



The Miracle of the Mother of God of the Sign (Tale of the Battle between Novgorod and Suzdal)

Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Church Slavonic (Russian Variant)

Period | 14th-15th Century

Genre | Legend

Source | St. Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Софийское собрание 396, fols. 1v-4v

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives; Making History: Chronicles, Legends and Anecdotes

URL | http://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/miracle_mother_god_sign/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Anthony Burger.

Introduction to the Text

This legend about a miracle brought about by an icon of the Mother of God refers to the events of the 1169 CE battle between Novgorod and Suzdal, two kingdoms in what is now western Russia. Written accounts of the event from both sides appeared soon after the battle, and an oral legend emerged to explain Novgorod's victory. The tale in this edition dates to the 14th or 15th century, and describes divine intervention in the conflict between Novgorod and Suzdal.

According to the text, the conflict between Novgorod and Suzdal began with a tax dispute, as a province under Novgorod's influence chose to pay tribute to Suzdal instead of Novgorod. In response, the Novgorodians sent a tax collector to the province along with an army. This army was intercepted by the Suzdalians, resulting in a battle with heavy losses on the side of Suzdal. Following this battle, tensions escalated between the two kingdoms, and Prince Andrei of Suzdal sent his full military might to attack Novgorod. While Novgorod was under siege, the archbishop, St. John, had a vision telling him to take the icon of the Mother of God (a painted image of the Virgin Mary praying with baby Jesus in a circle in her chest) from its place in the Church of the Holy Savior on Il'ina Street and place it opposite the enemy. The following day, he held a holy gathering and told the people of Novgorod to follow its instructions. However, the icon would not move from its place until he prayed beneath it, and then it moved on its own, a miracle which all the congregation witnessed. They brought the icon out facing the enemy, and the icon "cried," tears appearing to flow down its face, as the Mother of God prayed to save the city of Novgorod. The Suzdalian army then descended into chaos, fighting amongst themselves. The Novgorodians were able to kill the majority and capture the rest thanks to divine intervention. Afterwards, the date of the victory was made a feast day and all the people of Novgorod celebrated.

Starting in medieval times, this tale was commemorated as a holy event later incorporated into the body of religious texts of the Russian Orthodox Church, establishing the titular icon of the Mother of God as a holy object. This icon, known as the *Mother of God of the Sign*, remains one of the most significant icons in the Russian Orthodox Church, and has stood for Novgorodian strength and independence throughout history.

In medieval as well as modern Russian Orthodoxy, the use of religious images such as the icon of the Mother of God is an important part of church practice and popular devotion. They are used as objects of worship, but are also associated with the spiritual powers of the personages and theological concepts they depict, and thus the subject of many superstitions. The icon of The *Mother of God of the Sign*, a central participant in this legend, is one such icon. Through "crying," it established itself as being spiritually more than just dry wood, and showed Novgorod the favor of the Mother of God herself. Another visual icon, *The Miracle of the Mother of God of the Sign*, was created in the 15th century to depict the events of this legend. On the feast day dedicated to this legendary victory, the visual icon is worshipped at the same time as the legend is read.



Introduction to the Source

The text used for this translation is from a 14th or 15th century manuscript, *Festal Menaion*, in the St. Sofia Collection of the National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg (Софийское собрание 396, fol. 1v-4v). A digitization of the manuscript is available to view online here: <http://nlr.ru/manuscripts/RA1527/elektronnyy-katalog?ab=D684C217-677F-40DD-AA-DA-33FD3A80D9B1>. The *Festal Menaion* is a liturgical book of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which contains texts used for the most important feasts that always fall on the same dates of the ecclesiastical year. The *Festal Menaion* is an abridged version of the *Menaion*, a far more extensive liturgical book which holds texts for the services for all the saints' feasts and commemorations that have a constant date in the liturgical calendar. The legend about the miracle of the icon of the Mother of God is included in this *Festal Menaion* because it celebrates the feast of the icon of the Mother of God, a significant religious holiday in Novgorod. As in most liturgical manuscripts, the names of the authors and scribes are unknown. However, from the differing handwriting and orthographic conventions used in the text, it is evident that more than one scribe worked on recording or copying this tale.

About this Edition

The only element of modernization in the manuscript transcription is the introduction of spaces to the text. Otherwise, the transcription reproduces the original, including abbreviations, superscript characters, line breaks, and punctuation as closely as possible.

The translation introduces modern English style, punctuation, and capitalization. Some alterations to the syntax have been made for the sake of clarity. Proper names have been transliterated, unless there are generally accepted English variants.

Further Reading

Birnbaum, Henrik. "Medieval Novgorod: Political, Social, and Cultural Life in an Old Russian Urban Community". Volume 14, edited by Henrik Birnbaum, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020, pp. 1-43.

- *General historical introduction to medieval Novgorod.*

Bulgakov, Sergej N., and Boris Jakim. *Icons and the Name of God*. W.B. Eerdmans, 2012.

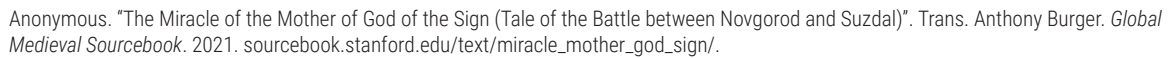
- *Theology of Orthodox icons.*

Lazarev, Viktor Nikitich, Gerold Ivanovich Vzdornov, and Nancy McDarby. *The Russian Icon : From Its Origins to the Sixteenth Century*. English-language ed. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1997.

- *General observations on Russian iconography.*

Lelis, Arnold A. "The View from the Northwest: The Chronicle of Novgorod as the Mirror of Local Experience of Rus' History, 1016-1333." *Russian History*, vol. 32, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 389-399.

- *History of medieval Novgorodian record-keeping.*



сѣло ѿ знаменїи стѣмъ
бѣа вѣ лѣѣ • хѣ • хъ • ѡзѣ • сътво-
ри сѣ знаменїе великое • ѿ пресла-
вное чѣ ѿ иконы стѣмъ бѣа вѣ но-
вѣѣ городѣ • сице во живущимъ но-
вгородѣмъ • владѣахоу ѿвластни
по своен волѣ • ѿже имъ бѣѣ порѣ-
чилъ • а князѣ держахоу по своен
волѣ • бѣ же оу нихъ тогда кнѣзь
романъ мѣстиславичъ вноу-
къ ѿзаславъ • в то же время
движани не хотахоу дани да-
вати новоу городоу • но вѣда-
ша сѣ кнѣзь андрѣю соузда-
скомоу • новгородѣци же по-
саша на двиноу • даньнико-
мъ даньслава лазоутиничѣ
а съ нимъ ѿс концевѣ по стоу
моужѣ • ѿ то слышавѣ князь
андрѣи • посла противоу имъ
своихъ моужѣи • тысящю
и пѣтьсотъ рати • ѿнѣ же
начаша переимати ихъ на бѣ-
лѣ ѿзерѣ • и начаша сѣ бити ѿ по-
сови бѣѣ моужемъ новгоро-
дѣмъ • ѿ оубиша ѿ полкоу
андрѣева • ѿсмисотъ
моужѣ • а прочѣи ѿзбѣго-
ша • а новгородѣцевѣ па-
де пѣтьнадесятъ моу-
жѣ • ѿ ѿтолѣ князь андрѣи
разгнѣва сѣ на новгоро-
дѣ • ѿ нача ратѣ копити
а самъ тогда разволѣ сѣ
ѿ посла сына своего рома-

5 Novgorod. The Novgorodians lived in the following way:
they ruled the regions which God entrusted to them
according to their own will,
and they had princes according to their own will¹.
At that time, they had the Prince

10 Roman Mstislavich, the grandson of Izyaslav.
At that time,
the Dvinians did not want to pay taxes to Novgorod,
but submitted instead
to Prince Andrei of Suzdal.

15 And so the Novgorodians
sent to the Dvina², as a tax collector,
Danslav Lazutich,
and with him one hundred men from each district of Novgorod.
And, having heard this, Prince Andrei

20 sent against them
one thousand five hundred of his armed men.
And they [Andrei's men]
intercepted them [the Novgorodians] at Beloozero,
and started fighting,

25 and God helped the Novgorodian men.
And they killed
eight hundred men from the army of Andrei,
and the rest fled.
And of the Novgorodians,

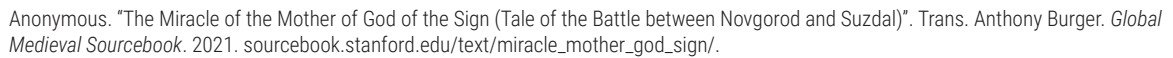
30 fifteen men fell.
And thence, Prince Andrei
became angry at Novgorod,
and started to gather an army,
but himself then fell sick,

35 and he sent his son Roman



на • к новоу городѣ съ всею
 силою соуздальскою • а с ни-
 мѣ князь мѣстиславъ • съ
 смолянны • с торопчаны • (// 2v)
 с муромѣи и с рязанци • и с пере-
 яславци • и с всеми князми все-
 я земля рускѣа • и бы всиѣхъ кня-
 зѣи • ѡ • и • ѣ • новгородѣи же слы-
 шахоу тоу силоу великоюу градѣ-
 цю на сѣ • и печалны быша въ ско-
 рѣѣ велици и сѣтованѣи мнозѣ
 молаше сѣ милостивомоу бгѡу
 и пречѣѣи его мѣтри стѣи гжѣ
 бѣи • и поставиша ѡстрогъ
 ѡколо всего нова города • а са-
 мѣ сташа за ѡстрогомъ • и и
 придоша к новоу городоу соузь-
 дальци • съ всеми князми зе-
 мля рускиа • стоахоу же подѣ
 городомъ • три дни • въ второу-
 ю же ноцѣ стѡмоу архиепѣоу
 иваноу стоацю и молацю сѣ
 стѡмоу ѡбразоу га наго їса ха • ѡ спа-
 сенѣи гра сего • и бы въ ѡжасѣ и слыша
 гла глѣшъ • сие иди в цркъвѣ стго спса
 на ильинѣ оулицю и возми иконѣ
 свѣтоую бѣю • и вынеси на ѡстрогъ
 противоу соупостатѣ • и стѣиши
 архиепѣи іѡа то слышавѣ пребы
 безѣ сна всю ноцѣ мола сѣ стѣи бѣи
 мѣтри бѣи • оутру же бывшю • пове-
 лѣ быти свору стѡму • и сповѣда ви-
 дѣни юго предѣ всеми • они же то-
 гда слышавше прославиша ба • архи-
 епѣи же посла дѣякона своего с кри-
 лосомъ • принести икону на сворѣ •

to Novgorod with all
 the military power of Suzdal,
 and with him Prince Mstislav
 with the people of Smolensk, with the people of Toropets,
 40 with the people of Murom, and with the people of Riazan'
 and with the people of Pereiaslav, and with all the princes
 of all the Rus land. And there were in total
 seventy-two princes. When the Novgorodians heard
 about that great force coming against them,
 45 they were saddened,
 in great grief and much sorrow.
 They prayed to merciful God
 and his immaculate mother, Our Holy Lady,
 Mother of God. And they built a fortified wall
 50 around the whole of Novgorod,
 and they themselves took up position behind the wall.
 And the Suzdalians came to Novgorod
 with all the princes of the Rus land.
 And they remained under the city³
 55 for three days. But in the second
 night of the siege, the holy archbishop
 John was standing and praying
 to the holy image of Our Lord Jesus Christ for
 the salvation of the city, and he was terrified when he heard
 60 a voice saying the following: "Go to the Church of the Holy Savior
 on Il'ina street and take the icon
 of the Holy Mother of God, and carry it out onto the fortified wall
 built against the enemy." And the holiest
 archbishop John, hearing this,
 65 stayed sleepless all night praying to the Holy Virgin,
 the Mother of God. When it was morning,
 he ordered that there be a holy congregation of clergy.
 He related his vision to everyone.
 And then they, having heard this, praised God.
 70 And the archbishop sent his deacon with the clergy
 to bring the icon to the congregation.



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рукама и дасть двѣма дѣаконо-
ма • и повелѣ нести прѣ собою • а са-
мъ поиде следъ • съ всимъ стѣмъ
своромъ • свѣршающе канунъ • наро-
ди же оугнѣтаху сѧ въследъ идѣ-
ще • и не соша икону на острогъ • идѣ
же нынѣ манастирь стѣмъ бѣа
на десатинѣ • а новгородци вси ба-
ху за острогомъ • не можаху проти-
вѣ стати • но токмо плакаху сѧ ко-
ждо себе • свою погыбель видающе • по-
неже бо сѣздалци • и оулицы раздѣли-
ша на свои города бывшую же часѣ
ѣ му • начаша приступати ко городу
вси полци рускыя • и спустиша стрѣ-
лы яко дождь оумноженъ • тогда же
икона бѣимъ промысломъ • обрати
сѧ лицемъ на грѣа • и видѣ архиепѣпъ •
слезы текуща ѿ иконы • и приять
въ фелонъ свои • ѿ великое страшно-
е чѣ • како се можаше быти ѿ суха дре-
ва • не сѣтъ бо слезы но являють зна-
мение своеѣмъ мѣти • сѧмъ бо обра-
зомъ молит сѧ стѣмъ бѣа снѣ свое-
му и бѣу нашему за грѣа нашъ • не дати
в поругание супротивнымъ • то-
гда гѣ бѣ нашъ • оумилосерди сѧ
на грѣа нашъ • мѣтѣми стѣмъ бѣа •
пѣсти гнѣвъ свои на всѧ полки
рускыя • и покры ихъ тма • яко
же бѣ при монѣти • иегда бо прове-
де бѣ • сквозѣ чермное море жиды
а фараона погрузи • тако и на сихъ
нападѣ трепетъ и оужастъ • и о-
слѣпоша вси • и начаша сѧ бити

- his hands and gave it to two deacons.
And he ordered them to carry it in front of them,
and he himself went behind with all the holy congregation,
singing the canon, and
110 the people following them were gathered in a crowd.
And they carried the icon to the walls,
where the monastery of the Holy Mother of God now stands,
"On Tithe"⁶, and all the Novgorodians were staying
behind the walls, unable to charge the enemy,
115 but each of them only wept for himself,
seeing his own doom,
because the Suzdalians had even divided⁷
the streets among their cities. At the
sixth hour, all the Rus armies approached the city
120 and sent arrows
like pouring rain. Then,
by divine providence, the icon
turned its face to the city.
And the archbishop saw tears flowing from the icon
125 and caught them in his phelonion⁸. Oh great, formidable
miracle! How can this come from dry wood?
They weren't mere tears, but revealed a sign
of her mercy. This way
the Holy Mother of God prayed to her Son
130 and Our Lord for our city, not to give it up in
desecration to the enemy.
Then Our Lord showed his mercy to our city
thanks to the prayers of the Holy Mother of God.
He unleashed his wrath on all the Rus armies,
135 and darkness covered them, as
happened to Moses when God led
the Jews through the Red Sea
and drowned Pharaoh. And in the same way,
they were attacked by awe and terror.
140 And they all went blind, and they started fighting



межи собою • се же новгородци ви-
дѣвше • изыдоша на поле • ови избѣ-
ша • а прочихъ живы изымаша •
ѿтолѣ ѿятъ сѧ слава суздальска-
я и чѣть • новгородъ же избавленъ
бы • матѣми стѣна бѣа • стѣи же
архїеѣпъ иванъ створи праздни-
къ свѣтелъ • начаша праздновати
всѣмъ новымъ горѣмъ • всѣ мужи
новгородци жены и дѣти • чѣтнѣмъ
знамени стѣни бѣа бѣ же нашѣ •

each other. When the Novgorodians saw this,
they went out to the battlefield. They killed some and
captured others alive.

This way, the fame and honor of Suzdal

145 was taken away, while Novgorod was saved
by the prayers of the Holy Mother of God.

And the holy archbishop John created a holy
holiday, and the whole of Novgorod started celebrating it
– all Novgorodian men, women, and children –

150 the holiday of the Venerable Sign
of the Holy Mother of God. Glory to our God!

Critical Notes

Translation

- 1 Medieval Novgorodians exercised a degree of control in who became prince of Novgorod, and at least theoretically had the power to elect and depose princes, though the extent of their power is debated.
- 2 The Northern Dvina River, along which residents lived on land under Novgorod's control.
- 3 The Suzdalians took up place outside of the fortifications of Novgorod and laid siege to the city.
- 4 Canon: A church chant honoring a saint or a holiday.
- 5 Kontakion: A usually short hymn in the Eastern Orthodox Church.
- 6 "On Tithe" refers to a historical location in Novgorod, in the same region of the city as the Cathedral of St. Sophia.
- 7 When conquering the city, the Suzdalians determined which regions of Novgorod would be claimed by which cities of Suzdal.
- 8 Phelonion: A priest's vestment of the Eastern Orthodox Church.