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The Icon as a Medium to Construct a Saint's Image: The Earliest Icons of Saint Nil Stolbenskii

In the early 17th century the creation of the iconography of Nil Stolbenskii, an obscure west Russian ascetic in the remote region of Lake Seliger, contributed to the dissemination of the reputation of this saint and fostered the saint's acceptance as a powerful miracle-worker by portraying him as a relic. Nil Stolbenskii's first icon was painted at the end of the 16th century when the monk Filofei Pirogov of the Gerasimo-Boldinskii Monastery composed the saint's *vita*. The 1614 testament of the Nilov Hermitage's first steward records two icons of Nil in the hermitage, one of which showed Nil standing on Stolbnoe Island. The three earliest extant icons of Nil, which date from the second third of the 17th century, depict the saint standing on his island next to the Nilov Hermitage, and praying before a Christ figure behind a ring of clouds in the icon's upper left corner. In the center of the image the saint's relics are displayed in a shrine next to the hermitage's main church.

Nil's icons count among the earliest images that depict a Russian saint next to his monastery and feature the relics of a Russian saint in their central composition. The island motif and Nil's prayer pose demonstrate the dual message expressed in Pirogov's hagiography that the Seliger saint was both a formidable ascetic hermit and a devoted intercessor for his fellow human beings. The need to increase Nil's saintly appeal led to the depiction of his shrine and relics, which proclaimed Nil's thaumaturgical power to the viewers of the saint's icons. The model for Nil's iconography came from icons of the White Sea island saints Zosima and Savvatii of Solovki, whose hagiography had influenced Nil Stolbenskii's *vita*. The creation of Nil's iconography shows how his icons served as an important medium in the dissemination of the holy man's image.