

# Reflecting history in mirror of our time

People worldwide have always loved to create fake artefacts; scientists are still sceptical regarding a poem entitled *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, whose original disappeared 200 years ago, under mysterious circumstances, during the 1812 War

By Victor Andreev

## In the beginning was the word

The poem's dating remains under debate, with some believing it to have been written after the 12th century. Karamzin fuelled such dispute in 1797, telling Hamburg's *Le Spectateur du Nord* magazine about the find: 'Two years ago, an extract from *The Song of Igor's Campaign* was discovered in our archives, which compares to the best of Ossian's poems.'

Ossian was a legendary 3rd century Celtic singer whose name was used by Scottish poet James Macpherson in writing and publishing his poems in the 18th century. Ossian's works were extremely popular worldwide but when Macpherson's pseudonym was discovered, he was accused of mystification.

The trend was contagious, with Ossian-style works appearing in the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and, even, in our country. Today, some agree that Karamzin and his peers may have seen *The Song of Igor's Campaign* on a 16th century manuscript. Our enlighteners have long endeavoured to find the poem's author among their own countrymen, announcing church figure Kirill Turovsky as the possible writer. However, he would have never addressed pagan gods in this manner.

## Why do rarities need documentation?

How do we differentiate between handicrafts and historical artefacts? Naturally, many pieces kept at museums are related to famous personalities from the past. For example, on visiting London's Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition, entitled *Royal Treasures: European Masterpieces from 1600-1800* (currently on show at Nesvizh Castle), it's obvious how many exhibits were owned by famous monarchs. However, as a journalist, I've been told that the ownership of one royal tobacco box is 'not indisputable'. Authenticity should be confirmed by documentation but this isn't always available.

Our number one national relic — Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya's Cross — is unique in being inscribed with the names of its creator and owner: 'God, help Lazar, known as Bogsha, who made this crucifix for the Cathedral of Exaltation of the Holy Cross. In the summers of 668 and 669, Yevfrosiniya kept the cross at her monastery of the Cathedral of Exaltation of the Holy Cross.' No more comment is required. Clear-



Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya's Cross

ly, the saint took possession of the crucifix and kept it safe at the Cathedral of Exaltation of the Holy Cross, where it remained until the 12th century. It is an authentic relic, rather than a legend.

Sadly, the original was last seen in 1941, held at Mogilev's Regional Committee Communist Party building. It houses the Pavel Maslennikov Art Museum these days — depicted on the 200,000 Rouble banknote. Its safe held many rarities, including King Zygmunt Waza's mace, a mitre owned by Archbishop Georgy Konissky and a 16th century Gospel re-written by Slutsk's Duke Yuri Olelkovich (as confirmed by a note on the first page of a book by confes-



sor protopope Malofei). This folio — also considered to be lost forever — was miraculously discovered on June 12th, 2003 — as the Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk, the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus Filaret tells us. In 2009, the Belarusian Exarchate joined the National Academy of Sciences in publishing a facsimile edition of the Gospel while the original is being held at the House-Church in Honour of the Council of All Belarusian Saints (in Minsk, on the corner of Rakovskaya and Osvobozhdeniya streets).

A copy of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya's Cross is held at the monastery she founded, skilfully made by Brest master Nikolay Kuzmich in 1997. Hopes remain of locating the original, since the Slutsk Gospel has been rediscovered.

## Hermitage guarantees

The authenticity of many relics remains under debate — in Belarus in abroad. Archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann — known for discovering Troy (as written in Homer's *Iliad*) and other ancient Greek cities — discovered many treasures. However, he mistakenly claimed ownership by characters from Homer's ancient tales. Later archaeologists view Schliemann as an amateur, proving that

the artefacts were created in other epochs, with no reference to Troy. Even now, scientific literature refers to 'the mask of Agamemnon' (found by Schliemann in Mycenae) and 'the treasure of Priam' (from Troy); in fact, those kings have no relation to the artefacts.

Belarus also has its own 'scientific forgeries' — such as Vytautas' belt, which was found in the 1990s, near the village of Litva, near Molodechno. It was privately owned for some time, before moving to the National History Museum. The legend of Vytautas' ownership of the belt (the circumstances of its discovery remain unclear) was asserted by Mark Kramarovsky, a leading research officer at the State Hermitage's Department for Eastern Studies. He told Minsk coin collector Valentin Ryabtsevich: 'I suppose the belt was presented to the Lithuanian Duke or some of his court nobility by a Crimean khan.'

Exhibition of rare gold and silver items at National History and Culture Museum of Belarus, with central treasure of unique silver Vytautas' belt, dated from 14th-early 15th century



Silver belt thought to have been worn by Duke Vytautas

Professor Ryabtsevich died four years ago but I remember meeting him in 2007. On the way from the National History Museum to the Belarusian State University's History Department (where he worked), he tried to convince me of the truth of Mr. Kramarovsky's words. Mr. Ryabtsevich compared the belt to Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya's Cross in its value. Supposedly owned by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's ruler, it is called 'Vytautas' belt' by museums and albums.

## Indisputable facts?

Walking through the halls of restored Nesvizh Castle, I can't help but look at the inscriptions on the portraits of magnates which decorate the walls. I've seen some previously at Minsk's Art Museum and at the History Museum. However, some magnates bear different names than a few years ago. Some have even 'lost' their family names and status, as historians are discovering that some facts are false.

Naturally, we can only speculate about much of the past and it can occur that seemingly fast facts are a mere reflection of reality in a false mirror.



Slutsk Gospel