

## CONTEXTUALIZING SOME BYZANTINE AND RUSSIAN IMAGES OF THE MOTHER OF GOD AND SAINTS FROM THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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### Introduction

Before reviewing some icons from the British Museum exhibited at the Museum of Russian Icons, Clinton, MA (see Note, page 15), let it be noted that this exhibition, of course, covers far from all the varieties of such an impressive phenomenon as Russian icon painting. Rus' embraced Christianity in 988 through the mediation of Byzantium. The newly built Christian churches were decorated not only with mosaics and frescoes, but also, increasingly, with icons painted on wooden panels. Many Russian churches were made of wood and, for this reason, had neither mosaics nor frescoes, but only icons. Compared with other types of religious painting, it was icon painting that became especially well developed in Russia. Gradually there emerged specifically Russian varieties of icon painting, differing in many respects from the Byzantine prototypes.

Figure 1. Saint John the Forerunner. 1330-1340. Byzantine icon. British Museum, BM 15.

The author will first consider the two earliest icons on display and then some images of the Mother of God and individual saints.

### Saint John the Forerunner



Despite its small size, Saint John the Forerunner (Figure 1) is the earliest icon in the exhibit and it gives an idea of many important features of Byzantine painting. Two aspects stand out. First is the exceptionally rich and intense inner life of the saint conveyed by his stern glance, knitted eyebrows, compressed mouth and the energetic outline of the right hand held in the gesture of blessing. Second, the painting is intricate and versatile, and has numerous accents. This is manifest in the drawing of the Forerunner's hair. Some strands are raised as one would expect from a man who spent most of his life wandering in the wilderness. This also shows in the varied drape of his garments, seen in the many layers of painting, shade and half-shade, white specks of light and blue overtones. Saint John the Forerunner is portrayed as an ascetic and recluse, who was given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven and who preached the coming of Jesus Christ. Of the two epithets associated with Saint John—the Baptist and the Forerunner—this icon emphasizes the latter idea of the one coming before Jesus, who announced His advent and preached repentance in preparation for the event (*Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand... Matthew 3:2*).



Figure 2. Saint John the Forerunner. Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Circa 1350.

The image of Saint John the Forerunner connects, as it were, figures of the Old Testament and the Gospel (the New Testament) and transfers the fervor of Old Testament preachers and prophets to the world of evangelical events.

The intricacy of polychrome painting in this icon and its relief (sculpted) form are characteristic of 14<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine art.

Scholars usually date this icon to around 1300. However, its complex rhythm of shapes, the sense of an intense inner search and the pronouncedly active spiritual life give grounds to suggest that this icon was produced somewhat later, perhaps in the 1330s–1340s. It reflects the religious atmosphere of Byzantium in the period of the so-called Hesychast Disputes, as well as the activity of Archbishop Gregory Palamas. The Palamite doctrine asserted the possibility of the ineffable experience of God through intense spiritual work. In its characterization of an inner state and in its intricate relief and drawing (drapery outlines and strands of hair) this icon has a parallel in an icon from the Dečani Monastery (Figure 2), Serbia (now Kosovo). True, Saint John the Forerunner is depicted there as a desert denizen, dressed in a skin and cloak and with the cross of the preacher rather than wearing an ancient chiton and himation.

Figure 3. "The Black George". Moscow. Early 15th century, British Museum, BM14.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the British Museum icon is the condition of its wooden panel. Edges are crumbled and uneven because borers have perforated most of the panel. These insects prefer hot southern lands, that is why such panels are found more often in Byzantine icons than in Russian ones.



### Saint George and the Dragon

The Russian-made icon of Saint George and the Dragon is quite another matter. Naturally, much depends on purely outward distinctions. The previous icon is small and has a wide frame, while this one is larger and has narrow margins (Figure 3). The former image is a frontal representation of the saint, whose eyes are directed at the beholder praying before the icon. This icon represents an action, an event, and its compositional lines go along the panel surface and are not directed towards the beholder. The eyes of the saint and the beholder do not meet.

However, even more significant distinctions depend not on the subject or the iconographical scheme of the representation but on artistic principles. The Saint George icon stresses line and silhouette rather than shapes in relief. Lines are flexible, rounded and tight, not flaccid. The bow-shaped contour begins in the lower right corner of the icon, and follows the silhouette of the horse to the upper left part of the composition. Here the movement goes on in the contour of Saint George's red cloak and in the outline of his arms, especially his lowered left arm that completes this movement.

The light and exquisite forms, linear rhythm, and bow-shaped rounded outline motifs are especially notable if we compare this icon with another on the same theme.



Figure 4. (left) Saint George and the Dragon. First half of the 16th century. Center: Saint George and the Dragon. Mid-14th century Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery. (right) Saint George and the Dragon. First half of the 14th century Moscow, private collection

Many works of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Russian painting departed from the poetics of 15<sup>th</sup>-century art (known to us from the Andrei Rublev tradition). The 16<sup>th</sup> century brought its own aesthetics, frequently referencing an earlier period, namely, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, which appreciated large, heavy and solemn forms. It was from that period that the painter of this Saint George on a White Horse (Figure 4a) borrowed the packed composition and massive figures of the rider and the horse. Meanwhile, the master of the icon of Saint George on a black horse shunned those tendencies. His Saint George wins victory owing to his ties with the divine world rather than his physical might, weight and bulk. And the heavenly world permeates the saint with beauty, movement and spirituality.

Figure 5. Archangel Michael with Scenes of His Acts. circa 1399. Archangel Michael Cathedral, Moscow Kremlin. 235.5 cm x 182 cm.



Although the black horse is not a unique feature of this old icon from the British Museum, it is rather rare in Russian icon painting. But there are other examples (Figure 4b and Figure 4c).

When was this icon painted? Scholars are quite right to see in it the tradition of dynamic art of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and to point out the impetuous movement and light shapes traced to that period. However, 14<sup>th</sup>-century art had far sharper outlines and heavier forms. The British Museum icon has new features characteristic of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the art of Andrei Rublev was already taking shape. Those new features are found in the principal icon of the Archangel Michael Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin: Archangel Michael with scenes of his acts (Figure 5). Although there is no documentary record to facilitate the dating of this icon, no one today doubts that it was made around 1400, when the Archangel Cathedral was repaired and renovated. The British Museum icon is similar to the icon from the Archangel Cathedral in two respects: first, the rhythm of rounded bow-shaped outlines and, second, the energetic movement. Of course, when comparing the two icons, we should keep in mind that the Kremlin icon is very large (more than 2.5 meter in height),



Figure 6. Initial 'B'. Khitrovo Gospels. Early 15th century. Moscow, Russian State Library.

whereas the one from the British Museum is comparatively small (77.4 by 57.4 cm). Yet, both belong to the same transitional stage of Russian icon painting from the dynamic art of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the poetically elegant and calmer images of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. That is why it would be correct to date the British Museum icon circa 1400 rather than to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century or, taking into account its finer proportions, even to the very beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

What art center could it have come from? Some publications attribute it to the Pskov school; others trace it to the northern province of Novgorod. The icon was found in the far north of Russia, on the Pinega River close to the White Sea near the Arctic Ocean. Yet, its exceptionally high artistic quality and tangible classic tradition leave no doubt that the icon belongs to the Moscow school. This is borne out by its exquisite composition, its aristocratic image and some direct parallels with the Muscovite arts. Thus, the representation of the coiled dragon, twisted into a knot, whose head Saint George pierces with his spear, looks like some initials in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Moscow manuscripts, the famous Khitrovo Gospels in particular (Figure 6).

Let me stress that the works we have used to compare with the icon of Saint George belong not simply to Moscow art, but to its “upper crust”: they are artworks associated with the upper social circles and court art. The art of Andrei Rublev was to gradually take shape in that cultural milieu.

How can we explain the fact that such a work of art could have made it to the Russian far north from Moscow? Images not only from Novgorod, but also from Moscow are known to have been brought to northern churches on the White Sea coast. The reason was not only the desire to enlighten the semi-barbarian lands and familiarize them with Christian values, but Moscow’s desire to consolidate its political and economic sway over the lands famous for their natural resources, including timber, fish and salt, on the White Sea coast.

Thus, in 1340 Ivan Kalita, Grand Prince of Moscow, sent an expensive parchment Gospel manuscript with miniatures to one of the villages on the Northern Dvina River. The donation was recorded in a detailed inscription inserted in the book. That Gospel book subsequently ended up in the northern Siysky Monastery (on the Siya River), was then brought back to central Russia, and is now in the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Miniatures from the Siyskoye Gospel. 1340. Saint Petersburg. Russian Museum; Library of the Academy of Sciences.



Several icons found in the Krivoye village on the Northern Dvina River are another example of a similar transfer from the center to the far north. These include a group of three icons with representations of Christ Enthroned (in Majesty), the Mother of God and Saint John the Theologian (Figure 8). These figures interceding with Jesus allude to the Crucifixion, the Jesus sacrificed on the cross, instead of the traditional Deesis row (which has Saint John the Forerunner on the right). Those icons, whose style bespeaks special tendencies (Italian or perhaps Serbian), were brought to the north most likely from Moscow.

The British Museum icon of Saint George on a black horse belongs precisely to that type of artworks exported to the North.

Other icons under review are of a later, so-called post-Byzantine period. It started after 1453, when the Ottomans had seized Constantinople. Nevertheless, traditions of the



Figure 8. Christ, Mother of God and Saint John the Theologian. Late 14th century. Balkan (Serbian?) icons. From the village Krivoje in northern Russia. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

preceding period were still strong in Russian art of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century: the art of the great icon painter Dionysius, which matured during that period, was transitional in nature. Meanwhile, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the emergence of art usually referred to as the art of the Late Middle Ages. It retained the basic principles of Byzantine art, yet had an important distinction: this reference to antiquity, felt in earlier Russian art due to Byzantine influence, was no longer in evidence.

We shall single out one group from among the icons of that period. This group consists of icons of the Mother of God. Let us consider some of them.

### Deesis Icon of the Mother of God

The Deesis icon of the Mother of God (Figure 9a) stands out from the rest of them. It was used to decorate the iconostasis of some small church. It was in the Deesis row, which ought to include the image of Christ in Majesty and the Mother of God, Saint John the Forerunner, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, and Saints Peter and Paul the Apostles on the sides and maybe some other apostles, martyrs, holy monks, etc. The icon is usually dated to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it may have been painted earlier. Its moderate proportions, flowing lines, voluminous forms and very rounded face of the Virgin call to mind the art of the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period usually referred to as “around 1600”. Two artistic varieties stood out during that time. One was the so-called Stroganov School, especially cultivated around the family of the famous Stroganovs, rich merchants. Those icons were, as a rule, small and characterized by exquisite miniature painting and refined poetical images (Figure 9b). The other was the Godunov School, named after the ruler Boris Godunov, who marked the watershed between the Rurikides and the Romanov Dynasty. The Godunov School (Figure 10) was distinguished by well-proportioned figures without inordinate stylization or distortions, rounded forms, the serene beauty of its images and the attempt to draw on the Byzantine tradition, emulating the art of the so-called Palaeologan period (approximately the 14<sup>th</sup> and even the late 13<sup>th</sup> century).

The other images of the Mother of God under review include bust-length representations of Her with the Christ Child. They are replicas of the especially venerated images of the Mother of God kept in various churches across Russia. Legend has it that the Lord worked different wonders through those icons, which therefore were attributed to miracle-working powers. Special public prayer services were held before them, they were carried in solemn processions, and numerous copies of them were made.



Figure 9. (left) Mother of God, from a Deesis. Circa 1600. 84.5 cm x 32 cm. BM 69. (right) Mother of God with Christ. Early 17th century Stroganov school. Perm' Art Museum.



Figure 10. Comparative detail of BM 69 (top) and the Holy Trinity. 1586. Godunov School. Tretyakov Gallery.

Figure 11. Mother of God Hodegetria. 16th century. 74 cm x 52 cm. BM 94.



## The Virgin Hodegetria

One such icon is the Virgin Hodegetria (Figure 11). It is a half-length image of the Virgin with the Christ Child on Her left arm and with Her right palm stretched towards Jesus. He is depicted frontally. His right hand is in a gesture of blessing and His left is holding a scroll. A composition of this type stresses above all the greatness of Christ as a teacher. Another idea embodied in such compositions is the tie between Jesus and the Mother of God, that is, His link not only with the Divine, but also with the human race. This is conveyed by His arm stretched out towards the Virgin and the border of Her robe. One ribbon of that border connects the face of the Virgin with the figure of Christ, and the other draws the viewer's attention to Her right hand pointing towards Jesus.

Virgin Hodegetria images were common in Byzantium and Rus'. Some of those icons were brought to Rus' from Byzantium. One of them, the icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk, (Figure 12a) was brought from Constantinople, according to legend, as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century (see the illustration of the event in Figure 13). It was kept in Smolensk in western Rus' and became famous as a miracle-working icon. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century it was taken to Moscow and placed in the Annunciation Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin. In 1456 it was returned to Smolensk, and replicas were made of it. The original Byzantine icon seems to have been lost during the war of 1812 against Napoleon, or even later, maybe before the Second World war. So only replicas remained. In honor of one of those replicas the Novodevichy Convent was founded in Moscow in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Its main cathedral was dedicated to the miracle-working image of the Mother of God Hodegetria of Smolensk (Figure 12b).

Another Byzantine icon of Hodegetria was in the Ascension Monastery of the Moscow Kremlin. During a fire there, the icon was damaged, and in 1482 the famous Dionysius repainted the image on the old charred panel. In composition the icon from the British Museum is very similar to the icon painted by Dionysius (Figure 12c): both have a simple and laconic composition and the same lines in the light border of the Virgin's attire. However, there are small differences: for instance, the blessing hand of Jesus is raised to a different height and He holds the scroll in a different way. The icon of Dionysius had a precious silver *riza* (icon cover) and there remain traces of holes for the nails that fastened it. The British Museum icon has retained its silver mounting.

It is close to works of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century in details and in the transparency of its laconic composition and can, therefore, be dated to the first half or middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## Feodorovskaya Mother of God

The Feodorovskaya icon of the Mother of God is another variety of the image of the Virgin with Child Jesus, which emphasizes the tenderness of the Theotokos and Child and Her sorrow at foreseeing the sacrifice of Her Son (Figure 14a) In this respect the Feodorovskaya Virgin is reminiscent of the Mother of God of Vladimir (Figure 14b) the most celebrated icon of the Virgin with Child Jesus in Russia. This early 12<sup>th</sup>-century



Figure 12. (left) Mother of God Smolenskaya, with Saints. 15th century. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery. (center) Mother of God Smolenskaya. 15th century (?). Revetment of the 16th century From Novodevichiy monastery. Moscow Kremlin Armory Chamber. (right) Dionisiy. Mother of God Hodegetria. 1482. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.



Figure 13. Muscovite Grand Prince Vasiliy Ivanovich gives the icon of the Mother of God Smolenskaya to Misail, bishop of Smolensk. Miniature from the Illustrated Chronicle Compilation. 16th century.

Byzantine icon was brought to Kiev around 1130 and then taken by Grand Prince Andrey Bogolyubsky in 1155 to Vladimir, a city in northeastern Rus'. Yet, the two icons have different iconographic details. In the Mother of God of Vladimir the legs of Jesus are fully covered by His himation whereas in the Feodorovskaya icon they are bent and one of them is open from knee to foot, perhaps, to show the human nature of Christ.

The icon from the British Museum is a later and reduced replica of the prototype of the first Feodorovskaya icon. There is no precise information about the origin of the first Feodorovskaya icon. In style it belongs to the second half of the 13th century. Only later legends, of little trustworthiness, recorded in the 17th century have survived. They allege that the old icon came from a small town on the Volga, where it had become famous in the early 13th century before the Tatar invasion, after miraculously appearing in the forest to one of the princes during a hunt. It was then transferred to Kostroma and kept for a while in the church of Saint Theodore Stratelates, from which it got its name. It was venerated and thought to be miracle-working in Kostroma and the neighboring lands and would have remained an object of local importance, but for an early 17th century event. Wars and a government crisis had put an end to the Rurikide Dynasty and the election of the new tsar Mikhail Romanov in 1613 led to the foundation of the Romanov Dynasty. Mikhail was in Kostroma when a delegation from Moscow came to meet him. The delegation was welcomed with the most venerated local icon, which, ever since, has been celebrated in Russia as an old miracle-working image that was party to one of the greatest events in Russian history—the foundation of the Romanov Dynasty. Today the original Feodorovskaya icon of the Mother of God is in the Kostroma Church of the Theophany (Figure 14c).

The icon from the British Museum is a small replica of the celebrated old icons that were produced on a large scale in Russia from approximately the 15th century on. Those replicas were roughly 25 cm high and 23 cm wide (sometimes slightly larger) and received the name *piadnitsa* (from the Russian *piad'* meaning span, the distance between the thumb



Figure 14. (left) Mother of God Feodorovskaya. 17th century. BM 70. (center) Mother of God Vladimirskaya. Early 12th century. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, (right) Mother of God Feodorovskaya. Late 13 cent. Repainted in the 17th century. Kostroma.



Figure 15. The meeting of the Moscow delegation at Kostroma, 1613. Miniature. Late 17th century. Detail.

and the middle finger of a man's open palm). Depending on their theme, such icons could be put on the analogion to commemorate one saint or another, or an event of holy history, or could be venerated as miracle-working icons. *Piadnitsa* icons provided representations of old monasteries or images of saints and replicated the iconography of celebrated icons. Obtained by worshippers and pilgrims in large churches and monasteries, they were convenient for transportation and were taken to remote churches or small chapels or else to private homes. One of the functions of such miniature icons was to preserve the memory of the old holy cities alive and to expose them to wider geographic areas. This Feodorovskaya *piadnitsa* icon of the Mother of God thus references the old Kostroma icon and the events of Russian history associated with it (Figure 15).

### Saint Sophia the Divine Wisdom

Another, slightly larger *piadnitsa* icon of Saint Sophia the Divine Wisdom (Figure 16a) had a similar role to play. It is a very close replica of an important artwork, the principal icon of the Novgorod Cathedral of Saint Sophia (Figure 16b). All major elements of the representation are there. An angel in royal attire with a red face and red wings is in a round halo in the center as a symbol of Divine Wisdom, Sophia, and Logos. Right above is Jesus Christ in an aureole. The overlapping of the aureole and the angel's halo may serve as a reminder of the Incarnation. Higher up, the angels are unfolding the fabric of Heaven with the stars and the Throne of God in the center. The three images placed along the vertical axis of the icon may allude to the three hypostases of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The Mother of God is to the left of the central image. Jesus Christ Incarnate is represented on Her bosom, thus stressing Her importance to the overall theological concept of the icon. Saint John the Forerunner stands on the right with his words about the advent of Christ inscribed on the scroll (*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!* John 1:29)



Figure 16. (left) Saint Sophia Divine Wisdom. 17th century BM 54. (center) Saint Sophia Divine Wisdom. Late 15th century. Novgorod, Saint Sophia cathedral., (right) "Stands the Queen...". Late 14th century. Moscow Kremlin, Dormition cathedral.

It was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that this complicated iconography evolved in the art of the Orthodox world. A Byzantine composition representing Christ as the Great Hierarch, the Mother of God in royal attire, and Saint John the Forerunner was probably used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was called *Stands the Queen* (Figure 16c) after the text of Psalm 45:9: "...at your right hand stands the queen..." It has been assumed that this 14<sup>th</sup>-century icon was painted in Novgorod for its Cathedral of Saint Sophia by a visiting (possibly, Serbian) master and was associated with the theme of Saint Sophia the Divine Wisdom.

Figure 17. Archangel Michael, with Scenes of Acts and Miracles. Late 17th century. 31,8 cm x 28,4 cm. BM 38.



This small icon from the British Museum reproduced the complicated theological concept of the large image of Novgorod's Saint Sophia Cathedral with stunning precision. It is a rarity even on the scale of Russian icon collections. A noteworthy fact, however, is that the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin has a small *piadnitsa* icon with the same subject.

Intricate theological themes first appeared in Byzantine and Russian art in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and gained especially frequent use in the post-Byzantine period, starting from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Although the profound symbolism and allegories of this icon may inhibit its perception, they do not overshadow its artistic merits: the majesty of the large figures, their expressive poses and gestures, and the artfully designed composition centering on the fiery red face of Saint Sophia the Divine Wisdom.

#### Archangel Michael and Attendant Figures and Scenes

The icon with Archangel Michael and Attendant Figures and Scenes (Figure 17) stands out from among icons



Figure 18. (top) Joshua (before Archangel Michael). Fresco of Hosios Lukas, Greece, 10th century. (bottom) Archangel Michael and Joshua. Russian icon from the late 12th century. Moscow Kremlin, Dormition Cathedral.

representing individual venerated characters. Its rounded shapes and the smooth modelling of the face in imitation of West European painting show that this icon was connected with Moscow art and the workshops which had evolved under the Kremlin Armory Chamber in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The theme of the icon is the appearance of Archangel Michael to Joshua, the son of Nun and leader of Israel. The commander of the army of the Lord orders Joshua to remove his shoes because the place where he stands is holy (Joshua 5:13-15). The subject is known in Byzantine art (Hosios Loukas, 10<sup>th</sup> century) and in Russian art from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 18). Two more scenes with acts of Archangel Michael are above and below the central representation. Such placement of additional scenes—freely around the central figure without any frames—was frequent in Russian icon painting in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the first of the additional scenes, directly carries on the central theme. The priests of Jericho are shown bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD (Figure 19) followed by other priests blowing the trumpets of rams' horns, as a result of which the walls of the impious Jericho crumbled down. *That was how, at the will of the LORD, Jericho was given into Joshua's hands* (Joshua 6:4-15). This scene was known in Byzantine art, for instance, from illuminations to the Octateuchs manuscripts and certain Byzantine and Russian murals.

A rare detail of that scene in the icon from the British Museum is the representation of Jericho itself in the form of light-colored buildings topped with tower-like structures. Their drawing seems to rely on the West European rather than the Byzantine or Russian tradition. There is nothing surprising about that because we often see Russian painting of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century drawing on motifs of West European art, including in the representation of architecture and landscape.

The other additional scene is the Miracle at Chonae (Figure 20), which was described in the Apocrypha and included, for instance, in the Great Synaxarion, an extensive 16<sup>th</sup>-century compilation of texts arranged by the days of the year. The subject is known in art from at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is associated with the theme of the divine protection of monasteries. Impious pagans wanted to flood the church in the village of Chonae by damming the nearby river. However, Archangel Michael punished the pagans and helped the monk Archippos, who guarded the church, by diverting the river, evidence that the monasteries and monks enjoyed divine protection. The theme was common in Russian art because the celebration of monasticism and monasteries was generally typical of Russian culture. Let it be remembered that from the 14<sup>th</sup> century there was a monastery in the Moscow Kremlin with its major church dedicated to the Miracle of the Archangel

Figure 19. (left): Bearing of the Ark of the Covenant. Detail. BM 38. (right) Bearing of the Ark of the Covenant. Miniature of the Ochtateuch of the 13th century Athos, Vatopedi, Cod. 602.

Figure 20. (left) Miracle at Chonae. Detail. BM 38. (right) Miracle at Chonae. Russian icon. Late 15th century. Novgorod, Museum.



Michael at Chonae. It was called the Chudov (Miracle) Monastery and, unfortunately, was destroyed in the 1930s.

A noteworthy detail is that both scenes convey the idea of the triumph of true faith and the punishment of the impious. That might have been connected with the circumstances in Russian history of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, namely, the schism and the split of Orthodox society. The so-called Old Believers were declared heretics by their opponents, who supported the then Russian patriarch Nikon. In the icon from the British Museum both scenes prove that divine power protects those of true faith.

The icon of the Archangel Michael is also of the *piadnitsa* type, if slightly larger. We can suppose that it replicates the composition of some larger icon that might have been in the Archangel Michael Cathedral or the Chudov Monastery of the Moscow Kremlin and has not survived to our day.

The icon has another notable feature. Its central image and additional episodes all stress the triumphant nature of the icon. Meanwhile, there was another side to the veneration of the Archangel Michael, who was worshipped as the psychopomp (a psychopomp is a being that escorts deceased souls into the afterlife). This aspect was very strong in Russian culture: dukes and distinguished members of the clergy were buried in the chapels of the Archangel Michael, and the Moscow Kremlin Cathedral of the Archangel was intended to serve as the sepulcher for princes and tsars. Pictorial arts, however, reflected this aspect only in individual scenes of the acts cycles. In general, the Archangel Michael shown in military or court attire as one of the court of the Lord of Heaven always has a triumphant image. We feel the same victorious tone in the icon from the British Museum.

Let us consider two remaining small studies. The representations of saints, both in groups and individually, are known to have formed a special subject group in Russian icon painting. There are, for instance, groups showing some canonized bishops (Saint James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, Saint Nicholas and Saint Ignatius the Theophoros, the State Russian Museum; Saints Eustathius and Tryphon, martyrs and patrons of farmers and so on).

### Saint Paraskeva

The icon of Saint Paraskeva (Figure 21), surnamed “Friday”, dates from the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century and is distinguished by the brightly colored background typical of that period, the contrast between the red maphorion and the green background and exquisite drawing. Scholars have so far failed to pay attention to the images of holy women as a special theme in Russian

art, which nevertheless merits special consideration. There are cases when figures of holy women get special emphasis in Russian art as in no other. The scene of The Righteous

Figure 21. Saint Paraskeva-Piatnitsa. Early 17th century. BM 83.





Figure 22. (left) Part of the fresco of the Last Judgment. Late 12th century. Vladimir, Saint Demetrius cathedral. (right) Detail of the Righteous Women Marching to Heaven.

Marching to Heaven, which forms part of the large composition of The Last Judgment, usually comprises several groups—the apostles, the prophets, the patriarchs, etc.—of predominantly saintly men. Meanwhile, this same scene in the Cathedral of Saint Demetrius (the 1190s) in Vladimir shows, in contravention of the custom, just one group of righteous women instead of several groups. They are marching directly after Saint Peter, led most likely by the Venerable Mary of Egypt with Saint Catherine in the rear, judging by her court attire and crown.<sup>1</sup> (Figure 22). There also are icons with compositions fully made up of a group of holy women whose figures seem to be united by some action or mutual spirituality. Such is an icon originating from the Church of Saint Barbara of Pskov (Figure 23a). In keeping with the dedicatory purpose, Saint Barbara is in the center. Her figure is accentuated by a luxurious dress decorated with gems and pearls, a white kerchief on her head, the representation of Christ-Emmanuel above her, flying angels and a peculiar gesture. Saint Barbara is holding high her right hand with the cross as a symbol of martyrdom and service of Jesus. Saint Paraskeva, recognizable by her red maphorion, is turned towards Saint Barbara, as is Saint Juliana (with a green kerchief) on the other side. Foreshortening, gestures, and the rhythm of lines, of which the diagonals are given prominence, impart inner movement to this icon to reflect the intense spiritual life of the three martyrs. In its liveliness and spirituality this icon seems to have no parallels in composition showing holy men. Analysis of the numerous Russian representations of Saint Paraskeva produces the impression that two different cults have come together in the veneration of this saint in Rus'. One Saint Paraskeva, Great Martyr, was commemorated on October 28 (Julian calendar). According to Konrad Onasch, she was thought to be the patron of marriage and brides. Precisely that cult may have

<sup>1</sup> Lazarev, *Drevnerusskiye mozaiki i freski* (Early Russian Mosaics and Frescoes), ills. 166-168.

Figure 23. (left) Saints Paraskeva, Barbara and Uliana. Early 15th century. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery. (center) Saints Paraskeva and Anastasia. 15th century. Saint Petersburg, Russian Museum. (right) Saint Paraskeva and Three Hierarchs. Early 15th century. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.



prompted the representation of Saint Paraskeva together with Saint Anastasia (Figure 23b) whose worship likewise had strong folk elements alongside Christian motifs. Both holy martyrs were patrons of women's pursuits and chores. The origin and evolution of this typically Russian cult is vague.

The other Saint Paraskeva, who is commemorated on July 26 (and also November 8 and 9), is Saint Paraskeva of Iconium, or the Elder, or the Roman, who is believed to have lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. However, according to legend, she was "at the Holy Cross" and there is a representation of her holding the Instruments of the Passion: a spear, nails, vinegar and a sponge (Oration of Saint Gregory Nazianzen, 9<sup>th</sup> century, Paris, gr. 410, fol. 285 r). There is a supposition that Saint Paraskeva was surnamed "Friday" precisely because of her connection with the Crucifixion, meaning Good Friday and the Savior's suffering on the cross. This liturgical aspect of her worship might have found reflection in the Russian (Pskov) icon of the early 15<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 23c) which shows Saint Paraskeva next to three bishops: Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great, the liturgists.

The figure in the icon from the British Museum (Figure 21) seems to reference precisely this evangelical aspect of the veneration of Saint Paraskeva. The archangels Michael and Gabriel are bringing her a crown, in her right hand she has the cross as the symbol of martyrdom and reminder of the redeeming sacrifice and, in her left, a scroll with the Credo prayer.

Figure 24. Saint Cyril of Beloozero. Late 16th century. 28,5 cm x 23,2 cm. BM 99.

Her name inscribed in the upper margin is noteworthy: Holy Martyr of Christ Friday. No doubt, the main meaning of this name has to do with the Crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday. However, another circumstance cannot be ignored: churches dedicated to Saint Paraskeva Friday were sometimes built on town market squares and Friday was the principal trading day. Saint Paraskeva Friday thus appeared to be a patron of trade. For instance, Novgorod the Great has an early 13<sup>th</sup>-century Church of Saint Paraskeva Friday in the Marketplace, which takes us from the evangelical interpretation of the Saint Paraskeva worship back to folk beliefs. Put together, all of the above proves the many-sided aspects and varieties of the veneration of holy women's images in Rus'.

### Saint Cyril of Beloozero

The last icon represents Saint Cyril of Beloozero (Figure 24), the venerable (monk) who lived in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1397, went northward and founded the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery on Beloozero, Vologda Region. It is of the already familiar type of small *piadnitsa* icons. The light yellow ochre or gold that used to serve as the background and the margins (frame) has not survived, and we only see the naked colorless ground. The drawing of the figure of the saint is somewhat flaccid and lacking in resiliency and tension.



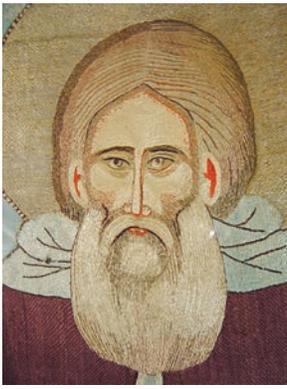


Figure 25. Saint Sergius of Radonezh. Embroidery. Early 15th century. Museum in Sergiev Possad.

Nevertheless, there is a strong iconographic tradition of Russian art and the rich legacy of Russian culture behind this small icon. Monasteries that have long played a big part in Russian life were of two types. The so-called semi-eremitic predominated in Rus' before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The other type—the cenobitic monasteries—stressed community life. From the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century the latter type of monasteries fast spread in Rus' in emulation of the Trinity Monastery of Saint Sergius founded not far from Moscow by Reverend Sergius of Radonezh (Figure 25).

The building of monasteries proliferated to match new shades of Russian piety that prioritized deep concentration on inner life, silence, meditation, insight, and benevolence towards those around. This trend is thought to have been brought about by the doctrine of Saint Gregory Palamas. One way or the other, these circumstances promoted the development of new imagery in the art of Andrey Rublev in the first 30 years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the art of Dionysius in the last 30 years of the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A series of outstanding representations of Russian monks, founders of monasteries, was produced in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In a broad sense, they were the followers of Saint Sergius of Radonezh active in the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is, before their representations were painted. One of the best icons portrays Venerable Dmitry Prilutsky (Figure 26), the founder of a monastery outside Vologda in the north.

Several varieties of icons of Saint Sergius of Radonezh have survived alongside two remarkable icons with the figures of Saint Cyril of Beloozero. One of them is framed with scenes from his life (Figure 27b). In the drawing of the figure its central part is very similar to the icon from the British Museum. The arms of the saint are drawn slightly apart, one hand folded in blessing and the other holding an open scroll with the text of his sermon.

The other icon (Figure 27c) has a full-length figure in a nearly identical pose and a similar text on the scroll, but no scenes from his life.

We see that the small *piadnitsa* icon from the British Museum is no masterpiece because of its flaccid drawing and relatively insignificant characterization. Earlier and larger

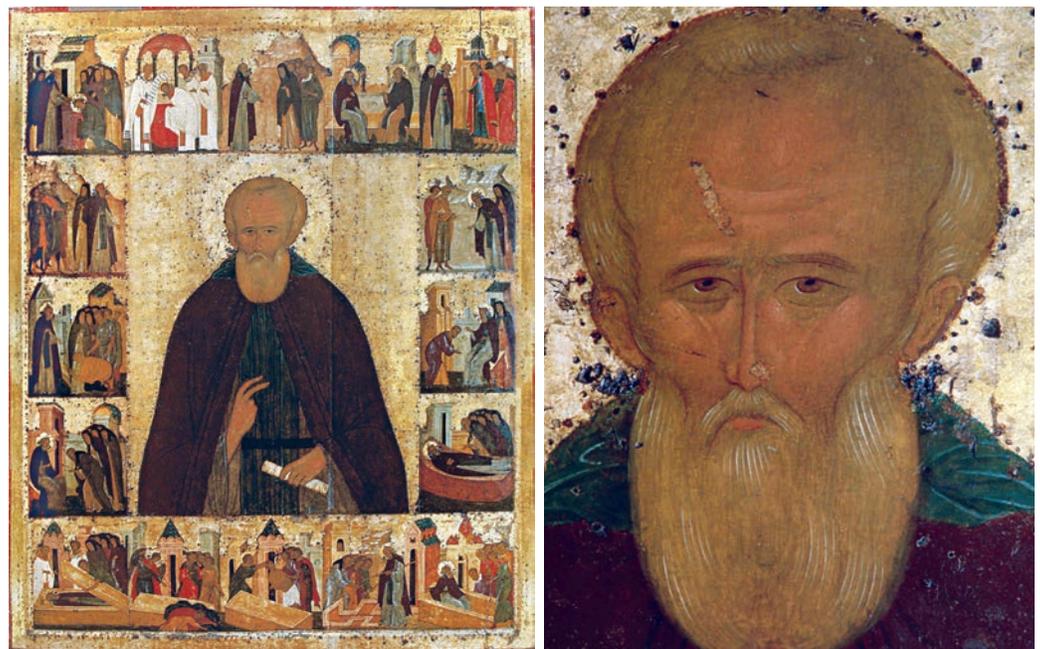


Figure 26. (left) Saint Dimitry Prilutskiy with Scenes of Vita. Late 15th to early 16th century. Vologda, Museum. (right) Detail.

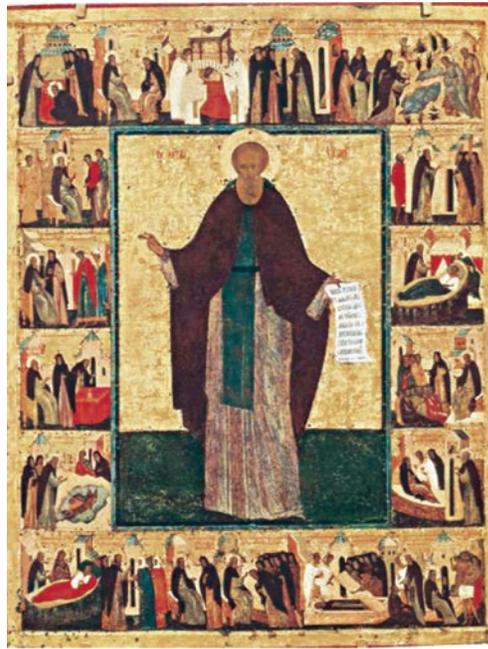


Figure 27. (left) Saint Sergius of Radonezh. Early 16th century. Moscow. Andrey Rublev Museum. (center) Saint Cyril of Beloozero. Late 15th to early 16th century. Saint Petersburg, Russian Museum. (right) Saint Cyril of Beloozero. Late 15th to early 16th century.

icons that served as its prototype have deeper characterization and were done with more energetic and precise draftsmanship. Yet, such small icons replicated the prototype and spread the memory of Saint Cyril to many cities, towns, and villages inside and outside the country.

*Note: This paper is an extended version of the keynote address presented by the author at the Ninth International Conference of Iconographic Studies (June 11-13, 2015) and held at the Museum of Russian Icons. The conference was sponsored jointly by the Museum and the Center for Iconographic Studies at the University of Rijeka, Croatia.*

*The British Museum icons discussed herein were exhibited at the Museum in conjunction with the conference and most had never been seen by the public. The exhibition subsequently traveled to the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia.*

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MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS