GIFTS FOR THE DEAD: DEATH, KINSHIP AND COMMEMORATION IN MUSCOVY (THE CASE OF THE MSTISLAVSKII PRINCES)

The obligation of Christians to pray for the departed, especially relatives, is found in both the Eastern and Western Churches. Votive candles, commemorative masses, special church services for the dead, commemorative meals, blessing of graves, appointed times in the church calendar when the dead were especially remembered – all of these pious practices were encouraged by the Christian Church both to assure the salvation of the departed and to encourage the living to be all the more cognizant of their own mortality. Biblical passages point out the efficaciousness of prayer for the dead.\(^1\) The origins of the Christian Church as a burial association in the Roman catacombs bequeathed it a certain eschatological focus – a focus in its doctrine on the afterlife and, more practically, the need to care for the bodies and souls of the dead.\(^2\) St. Athanasius the Great, fourth-century bishop of Alexandria and doctor of the Church, admonished the faithful that failure to pray for one’s departed kinsmen might risk one’s own prospects at the Final Judgment, when neglected relations could appear “in court” and offer literally damning testimony against one.\(^3\) The Church has thus long taught that offering com-

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1. See 2 Maccabees 12: 39–45, and the repeated references to death and burial throughout the Book of Tobit.
memorative prayers was a pious duty for Christians that benefited the dead, easing God’s wrath over their sins.

The Orthodox Church in Muscovy certainly expected and required the faithful to pray for the departed. A place for prayer for the dead was provided for in private devotions in the home, at the local parish church, and at monastic foundations. To be sure, monasteries naturally became the primary locus of commemoration. There the monks could be full-time caretakers of the souls of the departed faithful, offering supplications for relatives of those who had commissioned prayers through donations of money, liturgical utensils, land or just about any item with monetary value. Indeed, even those without anything to offer could be assured of at least the basic prayers for the repose of souls. If those “in the world” were encumbered (or distracted) by the demands of life — whether they were peasants eking out an existence in a subsistence economy, or whether they were princes busy at the court or in the cavalry — at least there was the comforting assurance that the monks were there praying for relatives and ancestors, fulfilling, by proxy, the duty of all Orthodox Christians. Monasteries were houses of prayer; and for the Orthodox culture of pre-modern Russia, among the most important prayers uttered were those offered on behalf of the dead.

The most important sources for scholars interested in studying death and commemoration in Muscovy are the documents produced and maintained at monasteries and churches. These include, principally, sinodikons (sinodiki — books containing names to be read during various church services), donation

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5. Most of the research on sinodikons has focused on the literary preface, which contains the anathemata against the ancient enemies of Orthodoxy and which were read during church services on the Sunday of Orthodoxy. See E. V. Petukhov, Ocherki iz literaturnoi istorii sinodika (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, 1895); I. V. Dergacheva, “K literaturnoi istorii drevnerusskogo sinodika XV–XVII vv.,” in Literatura drevnei Rusi. Istochnikovedenie, ed. D. S. Likhachev (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 63–76. The more important component of the sinodikon for our purposes — the lists of names to be commemorated at appointed times of the day and year — has received its first modern treatments only recently, both in specialized studies and in more general analyses of commemoration at monasteries. See Steindorff, Memoria in Altrußland; Jennifer Baylee Spock, “The Solovki Monastery, 1460–1645: Piety and Patronage in the Early Modern Russian North” (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 1999); S. V. Konev, “Sinodikologiia. Chast’ 1-aia: Klassifikatsiia istochnikov,” Istoricheskia genealogia/Historical Genealogy 1 (1993): 7–15. Of these, the so-called “Sinodikon of Victims” (Sinodik opal’nykh) of Ivan the Terrible’s Oprichnina has received particular attention. See, for