

## The Ladder of Divine Ascent—A Codex and an Icon

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Codex Lankton Folio 1r



Ladder of Divine Ascent, Icon #2008.37

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The Museum of Russian Icons has three copies of an icon type called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. In addition, it has recently acquired an early 19th century handwritten, 310 folia Church Slavonic<sup>2</sup> translation of the 7th century Greek text on which this type of icon is based, viz., Saint John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this research paper is to describe both of these artifacts, the codex (now named the Codex Lankton in honor of the founder of the Museum) and the icons, and to examine the relationship between the two.<sup>4</sup>

This research paper begins with a brief biographical sketch of Saint John and places him within the context of his geographical and temporal milieu. Then the physical condition of the codex and its textual contents are described, followed by a discussion of the illustrations in the codex which pattern those of the icons. This leads naturally to a description of the icons. This is done in two parts paralleling the discussion of the codex, namely, a description of the texts written on the icons, and in particular, their titles. This is then followed by a description of the pictorial representations themselves. The paper closes with a brief summary and conclusions.

Clearly these artifacts had two disparate functions. In earlier times literacy was rather rare so that icons and frescoes were the normal media used to present ideas to the illiterate masses in visual form. Codices and books, obviously, were meant for the literate and allowed for more extensive elaboration of these ideas. Climacus' book<sup>5</sup> was meant for monks and is a wide-ranging text on suggestions for helping monks (and lay persons) in achieving spiritual fulfillment. The Museum's copy of the book is a long handwritten text with two illustrations and various ornamentations within the text such as initial letters and rubricated and polychrome headpieces. The Museum's icons, on the other hand, are each single polychrome paintings with very little text.

## Background—John Climacus and His Milieu

In 7th century Egypt a hermit monk wrote a text which has come to be called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.<sup>6</sup> It is to Eastern Orthodoxy what Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* is to Western Christianity. It is called the Ladder because that is the metaphor used by the author to write about the steps one can take in achieving spiritual fulfillment. The monk's name was John and, because of the ladder metaphor that he used, he is referred to as John Climacus<sup>7</sup>, 'climacus' being the Latin word borrowed from the Greek κλίμακος meaning 'ladder'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly in Russian he is known as Иоанн Лествичник because the Russian word for ladder is лесница.

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I would like to thank David J. Birnbaum for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 The phrase 'Church Slavonic' for the writing on icons adheres to a convention of the British Museum to refer to this language. This allows one to avoid having to identify a particular recension of the language.

3 The most recent English translation is Luibheid, Colm and Norman Russell, translators, *John Climacus—The Ladder of Divine Ascent* Mahwah, NJ: The Paulist Press, 1982. A somewhat earlier translation also includes a translation of the correspondence between John of Raithu and Saint John Climacus as well as Climacus' "Homily to the Pastor" which are usually considered to be integral to the Ladder. This work is Moore, Archimandrite Lazarus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery 1959, revised in 1979.

4 It should be noted that portraits of Saint John and the representation of the Ladder also appear in frescoes, not just icons. Børtnes (Børtnes, Jostein *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography*, New Jersey: Humanities Press International) cites the frescoes in the 1374 Church of the Transfiguration in Kovalevo by Theophanes the Greek and one in the Church of the Dormition on the Field in Volotovo from about 1363. An image of Saint John in a fresco in that church is reproduced in Figure 159 in Вздорнов, Г. И. Волотово—Фрески Церкви Успения на Волотовом Поле близ Новгорода Москва: Искусство, 1989.

5 In contemporary Russian Saint John's book is called Лествица. He is known as Иоанн Лествичник.

6 This is the 'received' English title. As Duffy reminds us the book has also been referred to as "Ascetic Discourse" and "Spiritual Tablets" (Duffy, John "Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in 'The Heavenly Ladder' of John Climacus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 53 (1999), pp. 1-17. For a photo of a copy of the book with the title "Spiritual Tablets" see Martin, John Rupert *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954, Plate 32.)

7 Saint John is also referred to as John of Sinai and John Scholasticus mainly by Western writers.

8 His name in Greek is Ἰωάννης ὁ τῆς κλίμακος and in Latin Joannes Climacus.

Saint John Climacus has been a saint to whom there has been a very strong devotion in Russia. There is a church in the Moscow Kremlin called Saint John of the Ladder Under the Bell that was built in 1329. The church was originally known as the Saint John church. However, Ivan III (1462-1505) had a bell tower built over the church (between 1505 and 1508). It is 266 feet high and was to mark visibly the geographic center of Moscow. That is how the church eventually got its present-day name.

John Climacus' exact life dates are not known; however, he is known to have lived during the end of the 6th century and the first half of the 7th (c. 570-650).<sup>9</sup> He became a monk at about the age of twenty and lived in Egypt at the foot of Mount Sinai in the Sinai Desert. Egypt had been conquered by Rome in 31 BCE so that it had been a part of the Byzantine Empire (founded under Emperor Constantine in 323 CE) and at this time it was still predominantly a Christian country<sup>10</sup>. It did not become an Arab state and Muslim until it was conquered in 642 CE by a Muslim army. But Islam was very tolerant of other religions at that time so Christianity remained a respected religion in the country and monasteries were allowed to function along with Muslim mosques.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that Saint John lived at the foot of Mount Sinai is an important one. It must be remembered that it was on Mount Sinai that Moses met with God. The first time was when he was told to lead the Israelites out of bondage (the burning bush episode) and the second time was when he was given the tablets with the Ten Commandments.<sup>12</sup> So it is a holy place for all three monotheistic/Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Byzantine emperor Justinian I in the second half of the 6th century ordered the building of Saint Catherine's monastery on that site. And the monastery today is an important repository of early Christian icons, books, and other sacred artifacts.

An abbot at the monastery at Raithu also located on the Sinai Peninsula, on the Gulf of Suez, requested Saint John to write a book on spirituality. The correspondence between John of the monastery at Raithu and Saint John Climacus regarding the book is rife with references to Moses in which John of Raithu asks John Climacus to become a second Moses by writing "God-inspired tablets" to instruct new Israelites, that is, new monastics, who will lead them up the Jacobean ladder to heaven.

Monasticism, as we think of it today, was actually *founded* in Egypt, during the 3rd century CE, and it spread from there to Syria and Palestine, Mesopotamia and Turkey, and then throughout Eastern Christianity and into the West. It arose during a time when it was felt that the body and the soul were in conflict and that an increase in hardship was what was needed to increase one's spirituality. Two types of monasticism developed at this time—cenobitic and anchoritic. Cenobite monastics (and what one thinks of as monks today) live together as members of a community, submitting themselves to an abbot or spiritual director. Anchorites (or, more simply, hermits), on the other hand, live alone or in small groups of other anchorites. The latter tend to be less concerned with the vicissitudes of daily life and tend to be more ascetical than most cenobites, living a life with little sleep, rags for clothing, little or poor food, and hard work. Precursors of the hermit life include the prophet Elias, John the Baptist, Christ when he went into the desert, and Saint Paul. By the 4th century there were many monks and nuns, most of the latter living in communities. They are often referred to as Desert Fathers or Sisters.<sup>13</sup> Among the early hermits in the desert were Saint Anthony of Egypt<sup>14</sup>, Saint Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Jerome<sup>15</sup>. Extreme examples of hermit life manifested itself in various austere ways—living on columns (hermits known as stylites, столпники) or in the open air (stationaries), and those never leaving their cells (recluses, затворники).

John's book is addressed to cenobite monks.<sup>16</sup> But this is ironic since, for most of his life, he was an anchorite living alone in Tholas, a few miles from the main monastery. He did visit a cenobitic monastery near Alexandria and was impressed with the monks' mutual love and prayer practice.<sup>17</sup> And his spiritual life was well-known and respected

9 Saint John Climacus' feast day is March 30. His book is so well-respected that it is read in most Orthodox monasteries during Lent.

10 Even before Constantine's conversion, Egypt had a large Christian population. Alexandria, Egypt, was heavily Christian even in 200 CE and later became the second largest city in Byzantium after Constantinople (now Istanbul).

11 An Arab Christian version of the Ladder was written in 1612. See Nelson, Robert S. and Kristen M. Collins, *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2006, p. 248-9 for a colored photo of this Arabic version of the image of the ladder.

12 And hence the title "Spiritual Tablets" given to some copies of the text.

13 See, for example, Ward, *Benedicta Daily Readings with the Desert Fathers* Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1988.

14 His dates are 251-356 CE. See *Lives of Saints Roslyn*, NJ: Walter J. Black, Inc. 1953 pp. 42-48.

15 Op. cit. pp. 82-91.

16 But in Step 26 John says that "the monastic life is a light for all men," that is, that lay people can also practice his steps for the development of their spiritual lives.

17 This monastery was probably the influence for Step 5 of the Ladder often referred to as 'The Penitential Canon.'

so it is that, after forty years at Tholas, he was elected abbot of the main monastery at Sinai, now known as Saint Catherine's, and it was there that he wrote the Ladder of Divine Ascent at the request of the sitting abbot of the monastery at Raithu.<sup>18</sup>

## The Ladder of Divine Ascent—The Codex

The Museum was fortunate to acquire a handwritten (codex) copy of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* from an antiquarian book dealer in Fall 2010.<sup>19</sup> It is an early 19th century copy of the famous book.

Two early editions of the Ladder were printed in Russia, one in 1647 and the other in 1854.<sup>20</sup> The last folio (ῥ, that is, 300<sup>21</sup>), of the codex tells us that the copyist hand-copied the edition of 1647, and not the later one because he copied even the colophon of that edition, in addition to the full text of the Ladder itself. In comparing the 1647 edition and the Museum's codex, one notices that the Museum's copy has simpler headpieces, similar but not as elaborate decorations in the margins, more angular and larger initials, but similar textual marginalia. And, as will be seen later, the ladder and John miniatures are more crude.

The colophon of the 1647 edition is copied in the Codex:<sup>22</sup>

By order of his Majesty the Tsar and Grand Prince Aleksey Mikhailovich,<sup>23</sup> autocrat of all of Russia and with the blessing of our great spiritual master, his father and pilgrim, the Most Holy Joseph, Patriarch of Moscow and of all Russia,<sup>24</sup> this book by the Venerable Father John of the Ladder, in the imperial city of Moscow, began to be printed in the year 1647 on January<sup>25</sup> 13 in memory of our Venerable Fathers Paul Fiveysky<sup>26</sup> and John Kushchnik,<sup>27</sup> in the second year of the prayerful imperial rule of the Tsar and gracious Prince of all Russia, Aleksey Mikhailovich. This book was completed in the same year, 1647, on March 1, in memory of our venerable mother Evdokiya,<sup>28</sup> and in the fifth year of the patriarchate of our great spiritual master the Holy Joseph, Patriarch of Moscow and of all Russia. Praise and glory, all powerful God and all the saints.

This is then followed by the personal colophon of the writer of *this* codex:

Glory to you, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. To the Creator of the world is rendered glory, thanks, honor, and worship; to the All-Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like a journey, I was very afraid to start this soul-saving book of Blessed John of the Ladder and to finish it. The sinful monk Joseph, April 11, 1837.<sup>29</sup>

So we know the name of the copyist, Joseph, and the date of its completion:

ЖТМЕ. ГАО. МЦА АПРЕЛІА БН ДНЬ

The date phrase says, literally, "7345 year month April 11 day." Taking into account that the year is written *anno mundi*, that is, the date system based on the supposed beginning of the world, we subtract 5508 and arrive at the

18 John Climacus' biographer is the monk Daniel who was also from Raithu.

19 A former owner of the codex wrote on the inside cover, in a 19th century Russian script the following—"This book belongs to the priest Romon Igorev Rogochevsky."

20 This is according to theirheartshallliveforever.yolasite.com.

21 The author's count is 310 (RNS).

22 A microfiche copy of the 1647 edition exists at the Lamont Library at Harvard University and was examined by the author. As stated in a note in that copy, it had been owned by the Troitse Sergieva Lavra in 1859.

23 Tsar Aleksey I's life dates are 1629-1676. He reigned from July 14, 1645 to January 29, 1676.

24 Joseph was patriarch from 1642 to 1652.

25 The word for January is spelled here with an initial re-.

26 A fourth century saint who died in 341 and whose feast day is January 15.

27 A fifth century saint whose feast day is also January 15.

28 Evdokiya was Tsar Aleksey's mother. Her life dates are (1608-1645).

29 Again, this is Professor Smith's translation.





1 Codex binding. From top: Front with foliate design, spine and back with cross.

date in the colophon of April 11, 1837. So we can safely say that the codex was completed in 1837.<sup>30</sup>

The first printing house was established in Russia in 1563, so it would seem surprising that a handwritten copy was made at this late a date. Yet copies of books were made by hand even much later, often as a form of spiritual exercise. The first translation into Church Slavonic is said to have been made in the 10th century, a very early period of the beginning of Slavic literacy. Later copies include that of the Metropolitan Cyprian, head of the Moscow church in the 14th century (and a former native of Bulgaria). Extant handwritten copies in Church Slavonic include three in the Russian State Library in Moscow—one dated 1411 from the Troitsa-Sergiev monastery, another dated 1412, and still another from the first quarter of the 15th century. Two<sup>31</sup> others are in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg—one dated 1421 from Kostroma, and the other dated 1422 from the Kirillo-Belozerskij monastery.

The cover of our codex is fully bound in black leather on wooden board, with two brass book clasps to help keep it closed. There is no title on the cover nor on the spine. There is also no apparent indication of who the maker of the cover was. The decorations on the front, back, and spine are blind-stamped and appear to be 19th century. The front cover and spine have foliate designs with geometric links in the border, and in the center, a large oval-shaped foliate design. The back cover has a single large representation of Saint Andrew's cross covering the center with the same border as on the front. Each spade-shaped book clasp has five incised concentric circles and two holes, and is held by a bent nail.<sup>32</sup>

The individual folia are approximately 4½" x 6½" (115 mm x 165 mm, similar to the dimensions of the contemporary C6 size). There are no watermarks. It is probably machine-made paper since none of the folia is deckle-edged. The laid lines of the blue paper (from the horizontal chain used in making the paper) and the chain lines (the vertical impressions of the chain) are quite visible when held up to bright light.

The text is written in black ink with occasional annotations, within the text and in the margins, in black and red ink. The annotations in the margins are often citations to biblical passages. Initial letters as in the following are similar to the 15th and 16th century ones from Novgorod and Uglich.<sup>33</sup>

The text may not have been written by a single person—shapes of the letters are written poluustav (semi-uncial). More research needs to be done. On

30 There is an interesting claim about the importance of the book in that the first book published in the New World was a Spanish translation of the Ladder (Mexico, 1532), entitled 'Escala spiritual de San Juan Climaco,' Martin, op. cit., p. 7.

31 See Вздорнов, Г. И. *Книги в древней Руси: Рукописная книга Северо-восточной Руси XII-начала XV веков*. Москва: Искусство, 1980.

32 Not much research has been conducted on early Russian bookbinding. Mokretsova has written a short article on the binding of parchment codices in Pskov and Novgorod in the 12th-14th centuries at the Russian State Historical Archives. But much more needs to be done. See Mokretsova, Inna "Russian Medieval Book Bindings," *Restaurator* 16(1995) 100-122.

33 See in particular plates 79 and 101 in *The Decorative Art of Russia* Portland House: Studion Editions, Ltd., 1990 (a reprint of Slavonic and Eastern Ornamentation, 1887) as well as Plates 51 and 52 (15th century) and 88 (16th century) in *Medieval Russian Ornament from Illuminated Manuscripts*, New York: Dover Publications, 1994 (a reprint of *Histoire de l'ornement Russe du Xe au XVIe siècle*.) See also as well three that are copies of a Climacus Ladder illustration in plates 62, 63, and 72. It should be noted that similar initials are still used in modern liturgical texts as in the *Древнеправославный молитвенник* 2nd ed., Erie, PA, 2001.



2 Folio (ЛИСТ) Д (numeral 1)

some folia the distance between lines is greater than others, the darkness of the letters is greater, and also the thickness and vertical size of the letters is greater. These characteristics appear consistently on folia seriatim.

Folio (лист) Д (1) is shown in Figure 2.

## The Codex—The Text

The symbol of the ladder appears in the literature of many religions, mainly to represent the communication between a god and humanity.<sup>34</sup> These religions include Islam (Mohammed saw a ladder to heaven), Chaldean, the Egyptian book of the dead, and some Amerindian religions. In the Dogon tribes of Mali miniature ladders are replicas of the large ones used to climb onto the roofs of their houses. These miniatures have a spiritual purpose in which, in the house, an altar is kept along with various small statues and a small clay jar which holds the soul of the family's head. The ladder is placed against the jar and when its owner dies, allows his soul to ascend to the hereafter and join his ancestors.<sup>35</sup> In the Judeo-Christian tradition the image of a ladder appears in Genesis 28:10 which describes the dream of Jacob. In his dream a ladder reached up to heaven on which angels were climbing and descending. At the top was God the Father (Sabbaoth) blessing Jacob and promising him safety on his escape from his brother.<sup>36</sup> Since then, it has become a common metaphor for God's way of making contact with humanity. Saint John Chrysostom (4th century), Saint Augustine, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (5th century), and Saint Jerome all used the ladder in their writings<sup>37</sup>. John Climacus, however, gives the ladder a central and concrete significance—it is a ladder with thirty rungs (corresponding to the age of Christ at his baptism), each representing a spiritual step to heaven.<sup>38</sup>

In the Museum's copy of the codex, in Church Slavonic the word слово, which, in contemporary Russian, means 'word' is used where we would use 'chapter'.<sup>39</sup> But along with each of the chapter numbers is the word for 'step'—степень—redundantly followed by the same number as that of the слово. So it is clear that referring to the chapters of the codex as 'steps' was by then conventional.

In the order as they appear in the codex illustration, the present author's translation of the thirty steps is:<sup>40</sup>

34 Western Christianity sometimes refers to it with the Latin phrase *scala paradisi*.

35 See Ginsberg, Mark *African Forms*. Mr. Lankton has a Dogon miniature ladder in his collection of African sculpture.

36 This image occurs as a scene (клеймо) in many of the Museum's other icons.

37 In more modern times see Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) (Кьеркегор, Сёрен) *Johannes Climacus* and Thomas Merton's "The Spirituality of Sinai" in his *Disputed Questions*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985. Both authors wrote extensively on John Climacus and the Ladder.

38 A summary of the use of the ladder image in the spiritual literature is available in Tucker, Suzetta "Christ Story Arma Christi—Ladder" at [ww2.netmitco/users/legend01/ladder.htm](http://ww2.netmitco/users/legend01/ladder.htm) 2001. In Christian iconography in particular its most obvious occurrence appears in the non-metaphorical sense in many depictions of the deposition of Christ's body from the cross.

39 In Church Slavonic it also means 'a teaching,' some writers use the word 'homily', which is probably what is meant here.

40 Translated from our copy of the Ladder as the steps are labeled on the ladder in the codex. All of the labels of the rungs begin with the Church Slavonic word for "On" (Greek Περὶ) followed by a noun or noun phrase or a participial construction.



3 An initial letter Б

- |                              |                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 30 On love, hope and faith   | 15 On chastity                  |
| 29 On denial of the passions | 14 On gluttony                  |
| 28 On prayer                 | 13 On despondency               |
| 27 On silence                | 12 On lying                     |
| 26 On discernment            | 11 On talkativeness and silence |
| 25 On humility               | 10 On slander                   |
| 24 On meekness               | 9 On remembrance of wrongs      |
| 23 On pride                  | 8 On placidity                  |
| 22 On vanity                 | 7 On grief                      |
| 21 On fear                   | 6 On remembrance of death       |
| 20 On vigilance              | 5 On repentance                 |
| 19 On sleep and prayer       | 4 On obedience                  |
| 18 On sensitivity            | 3 On solitude                   |
| 17 On poverty                | 2 On detachment                 |
| 16 On avarice                | 1 On renouncing the world       |

Following Luibheid and Russell (op. cit., pp. 12-13), we can group the steps roughly by topic:

- I. Breaking with the World: Steps 1-3
- II. Practicing the virtues ("Active Life"): Steps 4-26
  - i. Fundamental virtues: Steps 4-7
  - ii. The struggle against the passions
    - a. Passions that are predominantly non-physical: Steps 8-13
    - b. Physical and material passions: Steps 14-17
    - c. Non-physical passions continued: Steps 18-23
  - iii. Higher virtues of the "Active Life": Steps 24-26
- III. Union with God (Transition to the "Contemplative Life"): Steps 27-30

The two English translations and our Church Slavonic translation differ in contents. Luibheid and Russell have just the text of the thirty steps. In addition to these steps, Moore also has "The Life of Abba John by Daniel, Monk of Raithu," "Letter of Abba John, abbot of Raithu to the admirable John, abbot of Mount Sinai," "Reply to Abba John, abbot of Raithu," and "To the Shepherd." Those of Moore are the contents of most canonical translations of the Ladder in all languages. Our copy in Church Slavonic has those of Moore but also has additional texts. This is not unusual. Heppel<sup>41</sup> describes more than a dozen Church Slavonic manuscripts in libraries in the former Yugoslavia that contain the text of the Ladder as well as other texts in addition to the canonical ones. Many of them were miscellanies which contained the Ladder. At least one contains the hesychast<sup>42</sup> text of Simeon the New (949-1022) just as ours does.<sup>43</sup>

### The Codex—The Illustrations

There are two illustrations in the codex. They appear on opposite sides of the same folio. That folio, not itself numbered, is inserted between the two folia numbered БН (12). The codex is paginated in the old alphabetic numbering style, but, in the case of this codex, one folio number is used for that folio and its preceding, facing folio also, i.e. the folio number appears only on the recto of each pair of sheets and is only incremented by one for

41 Heppel, M. "Some Slavonic Manuscripts of 'Scala Paradisi' ('Lestvica')"  
*Byzantinoslavica* 18, #2 (1957), 223-270.

42 Essentially an eremitic practice of interior prayer.

43 This is MS 74 in the Dečani Monastery in Kosovo.





4 Ladder from codex at the Museum of Russian Icons f15r

each pair.<sup>44</sup> In particular, the ladder is the first of the two illustrations and appears recto; verso is the image of Saint John, the ladder, Christ, and Hell.

These two illustrations are *not* traditional illuminations. They are simple, naïve pen and ink sketches in red and black with some occasional washes of red, yellow, and green. The ladder in the first of the two illustrations (Figure 4) has a very clear numbering and labeling of the steps in their abbreviated titles. The ladder is leaning to the right<sup>45</sup> with a simpler floriate border to the right and left and with two representations of facing visages, each representing the word of God, in the two top corners. The border and the ladder are in red ink. Each rung is numbered in Church Slavonic using the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, the method of numbering described above which had been borrowed from the Greek, with an overstroke. All thirty rungs are represented. The numbers are written in black separated by the word 'on' (ѿ) in red followed by a noun or a short participial construction in black.

The image of the ladder in the Museum's codex is very similar to the 1647 version (Figure 5) with respect to the orientation of the ladder and its labeling and also the copying of the two sketches of the visages at the top. Where they differ principally is in the decorative border. The 1647 edition has beautifully rendered oak leaves in the border.

The second illustration (Figure 6) is on the overleaf of the above-mentioned ladder image, also itself with a sketch of the ladder, again leaning to the right with the outline figures of Saint John, monks, angels, and devils in black. In the upper left hand corner is the following text<sup>46</sup>.

Ascend, ascend the ladder with eagerness in your hearts, brothers. Listen to him who says: Come up onto the mountain of the Lord and to our God who endows us with legs like a stag's, and, on the highest rung, bestows on us his blessed love.<sup>47</sup>

At the top of the ladder is Christ reaching to help a person nearing the top of the ladder. An angel is also helping to the left. On the ladder are two figures climbing up while another has already fallen into the jaws of hell. Two winged devils are falling headlong into the jaws and another pushing the falling monk. In the lower left of the image stands Saint John<sup>48</sup> pointing to the ladder while a group of monks on his right stands waiting their turn to climb. He looks toward them but his hands point to the ladder. In his left hand is an open scroll which he is holding by the bottom with his left hand while his right hand is pointing.

In the 1647 edition (Figure 7), the writing on the top extends and wraps around the crucifix on the church, which itself is much more elaborately depicted. And John is holding a blank scroll. The figures are positioned similarly as the Museum's codex but in much more detail. John is standing in a pulpit with steps but with his back to the railing.



5 Detail of ladder with oak leaf border, 1647

44 The highest folio number written in the codex is 310.

45 Other pictorial representations of the ladder have it leaning left and even straight up, where, in books, this conventional representation is used as a table of contents.

46 Professor Smith's translation.

47 In excerpts quoted in Heppel, variations of this text, but not the same exact, appear in other (Serbian) Church Slavonic manuscripts.

48 Spelled ѿѡнъ on his nimbus.





6 Ladder with Christ (top), angels, devils, Saint John and others f15v

## The Icons—The Texts

The Museum is fortunate to own three very beautiful variants of the Ladder icon. These are icons 2001.14, 2007.43, and 2008.37. Since we have just discussed the text of the codex, let us examine the texts written on these icons. Only two of the three icons (2001.14 and 2008.37) have titles written on them. The first thing that one observes is that there are errors in the titles of both of these texts. These particular errors suggest that the titles were written much after the icons had been painted.<sup>49</sup> What strikes one first on icon 2008.37 is the initial phrase ВНДЕННЕ ОБРАЗ which would translate as 'a view of an image.'<sup>50</sup> It is a tautology and it is the first time that the author has ever seen the two juxtaposed this way in an icon. In most cases there is just one word as the first word and it is ОБРАЗЪ. Secondly, if the two words together were correct, one would expect the word ОБРАЗ to be in the genitive case, ending in а. But the word written here is in its root form. This would be odd by itself since its nominative singular form ends in ѣ in Church Slavonic and that is not how it is spelled here. Thirdly, the word ВНДЕННЕ would be written in Church Slavonic as ВНДѢННЕ with a ѣ (jat') in the second syllable. Fourth, there is a very wide space between the fourth and fifth words. But what is even more troubling here is the fact that words four and five do not exist, or at least do not appear in any dictionaries<sup>51</sup> of the language, in Church Slavonic that the Museum has. Word four is written with a sequence of three allographs of the grapheme и. A word does exist in Church Slavonic that is spelled with an 'с' followed by иѣ, namely, the word for 'this.' The actual written sequence of the three occurrences of и, however, does *not* exist in Church Slavonic.

Also troubling is the fifth word, which looks like ЛНЧІА. It also does not appear in any Church Slavonic dictionary at the writer's disposal. What to do? If one looks at the title of icon # 2001.14, it has, as the third word, СНИСАТЕЛІА where icon 2008.37 has those two unidentifiable words above. But much of the single word in icon 2001.14 maps rather nicely to words four and five of icon 2008.37, if one shrinks that space. Words four and five in icon 2008.37 are very possibly meant to copy the single word СНИСАТЕЛІА of an icon like 2001.14 where the first two vertical lines of the first word are supposed to be an н and the rest of it are misspelled versions of the last two syllables -ТЕЛІА. This is interesting except that that word also does not exist in Church Slavonic. However, there is a word that resembles it very closely, namely, the word СНИСАТЕЛЬ, with a л instead of an н, that is, the horizontal bar is at the *top*, not the middle of the two vertical lines. And this word does exist in Church Slavonic. It means 'writer', or 'author', a word which fits perfectly in the context of the title in both icons.<sup>52</sup>

Another troubling aspect of spellings in both of these icons is the word for 'ladder' or 'of the ladder.' In both titles the second letter of that word is 'е' where Church Slavonic writes it as ѣ (jat'). In modern-day Russian it is written with an 'е' just as in the icons. However, the official merger of ѣ and е in the Russian spelling system (because of a coalescing of their



7 John with blank scroll, 1647 edition

49 Probably after restoration.

50 ВНДѢННЕ is actually defined as ОБРАЗЪ in *Словарь церковно-славянского и русского языка*, Санктпетербургъ, 1847

51 Дьяченко, Григорий *Полный церковно-славянский словарь* reprint Москва 2007 and Срезневский И. И. *Материалы для словаря древно-русского Языка* 1955 reprint of 1893 Saint Petersburg original.

52 A verb списать does exist in contemporary Russian meaning 'to copy from.' Whether the icon painter thought of Saint John as a copier rather than an author is probably not the case since the agentive form existed in Church Slavonic.

pronunciations) did not occur until after the Revolution of 1917. The merger in pronunciation of these two sounds had already occurred in the spoken dialects of the painters of these icons.<sup>53</sup>

Derivationally, the last word in the 2008.37 title ends in –НННУ where the copyist Joseph and modern-day Russian use –ичник. One does not find –ич as a derivational suffix in Church Slavonic except in–ович as a productive derivational affix for patronymics. The person painting the text on 336 may have interpreted what he was copying as the proper suffix, but it is clearly incorrect usage here.

In the instance of the wrong words, it is probably the case that the title writer was working from a copy of the Ladder icon whose writing was so badly faded or damaged, they could not identify the words, even from context (although the word писатель without the initial с does occur in modern-day Russian). As for spelling the word for ladder with an є instead of a ѣ, one plausible conclusion is that the title was written after the merger of the two separate sounds (one a mid front vowel ‘e’ and the other a low front vowel pronounced like the æ in English ‘fast.’) in the writer’s idiolect.

So how can we account for these errors? In the case of 2001.14 the title is not centered on the image. On the contrary, it is right-justified to the edge of the icon. Since the title is usually the last item to be painted on an icon, it is probably the case that this title was written later than the icon, perhaps after a restoration. In the case of 2008.37, a close examination of the paint used in the title makes it clear that the title was added later.

An important fact to consider is that written language is more conservative than spoken language, especially with respect to its phonology. Take, for example, the English word ‘water,’ represented graphically as <water>. In many American English dialects the graph <t> in intervocalic, post-tonic position is pronounced as an alveolar voiced flap or stop as in [ˈwɔɾə] or [ˈwɔdə]. Yet, it is not spelled with a <d>, that is, <wader>, which one would expect if English spelling kept current with changes in pronunciation.<sup>54</sup> Consider also modern-day Russian which pronounces <хорошо> as [хəɾəʂo].

This conservative nature of written language is even truer for liturgical languages such as Church Slavonic. In fact a variation of Church Slavonic continued as the Russian literary language even into the late 18th and early 19th centuries. So one would expect the texts on icons such as these to be more ‘correct’ than that in spoken language, that is, would follow older rubrics of the language.<sup>55</sup>

The title of icon 2001.14 can be translated as ‘An image<sup>56</sup> of our venerable father John, the author of the Ladder.’ That of 2008.37 is ‘A view of an image [the next word is not clear]<sup>57</sup> John the author of the Ladder<sup>58</sup>.’

## The Icons—The Images

There have been a variety of representations of Saint John and of the Ladder. Sometimes he is represented without the ladder as in *Saint Jean Climaque avec les Saints Vieillards*<sup>59</sup> and at times the ladder is represented alone without Saint John as in *L’Echelle du Paradis*.<sup>60</sup> As stated above, the Museum has three versions of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* icon: 2001.14, 2007.43, and 2008.37. We will examine them in this order.

### Icon #2001.14

In this icon the title is at the top and right-justified. In the upper left-hand corner Christ is seated on a sketchily painted throne reaching out and blessing the monk who has just achieved his reward in heaven, but He is looking

53 That ѣ and є merged in Bulgarian and Serbian in the 12th century does not suggest a South Slavic provenance for this icon given the other evidence. See Гальченко, М. Г. *О написаниях є вместо ѣ в юго-западно-русских рукописях XII-XIV вв Избранные работы*. Москва, 2001.

54 It must be remembered that English spelling is more morphophonemic than phonetic, as is, for example, Czech.

55 Versus what one finds, for example, on the Novgorod birch bark writs of the 12th-15th centuries which captured the then current pronunciation.

56 Образъ on this icon is written обра with з written above а and on its side ‘face’ down as a titlo. There is no ѣ which one would expect in the nominative singular for this masculine noun. (This is a common spelling.)

57 It could be a misspelling of the abbreviated ‘venerable.’

58 Or ‘, the Ladderman.’

59 Popova, O. *Les Miniatures Russes du XIe au XV e Siecle*. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1975: 88.

60 Ibid. p. 49. Both are from the first third of the 15th century.



8 *Ladder of Divine Ascent* Icon #2001.14

at the three angels labeled 'Holy angels of the Lord' rather than the new arrival. In turn, the left-most angel is looking at the second angel, who is looking at Christ, while the third, dressed as the Archangel Michael often is, is the only one looking at the newly accepted monk. Paradise is delimited by dark clouds that encircle this scene.

In the lower right-hand corner of the icon Saint John's arm parallels the curve in the left-hand side of the monastery and delimits the scene into two distinct images—the monastery and its inhabitants on earth in the lower right-hand quadrant versus the upper half depicting heaven.

Saint John himself is labeled 'Venerable John.'<sup>61</sup> The scroll that he is holding is not legible.

John is looking at, and probably talking to, two monks<sup>62</sup> who stand behind an architectural piece, perhaps a rostrum, pulpit or a prie-dieu, which comes about half-way up their bodies. All three of these architectural possibilities are possible since there are two monks in the image and they appear to be standing, not kneeling. It could actually represent a safety barrier since they are looking at each other as if asking "Should we do this?"

Behind them is a representation of a monastery complex. This is probably that of Saint Catherine's at Mount Sinai because the image is of a three-aisled church and detached campanile as at Mount Sinai.<sup>63</sup>

In this icon the ladder leans to the left and has eight widely-spaced rungs. One man, dressed in rather expensive garb is just beginning his ascent. A monk has just begun to fall, and a nun is falling headlong into the jaws of hell in the lower left hand corner. The image of the nun (Figure 9) looks as though she had been cut from another icon, turned upside down, and glued in place—there is no fluttering of her garments, her hands in simple beseeching pose. There is no terror in her expression even though right below her in sight are the jaws spewing fire from the sagittal view of the head of the dragon of hell.

### Icon #2007.43

This icon has no title but it does have some writing in the border at the top of the kovcheg which is not legible under the red paint. In addition Saint John is holding a scroll which, again, is illegible.



9 Inverted image of nun falling into flames

At the top in the center, Christ, encircled by a half mandorla of flames (Figure 11) through which one can see heaven, is welcoming a monk into paradise by blessing him with his right hand and laying a crown on his head. An angel on the left is also welcoming the monk. The flame here indicates a cleansing divine fire of Heaven versus the punishing conflagration of Hell.

A half mandorla of flames, especially a true almond-shaped one, is rather rare in Russian iconography.<sup>64</sup> The author has been able to find only one

<sup>61</sup> Spelled *Юаннь*.

<sup>62</sup> Monastics are usually indicated in icons with caps as those shown here.

<sup>63</sup> It is not as apparent as that of Folio 17 of the Greek Sinai Codex 427 reproduced as Plate CX in Martin 1954, Figure 293, which is a beautiful and incredibly accurate 16th-17th century representation of Saint Catherine's.

<sup>64</sup> This one also encircles the figure of Christ; it does not fill the background. In Buddhist and Hindu iconography mandorlas with flames are very common but they usually completely fill the background of the holy personage.





10 Ladder of Divine Ascent Icon #2007.43

such half mandorla and it contains not flames but grey images of angels. It is in a mid-15th century icon of the Dormition from the feast tier in an iconostasis in the Church of the Dormition on Volotovo Field.<sup>65</sup>

Christ is dressed completely in white, a traditional color indicating divinity. There are two tiers of saints in this paradise, rather like rows of saints in an iconostasis.

At the center is the ladder, which leans to the right and has about twenty rungs. Three monks are climbing the ladder. One is just stepping onto the ladder while a monk in the middle is being helped by an angel and the one at the top is being welcomed. One monk is falling into the jaws with a demon reaching up to grab him. Another monk is being pulled off the ladder by a demon with a lasso. This demon is naked and brown. He has a human face, jagged wings, a tail, and long nails on his toes. The brown devil is holding a brown soul in the very fierce flames in the maw of the dragon with its prominent eye.

On the left is Saint John standing in front of a monumental church complex. He is on a pulpit holding in his left hand the open scroll from the bottom<sup>66</sup> and surrounded by an entourage of five prospective climbers standing in front, one of these is a young man, perhaps a postulant or novice.

### Icon #2008.37

This is the most spectacular, sophisticated, and iconographically rich of the three icons (and of many others in the collection).<sup>67</sup> The first thing to notice is that the firmament overflows the kovcheg and has God the Father in the center looking at His Son. Heaven is filled with trees, probably trees of knowledge of good and evil with their relationship to the semiotics of the ladder, that is, the ladder text gives one the knowledge of good and evil, and the steps to reach heaven.

Just below the trees we see Christ in Heaven framed by an archway resembling a church and royal doors as in an iconostasis. And to carry the analogy of an iconostasis further, there is a tier of saints including the Theotokos to the right of Christ and John the Forerunner to the left, as one would find in a Deisis. And the gates of Paradise are flanked by Archangels Michael and Gabriel, respectively, as one often also finds in an iconostasis.



11 Christ surrounded by mandorla of flames

Christ is standing to the left of the center of the tier, a  $\frac{3}{4}$  figure in partial profile in the open royal doors decorated with foliate designs (Figure 13). Behind Him is Paradise with a large grove of fruit-bearing trees against a white background. He is dressed in a red dalmatic covered with a blue himation. The two archangels have the same colored raiment. All the angels have white ribbons flowing past their heads. These are *слухи* (*slukhi*) by which they can hear the will of God. Christ is leaning forward, blessing the person who has achieved the topmost rung and taking that person's right hand in His. The angel to the right and at the foot of the royal door on the right holds a crown ready to be awarded to the new member of the congregation of saints.

<sup>65</sup> It is reproduced on page 35 of Игнашина, Е. В. и Комарова Ю. Б. *Русская икона XI-XIX веков в собрании Новгородского Музея*, Москва: Северный паломник, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> This miraculous feat is also depicted in icon 2008.37, but does not appear in 2001.14. Holding an open scroll from the bottom with no support at the top is a very common phenomenon in iconography and is depicted on many other icons at the Museum such as that of Saint Paraskeva, Icon 2006.11.

<sup>67</sup> It was purchased at Christie's auction house in 2008.



12 Ladder of Divine Ascent Icon #2008.37

To the left of Archangel Michael is an aedicula containing the images of two unidentified saints, one of them a monk. To the right of Christ are five other aediculae, each surmounted with its own dome. The first contains the Theotokos, dressed completely in red and smiling at the new arrival. This one is then followed by one containing the Prophet Zachariah looking to his left at Saint John the Evangelist, and Avvakum.<sup>68</sup> The next frames the Holy Apostles Paul, Peter, and Andrew. The next contains Saints Basil, Nicholas, and Varlaam. In each of these frames the first figure looks to his left at the other two. Last are Saints Zosima and Savatty,<sup>69</sup> both names misspelled, both looking to their right. Other nimbi appear behind some of the saints, indicating a larger assembly of saints. In the foreground of each aedicula is a table set with drinks. The sumptuous clothing, ornate tablecloths, chalices, heavenly companionship, aediculae, and being in the presence of the Lord all represent the rewards of fulfilling Saint John's suggested steps. In front of and below the aediculae a red brick wall separates Heaven from Earth.

In this version of the icon the ladder leans leftward and has all thirty rungs notched into the supports. Some of the rungs are labeled legibly and their codex chapter designations labeled on the left-hand vertical support. Behind the ladder and in the center of the icon is a flash of bright color. It is an area of bright white with multiple shades of blue suggesting waves. In addition, on its left extremity appear to be small waves lapping at Hades. It is, of course, a cascading river. The river protects the monks on the right from the dangers of Hades. And on this river are fruits and flowers floating down from the trees in Paradise. A plausible interpretation of this part of the image is that just as the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden bore knowledge of good and evil, Saint John Climacus' ladder expresses the knowledge that can help the diligent practitioner of his steps achieve Paradise.

An explicit reference to a river appears in Step 26 (On Humility) in the Ladder: "Let not your soul be a hollow in the stream of life, a hollow is sometimes full and sometimes dried up by the heat of vainglory and pride. Instead, may your soul be a well-spring of dispassion that wells up into a river of poverty."

There is a history of the image of a river connecting heaven and earth. It occurs in both the Old and the New Testament. Jeremiah 2:13 refers to the Lord as the fountain of living waters. Revelation 22:1,2 reads "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." The Museum has another icon with a very similar image of a river connecting heaven and earth. It appears in icon 2010.26, "Scenes from the Life of John the Baptist," circa 1750.



13 Christ standing in the royal doors

Saint John is to the right of the center of the icon in the lower right-hand quadrant. The two steps he is standing on are painted white, as if the light from a spotlight were illuminating them, or as if it was coming from within the steps themselves. This would re-enforce the semiotics of the ladder steps as guides to spiritual fulfillment. This light continues the white and light blue background that floods the center of the icon and unifies the connection between Saint John and the ladder. He is pointing to the ladder but looking at a group of over a dozen monks and nuns. In his left hand is an open

<sup>68</sup> This is probably a misspelling of Avvakum.

<sup>69</sup> The two founders of the Solovetsky monastery.





14 Saint John with open scroll

scroll (Figure 14), also not held up by his right hand, which 'records' what he is saying (from Matthew 7:13-14):

"Behold,  
brothers, the  
path is  
narrow that  
leads to  
paradise,  
wide..."<sup>70</sup>

Among the monks in this corner of the icon (Figure 15) is one who has his left hand raised outward as if expressing the wish not to participate in the spiritual journey laid out by Saint John. And the nun behind this monk, right at the border of the kovcheg, is looking out of the icon directly into the eyes of the viewer thereby drawing him or her into the scene, perhaps asking the viewer if he or she is ready to join in the ascent.

At the top of the ladder a person reaches for Christ's hand, who does indeed take it. In the meantime two angels in a flying posture are holding magnificent crowns for prospective successful climbers. The dalmatic of the one on the right is different from all the other angels, however; it is black, covered with white circles, perhaps imitating a coat of mail, a garment worn by warrior angels. Unfortunately, the person below our successful candidate has a rope around his neck and another around his waist and is being pulled down by a red demon. Further down the ladder is another hesitant but eager postulant or novice at the beginning of his climb. All three monks on the ladder are climbing up two rungs at a time. It is the case that completing a step is not a prerequisite to accomplishing another step, and, perhaps, that is what is being suggested here.

What is especially notable in this part of and throughout the icon is the draping of the personages' clothing which is so wonderfully executed (Figure 16). First, it portrays movement in the angels with clouds billowing behind them. In addition the drape of the fabric of the monk reaching the top of the ladder, with cowl off his head, has his foot caught in his dalmatic, expressing the difficulty of following the rigors of the steps.<sup>71</sup>

To the left of the angels holding crowns, and across the ladder, are two other angels, sitting in the air and holding white cloths. White usually signifies purity or sanctity. The cloth may represent a garment that will be placed on those who successfully reach heaven.<sup>72</sup> In this case, however, the cloth gently touches their respective cheeks. They may be drying tears that they are shedding for those unfortunates who are in or falling into Hell below them.

Further below them are two men, one with a long beard and another with a shorter beard, falling into the jaws. The one on the left is being dragged down by a brown demon and the other, with a lasso around his neck, is being pulled down by a black demon, all of the demons being winged. Most of the demons have individual, imaginative and fanciful characteristics. They have jagged, bat-like wings, furry legs, long, hooked noses, hair that stands on end, pointed ears that stand straight out, very



15 Monks and nun detail

<sup>70</sup> Translation by Professor Smith.

<sup>71</sup> Notice in this context that humans have black foot coverings whereas angels have red ones.

<sup>72</sup> Angels are often represented holding a white cloth when serving God. Even today priests in liturgical services will hold a chalice, for example, with a cloth over their hands.





16 A monk reaches the top of the ladder

long fingernails, very large eyes, large mouths, long tails, emaciated body structure, and each is of a different, dark color. The different colors may be symbols of types of sins. The demons are the most emotionally expressive characters in the whole icon.

In the jaws of Hell and in the lap of the largest demon is a nude child painted in white and holding a black purse. This is a common way of depicting Judas Iscariot in icons—his soul holding the purse of silver coins (Figure 17).

## Summary and Conclusions

*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is an important work of Orthodox Christian spirituality. The Museum of Russian Icons has a handwritten Church Slavonic copy which contains the canonical contents of this codex, viz., the central portion of the codex describing Saint John Climacus' thirty suggested steps for achieving spiritual fulfillment, the correspondence between John of Raithu and John Climacus, the biography of Saint John, and the 'slovo' to pastors.

The Museum's copy is bound in a black blind-stamped leather cover and the text is written in a poluustav script consistent with the writing of a single copier. There are no exotic illuminations; however, there are a few chapter headpieces drawn in a naïve manner and some rather elaborate rubricated and polychromatic initial letters.

The Museum's three icons follow traditional iconography for Ladder icons—the ladder (with a variety of number of rungs), Saint John holding a scroll, Christ welcoming successful climbers into Paradise, personages climbing the ladder, some falling or being pulled down, and the jaws of hell open to receive falling climbers.

Icon 2008.37 is the most sophisticated of the three in richness of detail and treatment of clothing, the elaborate images of the monasteries and decorative architectural features, the fanciful and imaginative portrayal of demons, the river connecting Heaven and Saint John, and the sophisticated use of light on the figure of Saint John.

Comparatively, the titles are of interest because of apparent errors in the spelling and choice of words. The titles of icons 2001.14 and 2008.37 were probably added after restoration. From these and other similar examples, there is a strong indication that this was a common occurrence and suggests that the title text should be given less weight in dating an icon. Text elsewhere on the same icon could assist with dating, if it has not been altered.

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17 The jaws of Hell



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