiga skete. Their merging with the wanderers was due to a desire to hide from the commotions of the Civil War and to avoid dekulakization. The migration of people was accompanied by that of books. The appearance of a great number of liturgical and doctrinal books published by illegal Old Believer and officially authorized Edinoverie printing houses in the second half of the 18th –early 20th centuries turned out to be significant in terms of consequences. Although they were mainly reprinted from the ancient editions of the Moscow publishing house, in the taiga monastery they were treated with distrust and forbidden to be used for prayers.

This was precisely the period when the skete leaders realized that the book collection compiled from the “gathered” books bought by the community and those brought by future settlers could bring not only good but also evil. The situation was even more complicated due to the fact that the skete community, afraid of further police raids, finally decided to select a dispersed type of settlement at the beginning of the 20th century. On the one hand, it guaranteed the preservation of the skete as an illegal religious center, but on the other hand, there was a threat that in cells located at a distance of between 1 to 7 km, with

²⁶ In 1867–1869, the discovery of this network, by means of which the Old Believers used to send neophytes “in large numbers to the forests of Tomsk province,” became a high-profile criminal case. (See: “Case about the discovery of a sect of wanderers or runners in the city of Kazan”, *Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts*. F. 1431. Op. 1. D. 1324–1325).

regular connection only during winter and summer, the Christian texts would be interpreted in the spirit of moderate Old Believer teachings.

However, the maintenance of a system of management by competent people, well-read in the Scriptures, who firmly followed the tradition of permitting anachoresis only within a joint decision process, allowed them to control the situation, both in the sphere of faith and book restoration. The community as the collective owner of the skete library decided collegially who of the skete inhabitants was ready for individual intellectual activities, determined the religious value of a particular book and consequently, the order and quality of its restoration. This helped to guarantee the timely maintenance of the books' physical condition, which needed to be restored not only because of the destructive influence of time, but also because of the methods of book storage and "protection" accepted in the skete. It was only possible to store the necessary minimum of liturgical, statutory and menological books selected in accordance with the Church calendar in heated rooms due to the small size of the cells. The remainder of the skete books were kept in chests in the attics or inner porches. In addition, hiding the most valuable books under earth became common in times of danger²⁷. This resulted in the deformation and contamination of book covers, mold infestation and extensive loss of text. Henceforth, it was not procuring but restoration of the skete books that became the main activity of the whole community.

The quiet life of the skete was disturbed in 1947–1949 by construction of the Siberian Chemical Plant, a large production facility for nuclear waste processing near the taiga settlement. This resulted in a total inspection of the territory; as a result, most of the skete inhabitants were thrown out to "the Nikonian world," where the adults received prison sentences and the teens were sent to their relatives. They returned already mature, with adopted secular habits and knowledge. This constituted the third migration wave, which later involved their spouses and children. This inertial movement, which we observed directly, did not add to the skete library, but it introduces several important aspects for our study of skete library management in the period 1960–2024.

²⁷ They could stay there for a reasonably long time, as evidenced by the letter we discovered: "Sister Xenia, you ask me for the writings about the self-baptized, but they were left in the secret place with other books. And it is too early to dig up such places". The full text of the letter in: "Krasny Yar: field materials of 2015", *Scientific Library of Tomsk State University. Department of manuscripts and book monuments (NB TSU. ORKP). Archive of the archaeological expedition*. Tetr. 6. L. 10.

On the one hand, despite generational change and increased influence of secular trends, divine services in the skete were still conducted according to the old printed books. On the other hand, the rigid restrictions on the choice of books for reading has disappeared. While choosing books, modern skete inhabitants are now guided not by the year the book was published or direct correspondence with the wanderers' creed, but by their preferences and reading habits. Once we had to use persuasion to have a 16th century manuscript with the teachings of Ephraim Sirin about monastic life transferred from the attic to a cell and on the same day, we attended the collective reading and interpretation of John Chrysostom's conversations on the book *Margaret* published by the Moscow Old Believer printing house in 1901.

The current reduction in the number of skete inhabitants has resulted in a decrease in the number of books needed for regular use. Realizing their responsibility for the skete library, they follow a path that their predecessors would find strange: they hand out books into safe hands. For instance, one of the female skete inhabitants gave us books in 2004, with the words: "I will die soon, take it, otherwise I will burn it. I'm afraid it may end up in the Nikonian church".

Therefore, one hundred forty-four old Russian and Old Believer manuscripts written between the end of the 15th century to 2012, and seventy-eight books published by the Moscow printing house, Old Believer and Edinoverie printing houses and even the printing houses of the Russian Orthodox Church constitute the digitized part of the skete library currently available for comprehensive study²⁸.

Although we estimate that these two hundred twenty-two manuscripts and printed texts comprise about one third of the skete library, they have confirmed our field observations — over the last fifty years the skete inhabitants have restored even those books they neither use for divine services nor read for leisure. We can see clean pages in books without natural dirt, but with cloth-covered bindings, leatherette-reinforced spines and replaced flyleaves. Excluding seventy-eight handwritten liturgical and homiletical texts remaining

²⁸ Digital copies of books describing restoration techniques and materials are presented on the websites: "Skete Library", *TSU Electronic Library*. [<https://vital.lib.tsu.ru/vital/access/manager/Collection/vital:19990>, accessed on 18.03.2025]; "Living or leaving tradition: textual heritage of the taiga Old Believers' skit (EAP834)", *Endangered Archives Programme*. [<https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP834>, accessed on 18.03.2025]; "Taiga Old Believer Skit as a Keeper, Restorer and Reader of the Old Cyrillic Book (EAP1308)", *Endangered Archives Programme*. [<https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1308>, accessed on 18.03.2025].

in fragments and for the most part initially without covers and bindings, the corpus of books important for our study is as follows — *one hundred fourteen books*—show traces of “old restoration”: text recovery, extension or trimming of sheets and repair of bindings. Moreover, in seventy-three restored books, the binding dates do not coincide with the period of writing or publication; they are made from modern materials, taken entirely from ancient books or compiled from fragment bindings from the 18th –19th centuries.

Distribution of the restored books according to topic reveals even more interesting nuances of skete library management (see the table below).

Groups of books (total number)	Time range	Total number // Restored	Number of restored books
Liturgy and Religious Rites (118 books)	1597–1990s	manuscripts: 74 // 27 early printed editions: 21 // 21 Old Believer and Edinoverie publications: 23//23	71
Christian and Old Believer didactic literature (89 books)	1590–1980s	manuscripts: 56 // 12 early printed editions: 3 // 3 Old Believer and Edinoverie publications: 22 //18 editions of the Russian Orthodox Church: 8// 5	38
Religious Controversy (6 books)	1870–2010s	manuscripts: 5 // 2 Old Believer publications: 1 // 1	3
Religious Poetry (3 books)	1900–1960s	manuscripts: 3 // 2	2
Community History (3 books)	1910–1990s	manuscripts: 3 // 1	1

Groups of books (total number)	Time range	Total number // Restored	Number of restored books
Canon Law and Monastic Rules (4 books)	1870–1940s	manuscripts: 4 // 0	0

The community's choice in favor of texts that form a Christian worldview through rituals or by setting religious norms is obvious and generally logical. What is more unexpected is the dissonance between the negative assessment of the publications of heterodox printing houses and their presence among the restored books. We consider that pragmatic explanations (such books are a kind of training material for neophyte restorers) are hardly explicit, since they do not take into account the specifics of religious consciousness, which requires that any violation of the previously introduced rules must be confirmed.

Therefore, when stating the reasons for restoration of doubtful or false books from the point of view of the wanderer's faith, it is important to take into consideration the ideological basis of eschatological messianism of the wanderers—the Old Believers' idea about the possibility of changing the canon in “the end times”, if circumstances require it, and peoples' ideas (in the broad sense) about the healing abilities of the sacred loci.

The skete inhabitants' attitude to their taiga monastery as a place consecrated by the Orthodox Liturgy allows us to see the action within the logic of the old Russian concept of “renewal” (*ponovlenie*)²⁹ in restoration of the books from outside. The sacred object is purified from sinful layers, which inevitably appear as a result of contact with the “Nikonian world”, and returns to the original, ideal essence. If this statement is true, the restoration practices must reflect one more connection, i. e. between the conviction of the skete community that it is indeed the keeper of the “territory of salvation,” and its “renewals” of the professed creed.

²⁹ The semantics of the word is revealed in: Panchenko, A. M. (1984) *Russian culture on the eve of Peter the Great's reforms*, pp. 48–54. L.: Nauka. Leningradskoe otdelenie (in Russ.).

Restoring the Faith, or “Hand and Eye Piety” in Old Believers

Old Believers’ ability to modify the creed while maintaining confidence in the full compliance of the adopted innovations with the ideas of pre-reform Orthodoxy is most eloquently confirmed by studies of their political, economic and migratory behavior³⁰. When historians analyze traditional sources of information — documentary and oral evidence — they are often limited to studying the situations when a religious community is already able to justify their legitimacy dogmatically. Analysis and interpretation of apparent traces of the restoration of books help to eliminate lacuna, and in our case, provides an opportunity to trace the accumulation of internal readiness of the peasant monks to equip themselves with the right to develop the established creed.

People who had previously been “Nikonians” and later atheists appeared among the skete inhabitants during the migration waves, and their life in the taiga monastery, according to the memories of our respondents, began with learning to read the Church Slavonic Cyrillic alphabet and mastering the basics of bookbinding and restoration. Therefore, when considering the principles on which the Siberian reclusive way of living was based and acquiring the ability to adapt to it, we use the terms suggested by Matthew P. Brown, “hand piety” and “eye piety,” where the former is “the tactile feel of and indexical movement within and across godly books”, and the latter is “the visual contemplation of its material image”³¹. On the one hand, they accurately describe the cultural and psychological aspects of transforming a layman, inexperienced in dogma, into a thoughtful reader of Christian literature. Indeed, it began with contemplation of an ancient book and touching its binding and sheets, which had turned yellow with the course of time. On the other hand, they provide an insight into how the restoration practices of a religious community, in appreciating the sensory experience of texts, will inevitably reflect its intellectual

³⁰. See for example: Guryanova, N.S. (2017) *Handwritten collections and the design of the ideology of the Old Believer movement*. Novosibirsk: In-t Istorii SO RAN (in Russ.); Kerov, V.V. (2016) “*This man and his business...: Confessional and ethical factors of Old Believer entrepreneurship in Russia*.” M.: JEKON-INFORM (in Russ.); Prigarin, A.A. (2010) *Russian Old Believers on the Danube: the formation of an ethno-confessional community in the late 19th and first half of the 19th centuries*. Odessa, Izmail, Moscow: «Smil» — «Arheodoksija» (in Russ.).

³¹. Brown, M.P. (2010) “Hand Piety; or, Operating a Book in Early New England”, in S.M. Gustafson, C.F. Sloat (eds) *Cultural Narratives: Textuality and Performance in American Culture before 1900*, pp. 14–33. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.

movements and the means of group consolidation. For example, the accurate replication of the old Russian restorers' technique helped the taiga community overcome the religious illiteracy of the neophytes, soften disagreements and demonstrate their belonging to the Russian community of Old Believer wanderers. Their modification³² meant that the skete inhabitants considered themselves the only guardians of Orthodoxy and therefore they had the right to self-determination as to whether the creed needed "renewal" or not³³.

A starting point for studying these aspects lies in where the skete community obtained information about proper restoration, which does not turn a "worshipful book" into a "profane reading thing," especially since its library did not contain old Russian instructions for the book restorers, well-known to the Old Believers of other regions³⁴. Turning to the skete inhabitants' narratives with their dominant theme of craft and visual education, we believe the main source of information to have been books, which appeared in the monastery with some traces of previous restorations.

An example of such a pattern are the restoration layers (dating from the 17th and 19th centuries) of the Prologue published in the late 15th century—the oldest manuscript of the skete library, donated to the skete in 1915³⁵. In summary, they represent that which directed the skete inhabitants to the realization that pious book restoration was not restricted to an ability to eliminate the consequences of incorrect book storage or its active use. Its main purpose was to restore access to the soul-saving knowledge of the Christian book. With this regard, we note that an essential detail of the Prologue's exterior, which was legitimized by a restoration layer dating from the second half of the 19th century, was reconstruction of the initial, imitating the Balkan style (F. 165). In the Old Believers' book culture of the Art Nouveau

³² In terms of the exterior, it was expressed in the design of bindings from wallpapers, newspapers, candy boxes, containers for transporting products from corrugated cardboard, and others, lengthening the cords using a patterned fabric, repairing sheets using silicate glue or scotch tape. The damaged fragments of old books were replaced with texts written with a ballpoint pen on the sheets of school copybooks.

³³ Dutchak, E. E., Vasilyev, A. V. (2023) "New materials on the discussion on Old Believer literacy", *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 489: 80–87 (in Russ.).

³⁴ See: Kalugin, V. V. (1987) "Decree on the art of bookbinding" according to the lists from the collection of E. E. Egorov and F. A. Kalikin", in *Notes of the Manuscripts Department of the Lenin State Library of the USSR. Vyp. 46*, pp. 82–94. M.: Gosudarstvennaja biblioteka SSSR im. V. I. Lenina (in Russ.).

³⁵ Skete Library. B-25011. Prologue, September—February. Late 15th century", *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.).

era, the preservation of unity in decorative style for Christian books still had religious meaning; the division of texts with initials, backdrops and endings continued to be the means of regulating the rhythm and speed of reading. Their restoration in the Prologue was a visible sign for the intellectual elite of the community of the spiritual kinship between the Old Believers' reclusive way of life and hesychasm, and it taught the others to treat reading as a means of controlling sinful thoughts, feelings and desires. This justified the cost of searching for a complete version of the restored text, which was the basis necessary to add the lost fragments and compare the remaining parts untouched by physical damage.

Such an approach to restoration — maintenance of the religiously grounded exterior look of the book and identification of accidental and intentional errors in its internal content — required joint efforts and collaborative decisions from the community. Texts for verification had to be ordered from the laity; corrections had to be taken as a result of joint decisions; the illiterate had to be taught not only to restore leather bindings and old paper but also understand the importance of restoring the information and reference book elements (the numbers of sheets and notebooks, page headers, bibliographical references) and along with them, the possibility to “operate books through navigational aids and cross-referencing techniques that generate knowledge and inform behavior”³⁶.

In the relatively peaceful conditions of the taiga monastery's existence, those actions were sufficient for the stable reproduction of both the community itself and everyday behavior and affective knowledge. The situation changed completely after 1912, when it became clear that the Last Judgment had been falsely predicted; the taiga skete appeared in a situation of spiritual crisis and faced losing its authority in the eyes of the surrounding rural populace.

In view of this, we can evaluate the significance of the Prologue's “renewal” made in the early 20th century and before its appearance in the community. An unknown restorer, along with text and decor restoration (F. 1–2, 40, 284–287), added hagiographic data into a manuscript dating from the late 15th century, which were included in calendars only in the 1660s³⁷. Considering the fact that such a

³⁶ Brown, M. P. “Hand Piety; or, Operating a Book in Early New England”. P. 17.

³⁷ The Story of the Miracles of St. Father Nikola about Vasily the Son of Agrik and The Memory of St. John the Faster from the Monastery of St. Sava were placed between sheets number 213 and 214, with the mention that the texts were taken from the December part of the “ancient printed” Prologue.

method was known both within the taiga community and from other books they received, the solution found was logical. It was not necessary for them to determine by themselves what was happening in the “world of the Antichrist” and compile historical and dogmatic treatises explaining the unrealized prophecy; their absence in one old book could be compensated by adding materials taken from other old books. A “coauthor-restorer” was only required to show that the source was trustworthy. Such a method of peasant monks’ involvement in religious discourse proved to be effective, and as early as the first half of the twentieth century bore fruit: when restoring books, the skete inhabitants started to “add” not only doctrinal, but also liturgical works³⁸. For example, they added a thematically related *samoglasen* on the Annunciation and an unrelated description of the food and beverages purification ceremony to the Service of Jesus Christ, hiding the innovation by referencing a respected source in their opinion, but a fictional one in actuality³⁹.

The development of this both mental and restoration practice, within which a generation of restorers/compiler was formed, helped the skete community in the 1920s-1930s to eliminate the consequences of the community being joined by Old Believers with differing views, and maintain their isolation in the conditions of Soviet statehood. For example, regular “conversations about faith” for the laity had to cease due to the increasing interference of the authorities into the life of the rural surroundings of the taiga monastery. The community held such conversations only for the skete inhabitants, concentrated on the church services and saw the pledge of its strong relations with the Soviet village in the dictum, “We live here and pray for the whole world.” It is no coincidence that we find signs of decor restoration, and therefore, preservation of the ancient monastic technique of reading aloud using visual lines of the books only in liturgical and writings regulating rituals.

Although these actions allowed the skete community to adapt to the new conditions, they implied rather a diligent apprenticeship

³⁸. Skete library. B-26408. Theoktistus Studitus. Service to Jesus Christ with the Chin of purification and prayers. Between 1890–1900”, *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.).

³⁹. In the appendices is mentioned that they “were taken from the Canonicals printed in Mogilev in 7352 [1844].” This is an incorrect imprint. Old Believer printing houses no longer existed in Mogilev in this period, see: Voznesenskii, A.V., Mangilev, P.I., Pochinskaja, I.V. (1996) *Book publishing activity of the Old Believers (1701–1918): Materials for the dictionary*, pp. 18–19, 39. Ekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (In Russ.).

as opposed to “renewal” of the creed in the original meaning of the word. The need to restructure the “doctrine of escape” arose due to external circumstances — in the 1940s and 1960s during the industrial development of forests, the united network of wanderer sketes was eliminated. The destruction of confessional ties and disappearance of the other taiga monasteries reinforced in the skete community the idea of having been chosen and increased the level of their responsibility.

The incessant work involved in compiling and “building up” texts shortened the period of balancing between consideration of one’s own skete as the last stronghold of Orthodoxy and fear of being accused of the sin of pride, as it allowed them to accumulate arguments⁴⁰ for a shift in emphasis to the “doctrine of escape.” At that time, it was not a question of “when to wait for the end of time and escape from the world of the Antichrist,” but of understanding “how the escaped had to live in order to be always ready for the fatal hour.” The next step, quite logical for the taiga monastery with peasants as members and their way of life, was the recognition by the keeper of the new Orthodox Holiness not of separate individuals, but of successive generations of monks — the guardians of the taiga settlement.

The nature of this Holiness, “nameless” but always “tied to the place,” is revealed in the materials of Siberian and North Russian folk hagiography⁴¹: a relative’s or fellow villager’s departure for the skete was an ordinary event, not directly related to the life story, which increased the cultural value of collective responsibility for the creed and place. The taiga community expressed a dichotomy between the communal and the personal using the formula, “the world will stand as long as at least one wanderer lives there, even the feeblest one” and depicted a famous maxim in itself — the saints who “do not do miracles, but above the first miraculous fathers they will appear in the Kingdom of Heaven”⁴²: “It is said about us, those who will hide from

⁴⁰ Skete library. B-25879. Selected extracts on Christian dogmatic theology, history and eschatology, 1st half of the 20th century, NB TSU. ORKP (in Russ.).

⁴¹ Romodanovskaia, E. K. (2005) “‘The Saint from the Tomb’. On some features of Siberian and North Russian hagiography”, in T. V. Rudi, S. A. Semiatchko (eds) *Russian Hagiography: Studies, Publications, Polemics*, pp. 143–159. Saint Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin (in Russ.); Panchenko, A. A. (2012) *Ivan and Jacob — unusual saints from the marshy area: “Peasant hagiology” and religious practices in modern Russia*. M.: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (in Russ.).

⁴² Poletaeva, E. A. (2011) “Extracts from the Life of St. Nifont in ancient Russian collections”, *Vestnik Novosibirskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta Serija: Istorija, filologija*. 2: 93 (in Russ.).

people at the end of time. They will perceive the diligence themselves and know themselves what to do here and how to live out here”⁴³.

The techniques involved in creating their own “information field” and, at the same time, key features of the skete hand and eye pieties in the 1960s-1980s open up the restored books again. On the one hand, they prove that the skete inhabitants were involved in communication with the external world: now it is not the Christian prophetic literature that serves as the key to understanding the processes in the “Nikonian world,” but “Nikonian” printing production that is used to enable access to the secret knowledge of books. The path “through secular to sacred” is clearly visible in the example of the “Maliy Sobornik”, an Old Believer collection of writings for reading during Lent⁴⁴. The restorer provided them with his drawings and cutouts using (as source material) a printed copy of the icon “the Last Judgment” and a book illustration referring to the architectural image of St. Petersburg⁴⁵. After cutting (!) the iconographic image and regrouping its fragments, the restorer obtained a visual line loaded with eschatological and didactic meanings, where the pre-reform patriarchs are in opposition to the “animal faces” of the Nikonian priests, the watery and fiery elements of hell to the palaces of Heavenly Jerusalem, and the individual torments of sinners to the collective heavenly meal of “old” and “new” saints. Also, for the skete inhabitants who studied in Soviet schools, the persuasion of such oppositions owed itself to the similarity of the restorer’s artistic technique with the familiar technique of decorating wall newspapers (Fig. 1–5. “Maliy Sobornik”).

⁴³ “Krasny Yar: field materials of 1987–1989, 2023–2024”, audio cassettes 2, 4, 9.

⁴⁴ “Skete Library. B-27247. Small cathedral. The last third of the 19th century”, *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.).

⁴⁵ Olga Bogdanova, a historian of architecture, believed that the depicted structures bear a resemblance to the buildings on Konyushennaya Square in St. Petersburg, which were restored in 1816–1823, the building of the Stable Office and the Church of the Savior of the Miraculous Image. She also highlighted the fact that the temple walls are decorated with the bas-reliefs, namely Carrying the Cross and Entrance to Jerusalem. It is difficult to say whether this was known to the skete restorer and he deliberately chose this image or we faced with symbolic coincidences, in which world history is rich.





Fig. 1–5. “Maliy Sobornik”

On the other hand, they show that the influence of secular print culture was not integral, and its limits were set by religious manuscript culture. For example, when analyzing the skete library, we noticed that many of the books restored in the 1930s-1980s had bindings from Old Believer editions dating from the end of the 18th and the turn of the 19th century. Taking into account the skete inhabitants' attitude towards the products of Old Believers' printing houses, their reuse did not come as unexpected. What is more interesting is that in most of the books repaired in this way the clasps were not restored, only the worn leather straps and metal braces remind us of their existence.

This does not correspond with the well-studied (using the materials of folk Orthodoxy) symbolism of “fastening” as a phylactery protecting a sacred object from “the evil one” and an Old Believer maxim “those who do not fasten the book, will experience anathema”. In the same quiet way, the skete inhabitants, unlike many other Old Believers, did not reject the factory marks “of Antichrist presence” on paper. Only in a few manuscripts produced between the 1850s-1930s, do we see removed stamps⁴⁶. Apparently, bindings with ancient embossing, taken from the pre-reform editions or the publications of Old Believer

⁴⁶ “Skete Library. B-25761. Minnea festive. Last third of the 19th century; B-26417. Canonbook. Second half of the 19th century”, *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.); “Skete Library. B-27401. Baptismal rite and Troparion to Zosima and Savvatii of Solovetsky. Between 1890–1900s”, *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.).

printing houses imitating them, were perceived as directly related to the era of “ancient piety” and therefore, even without fasteners, were still able to protect a sacred book. However, a codex written using modern ink on modern paper had to have all the attributes prescribed by tradition in order to gain the status of a guide for a religious group. For example, the bindings of codices composed of polemical writings by the community leaders are made using the same technique: the boards are covered with a woolen lilac cloth, leather spine, and straps with neatly nailed self-made copper fasteners⁴⁷.

The return to the “fastened book” symbolism took place at the end of the 20th century and it was the result of renewal of the community during the third migration wave. A current skete inhabitant trying to restore the book “the old way” does not correct or supplement the text but rather copies Church Slavonic letters on the margins or flyleaves and reflects on the need to master the semi-uncial writing: “You need to learn, maybe something will work out, practice is a test of knowledge, it is difficult to manage, but you need to get used to it. Learn with patience and do not rush. You need to get used to writing. God, help me, a sinner, to write without mistakes. God does not help sinners, but accepts the converted”⁴⁸.

Repentance, sincere acceptance of the faith of their ancestors and the duty to preserve the taiga monastery remove the contradiction between the way they treat an ancient book as a “bearer of sacred knowledge” and the use of modern materials for its renewal. Such asynchronous cultural layers do not generate internal conflicts. On the contrary, they create conditions for today’s generation of skete inhabitants to realize the unity of their goals with those of their predecessors. In the conditions of destructive pressure of the “Nikonian world” it is important to preserve at least the key elements of ancient worship, social ideals, prohibitions and practices which date back to pre-reform Orthodoxy, and along with them, “territory of salvation” is left in their care.

Conclusion

Material preservation of unique books is the most obvious, but not the only indicator of effectiveness for the illegal network of religious

⁴⁷ “Skete Library. B-26418. Polemical epistles on marriages and the doctrine of the Old Believers-titians. Between 1960–1987”, *NB TSU. ORKP* (in Russ.).

⁴⁸ We have seen this recording on a bookmark in the Skete Psalter.

centers created by the Siberian Old Believers. Maintaining a reclusive peasant way of life, such a long existence as a competitor of the state version of Orthodoxy would have been impossible if the skete library management had not changed according to its contemporaneous situation, and book restoration had remained a uniquely technical operation.

The Christian books transferred beyond the Urals became, according to P. Duguid, “cultural artefacts traveling a social circuit”⁴⁹, and were used by the taiga sketes for the creation and support of communities oriented to the messianic ideas of the Old Believers. An in-depth analysis of these processes presents skete library management as a collective activity aimed at solving two key tasks: ensuring the community had the “correct” books for prayer and reading while simultaneously preventing the risk of chaos due to the accidental introduction of “incorrect” texts. Therefore, the “renewal” of ancient books and the training in book restoration techniques, using religious books published after the church reform by Patriarch Nikon, became a distinct channel that involved the rural population of the outlying territories in religious discourse.

We agree with the statement by K. Lynch that the study of historical forms of bookbinding practices is the first step towards the study of the reception of texts⁵⁰. This was because, in our case, the skete inhabitants’ conviction that they were praying with “correctly” restored books helped them to consider themselves “the chosen flock of Christ”. The appropriation of this concept (fundamental for Russian Orthodoxy) compensated for the lack of an ordained priesthood, replacing it with collective responsibility for the taiga monastery as the place for the books’ storage and their pious restoration.

In turn, this explains why book restoration became a basis for creed renewal for the peasant monks. The maintenance of a set Canonical appearance of Orthodox books was the “anchor” holding them within Church law, and it served as a “bridge” connecting the everyday life of the taiga skete with everything written and printed in Church Slavonic Cyrillic. It can even be said that the peasant character of this culture allowed the taiga Old Believers to find another way to comprehend Godly wisdom by supplementing the “accumulation of

⁴⁹ Duguid, P. (1996) “Material Matters: Aspects of the Past and the Futurology of the Book”, in G. Nunberg (ed) *The Future of the Book*, pp. 63–102. Berkeley, Los Angeles.

⁵⁰ Lynch, K. (2002) “Devotion Bound: A Social History of The Temple”, in J. Andersen, E. Sauer (eds.) *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, p. 177. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

knowledge” and “revelation” (already known in the Middle Ages) with tactile work with the books describing them.

Our research has shown that the modern restoration of ancient Christian books using atypical materials reflects not only the natural historical development of Old Russian book restoration techniques. It also allows us to trace how neophytes—including those with a secular education and upbringing—engage with the culture of a reclusive lifestyle and learn to perceive themselves as guardians of the “ancient, true” faith.

Therefore, in the conditions of objective modifications of everyday life (already in the 1980s in the skete, days were measured using wall tear-off calendars, alarm clocks were mechanical, and now any skete inhabitant is familiar with cell phones) largely due to a desire to learn to read, write and restore “the old way” the temptation to go beyond prescribed boundaries was suppressed. Realization comes that today “one’s own information field” should be determined referring to the dogmatically justified tradition and collective memory of the skete community. It is difficult to predict the results of the ongoing reverse movement, but it once again proves that the study of different forms of hand and eye piety make it possible to provide a more adequate and dynamic picture of the Old Believers’ history of devotion.

Translated by Pyotr Mitchel

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- B-26408. Theoktistus Studitus. Service to Jesus Christ with the Chin of purification and prayers. Between 1890–1900.
- B-27247. Small cathedral. The last third of the 19th century.
- B-26418. Polemical epistles on marriages and the doctrine of the Old Believers-titians. Between 1960–19 87.
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