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NOTES ON A RUSSIAN FOUR-PART ICON

Заметки о русской четырехчастной иконе

Abstract

В исследовании анализируется четырехчастная русская икона XIX века преимущественно с иконологических позиций. В ее левой верхней части изображена икона Богоматери «Умягчение злых сердец». Другое название этой иконы – «Симеоново проречение». В правой верхней части иконы изображен первосвященник в открытом гробу (возможно, митрополит Киевский Никифор, †1121). В левой нижней части иконы предстает святитель Николай с Христом и Богородицей. В правой нижней части иконы в центре изображен митрополит Алексий со святыми Екатериной справа и Александрой слева.

Keywords: *iconology, 19th century Russian icon, belilo, Theotokos “Softener of Evil Hearts”, Metropolitan Nicephorus of Kiev (†1121), Saint Nicholas, Metropolitan Saint Alexius, Saint Catherine, Saint Alexandra.*

In Russia, four-division or, in other words, four-part icons are of considerable significance. Among them, works depicting four different representations of the Holy Mother of God stand out. Others show saints or sacred scenes. Sometimes there are links between these images, but most often they appear independently of each other. The greatest number of four-part icons were produced in the 19th century. They are usually without a *kovcheg* (i.e. a recessed central field), the *kovcheg* being marked only by a simple border. Sometimes Christ on the Cross was painted between the four images.

Our icon¹ is noteworthy not only for its peculiar iconography but also for its high quality. The exact place of the icon's origin cannot be defined. It might have been made in the Central Russian region in a smaller-size workshop, in the early 19th century. This hypothesis is supported by the following technical features: the icon board in this case also has no *kovcheg* (recessed central field), the panel is grounded without a *pavoloka* (cloth glued to the icon board), and a very thin gypsum priming was used. In stylistic regards, it is dominated by linearity, with fairly few colours applied and the use of a great amount of *belilo*, that is, lead-containing white paints that “glow” as it were. As for its function, the icon was probably used for domestic devotion. This is also suggested by the area blackened by burning candles at the bottom middle. Such damage is very rare with icons used in churches.

¹ Four-part icon. Russian, early 19th c. The Mother of God “*Softener of Evil Hearts*”; The translation of Saint Nikifor's ashes; Saint Nicholas; Three saints: St. Catherine, the Metropolitan St. Alexius, St. Alexandra. Wood. 27 x 23.5 cm. Private collection. Inv.no.: 128.





Illustration No. 1.

The icon was sold at the 2018 auction of the Nagyházy Gallery and Auction House.² In the upper left compartment of the icon we see the depiction of the Theotokos as the “*Softener of Evil Hearts*” (Russian: „Умягчение злых сердец”). Another name for this is „*The icon of Simeon’s Prophecy*” (Russian: „Симеоново проречение”). The name “*Softener of Evil Hearts*”, or “*Melter of Hard Hearts*” comes from the fact that those who turn to this icon in prayer have their physical and

² Nagyházy Gallery and Auction House. Auction no. 234. Budapest, Nagyházy Galéria és Aukciósház, 2018. No 37, p. 22.

spiritual suffering alleviated, and when they pray before the icon for their enemies, their hostility is softened and a generous sense of forgiveness moves into their hearts.

Another source of the icon's name is the Gospel of Saint Luke. After the blessing, Simeon turned to the Mother of God and spoke prophetic words: "And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; - (Yeah, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Lk 2, 34-35.) With this Simeon foretold the immense sorrow of the Theotokos at the suffering of her son. This prediction of Simeon is represented in this iconographic type by a sensuous symbol, namely, the seven swords (daggers) thrust into the body of the Mother of God. The number seven in the Scriptures usually refers to the totality of something. Here it indicates the infinite sorrow and heartache of Mary's life on earth.

Very close to the iconographic type of the Holy Mother of God as "*The Softener of Evil Hearts*" is the Marian icon of "*The Seven Swords*" also known as the „*Toshenskaya Icon of the Mother of*" or "*Icon of the Theotokos of Toshnya*" (Russian: "Семистрельная икона Богородицы", "Тошенская икона Богородицы"). (Its Roman Catholic equivalent is approximately the Virgin of Seven Sorrows.) The origin of its cult is probably linked to the Crusades. The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin refer to the following seven events: 1. The circumcision of Jesus; 2. The flight of the Holy Family to Egypt; 3. The twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple; 4. The taking of Christ and Christ carrying the cross; 5. The crucifixion of Christ; 6. The descent from the cross; and 7. The entombment of Christ.) In the iconographic type of the Theotokos of "*The Seven Swords*", the seven swords are thrust into the body of the Virgin from the right and left, while in the iconographic type of the Mother of God "*The Softener of Evil Hearts*", three swords are thrust into the body of the Theotokos from the right and three from the left, and the seventh sword pierces her body from underneath.

Several miracles are associated with the icon of "The Seven Swords" or Toshenskaya" icon of the Theotokos. In the north, on the banks of the Tosnya River in the Vologda region, lived a lame peasant. In his dream, a voice commanded him to pray for his healing in front of an icon of the Mother of God in the bell tower, where there were many old icons. When he climbed up with great difficulty, he noticed that the icon was covered with rubbish and mud, and was used as a step for the bell ringers. When the icon was cleaned and a short service was celebrated in front of it, the lame man was cured. And in 1830, the icon put an end to the cholera illness in the city of Vologda [ДМИТРИЕВА 2004].



Illustration No. 2.

In the upper right field of the icon we can see a high priest in an open coffin. The inscription above mentions the name of Nikifor. Several ecclesiastical figures are known by the name of Nicephorus (Nikifor), such as Metropolitan Nicephorus of Kiev (†1121), Monk Nicephorus (Greek: Νικηφόρος ο Μονάζων) the Hesychast, who lived in the 13th century, the Holy Monk Nikifor Vazheosersky (†1516), the Holy Monk Nikifor Kozheosersky (†1640), the Metropolitan of Astrakhan Nikifor (†1682), or the famous theologian, physicist and mathematician Archbishop Nikifor Feotokis (Greek: Νικηφόρος Θεοτόκης, Russian: Никифор Феотокики or Никифор Феотокис), who was born on the island of Corfu in 1731 and died in Moscow in 1800. He was Greek by birth, but lived in Russia for most of his life. We do not know which of the above-mentioned prelates is depicted in the upper right composition of the icon. The scene represents the translation of the ashes of a high priest, the bishop's mitre and white omophorion of his vestments being clearly discernible. Caption:

ПРИНЕСЕНИЕ МОЩЕЙ СВ НИКИФОРА ПАТ[РИАРХА] (TRANSLATION OF THE HOLY PAT[RIARCH] NIKIFOR'S ASHES).

It is notable that the scratched text on the back of the icon also refers to Nicephorus as Patriarch. It may permit the cautious assumption that perhaps Metropolitan Nicephorus of Kiev (†1121) was named Patriarch. In the lower left part of the icon we see Saint Nicholas (Greek: Άγιος Νικόλαος, Russian: Святитель Николай) (c. 270 – 6 December 343) with Christ and the Mother of God.

St. Nicholas is holding the open book of the New Testament in his left hand, in which a passage from Christ's sermon in the field can be read from Luke's Gospel:

ВО ВРЕМЯ ОНО, СТА ИИСУС НА МЕСТЕ РАВНЕ, И НАРОД УЧЕНИК [ЕГО, И МНОЖЕСТВО МНОГОЛЮДЕЙ...] (AND HE CAME DOWN WITH THEM, AND STOOD IN THE PLAIN, AND THE COMPANY OF HIS DISCIPLES, [AND A GREAT MULTITUDE OF PEOPLE...] Lk 6, 17.

At the top, on the left, there is a small half-length image of Christ, with a small half-length figure of the Theotokos on the right. This depiction refers to the miracle at the Council of Nicea in 325.

It was here that St. Nicholas struck the heretic Arius in the face in the heat of a controversy. St. Nicholas was stripped of his episcopal dignity. But in the night Christ and his Mother appeared to him. The Mother of God gave him back the omophorion, restoring him to his episcopal title. Christ gave him the Book of the Gospels, another attribute of St. Nicholas, so that he could continue to teach. The source of this momentous event can be found in *Vita Compilata* written down sometime between 860 and 965.



Illustration No. 3

Also noteworthy is the position of the fingers of St Nicholas's right hand. The index finger, held upright, is vertical and straight, indicating a letter I. The middle finger is slightly bent and together with the index finger they suggest the letter X. The ring finger, bent in a semicircle, resembles the letter C. Finally, the little finger, slightly bent in a semicircle, also indicates the letter C. Together they combine into ICXC, the abbreviation of the name of Jesus Christ. In the lower right field of the icon, the Metropolitan Saint Alexius is painted in the middle, with Saints Catherine on his right and Alexandra on his left. St. Catherine of Alexandria (Greek Αικατερίνη, Αικατερίνα) was born around 282 and died around 305. St. Catherine, daughter of King Costus, was a scholar in all the liberal arts. She argued with the pagan emperor about Christianity. After a long debate, the emperor summoned fifty wise men to persuade St. Catherine. But in the end they got all converted to Christ's faith. The emperor wanted to have her body torn apart by a wheel with iron saws and spikes. Her body was carried by angels to Mount Sinai. The famous monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai, which also houses a large collection of early icons, bears her name [ΓΑΛ&ΒΑΡΗΣ 2002: 1-38].

Saint Catherine is venerated as the patron saint of philosophers, librarians, young students and wheelwrights, among others.³ Her attributes are the spiked wheel and the crown, as she was a royal daughter. She also appears in this icon with a crown, but without a wheel. The inscription of the female saint to the left of Metropolitan Alexius reads Alexandra. This is not Alexandra of Rome known from the legend of St. George, for that saint was a monarch and is always depicted with a crown. Here a little-known saint, Alexandra of Alexandria, also known as St. Alexandra of Egypt, is represented, who died around 376. She appears in the simple brown robe of hermits with a cross in her hand. According to her hagiography, there was a young man deeply in love with her who kept suing her persistently. Not wanting to cause him grief, she chose the eremitic life; she left Alexandria and retired to a crypt in a cemetery. There she spent ten years in work and prayer, contemplating the faith of the patriarchs and the holy fathers.

The Metropolitan Alexius is thus seen between two Alexandrian women saints. The metropolitan was born in Moscow around 1300 and died there on 12 February 1378. He was one of the most influential metropolitans. In 1354, the Patriarch of Constantinople installed him Metropolitan of Kiev and all Rus'. Upon his initiative, the construction of the Moscow Kremlin began in stone in 1366.⁴ The best-known representation of the saint, most probably from the eighties of the 15th century, is associated with the workshop of the icon painter Dyonisy, who depicted him in a hagiographic icon [DYONISY, LAZAREV 1971]. Another noteworthy icon also in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow is hypothetically attributed to the icon painter Georgy Zinoviev [ZINOVIEV].

³ From the immense special literature, let me call attention to an English- and a Russian-language work: WALSH C. 2007. See also БЕЛОМЕСТНЫХ И ДР. 2008.

⁴ One title from the libraryful literature on the saint: СЕМЕНЧЕНКО 1981. See also МЕЛЬНИК 2014, 2017, ТУРИЛОВ-СЕДОВА 2000.



Incidentally, our most carefully and meticulously painted icon shows a large burn mark at the bottom of the middle part, caused by a candle or lantern flame, which fortunately does not extend to the essential depictions of the icon. Finally, although not strictly related to our subject, we must mention here an interesting Russian story. It is well known that the use of candles is widespread in the Christian liturgy. (Candles also refer to the Holy Trinity by virtue of the trinity and unity of flame, wick and wax. They also symbolize Christ in the sense that a candle is destroyed while giving light. Christ also undertook death to redeem mankind.) Our story is linked to an icon set up by a roadside.

In Russia, icons were placed on posts at roadsides and crossroads in kiots (glass icon cases) to encourage prayer, contemplation and pious deeds. These icons were all destroyed under Stalinism. An old story was recorded of a simple peasant returning home from town drunk as a skunk. On the way, he picked a quarrel with his fellow travellers; as he put it: “the devil was busy in his head”. The muzhik ended his narrative by saying: “When you see the icon on the side of the road, with a small candle in front of it, it sobers you up. You wish your fellow traveller good health, and believe it or not, you even forget to swear” [ЦЕХАНСКАЯ 1998: 102].

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Illustrations

- 1) Four-part icon. Russian, early 19th c. The Mother of God, “*Softener of Evil Hearts*”; Translation of Saint Nikifor’s ashes; Saint Nicholas; Three saints: St. Catherine, the Metropolitan St. Alexius, St. Alexandra. Wood. 27 x 23.5 cm. (Photo Fruzsina Spitzer)
- 2) Detail of the four-field icon. (Top left: Theotokos “*Softener of Evil Hearts*”) (Photo Fruzsina Spitzer)
- 3) Detail of the four-part icon. (Bottom left: Saint Nicholas) (Photo Fruzsina Spitzer)

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