THE MONKS AND THEIR READING


[Irina M. GRITSEVSKAYA, Readings and Četii Sborniki (Collections for Reading) in Old Russian monasteries of the 15th–17th centuries, St Petersburg: Dmitry Bulanin, 2012, 425 p.]

This book by Irina Gritsevskaya has an intriguing aim: to study private reading in Russian medieval monasteries as a coherent system. Such study is important not only for understanding the history of monasticism or even for its potential to inform modern concepts of monasticism. This system of reading affected the very foundations of secular society because, in contrast to the “university” culture of medieval European, medieval Russian culture was “monastic.”

Books in medieval Russian monasteries can be divided into three main classes: (1) those with liturgical functions, (2) paraliturgical books that were read at some points of liturgical service or during mealtimes for the gathered monks, and (3) books for individual reading. This third group often overlapped with the paraliturgical books. Church regulations contained strict instructions concerning the reading of the first two groups of books, so these have been studied comparatively well. Irina Gritsevskaya’s book is focused mostly on the third group, i.e. the books that medieval monks would use for private reading. This reading was also regulated by monastic rules, but these regulations depended on the monastery and on local traditions.

Our knowledge of the assortment of books used for private reading comes not only from the catalogues of the medieval monastic libraries, but also from indexes of “genuine” (accepted) books and indexes of prohibited books, as well as from quotations in the monastic writings.

The majority of the books for private reading were ascetical and mystical texts by Holy Fathers whose writings are considered by the Orthodox Church to be an integral part of the Holy Scriptures. But in the medieval monastic tradition only 7% of the books were the work of a single unique author. The remainder consisted of collections con-
taining a number of different authors known as Četii Sborniki (collections for reading).

Irina Gritsevskaya studies the Četii Sborniki in detail. Very often they were compiled by the monks for “intensive” and profound reading, rather than that of an “extensive” and superficial kind. The aim of such collections was not to present new information but to retain the important content and to present it in a concentrated form.

Some of the Četii Sborniki had stable content that was rewritten and copied many times such as the famous Izbornik of 1073. Others had variable content collected by the compiler. Some of the Četii Sborniki included only long texts. Others were devoted largely to a single author with the addition of shorter writings by other authors. But the most interesting type of Četii Sborniki were the collections of diverse texts selected by the compiler for his own particular needs. Very often they included both prose and poetry, prayers, abstracts from the Holy Fathers, technical descriptions, both documents and fiction, and both short and long fragments. Gritsevskaya defines these as the centon collections (from Latin cento, that is a patchwork). Their content was formed by both the traditions of the monastery and the personal features and needs of the compiler. They usually included fragments written by different hands and on different types of paper. They have varied structures, although it is possible to distinguish some similar blocks of texts common to multiple collections. The study of such centon collections can reveal a lot of information about monastic trends and about the personal peculiarities of the owners of such books.

Gritsevskaya presents a detailed analysis of two such Četii Sborniki. One of them is a centon collection by the monk Barlaam Sinitsa and the other is a stable collection of the Rules of Skete (Skitskoi Ustav).

In the final chapter Gritsevskaya considers monastic reading in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The chapter includes two documents: the text of the Illuminated Synodical Collection (Litsevoi sinodičeskii sbornik) of the 17th century from the Regional Library of Nizhny Novgorod and the text of a Cycle of Narrations about Angels which is part of an 18th Century Old Belivers collection from the same library. The study of these collections shows that they were deeply influenced by traditions of monastic reading from the previous centuries.

Irina Gritsevskaya’s observations can be confirmed by a modern example known to the reviewer. Monk Ch. was imprisoned in Russia on the basis of false accusations. In jail he tried to continue his monas-