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Written Sources on 17th-century Russian Icons in the Orthodox East: An Introduction

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RÉSUMÉ : Au XVII^e siècle, les icônes russes avaient déjà gagné les régions post-byzantines sous domination ottomane de l'Orient chrétien : les contrées grecques et balkaniques, l'Afrique du Nord et l'Asie Mineure, Crète, Chypre, la Palestine, la Syrie et le Liban. Les archives (peu étudiées) témoignent d'une exportation élevée de peintures religieuses russes dans l'espace méditerranéen. Une grande partie de cette documentation se trouve aux Archives Nationales des Actes Anciens de Russie (RGADA). Ces documents ayant appartenu autrefois à l'administration diplomatique, *Posol'skij Prikaz*, sont conservés dans le Fonds 52 et concernent les relations entre la Russie et les centres ecclésiastiques orthodoxes situés dans l'Empire ottoman. Au XVII^e siècle, les œuvres russes qui circulaient en Orient étaient en grande partie le fruit des activités évergétiques des grands princes et des tsars, mais le commerce jouait aussi un rôle important dans leur transmission. À en juger par le grand nombre d'œuvres qu'ils possédaient, leur qualité artistique et leur coût de production élevé, les patriarches devaient être les commanditaires les plus importants. Cependant, les émissaires du tsar se rendaient en Orient pour diverses missions et apportaient également des icônes. Les Grecs qui vivaient en Russie ou qui y séjournaient longtemps envoyaient, eux aussi, des icônes russes dans leur patrie. Enfin, les icônes russes étaient exportées par les marchands grecs. À Moscou, les étrangers pouvaient commander les icônes directement auprès des peintres ou les acheter sur le marché. Les archives conservent encore des nombreux testaments de Grecs décédés à Moscou, riches en informations quant aux icônes russes qu'ils ont eues en leur possession. Un bon nombre de maîtres russes ont travaillé à l'étranger, en particulier dans les Principautés de Valachie et de Moldavie. Certains étaient peintres d'églises, mais d'autres peignaient des icônes sur commande. Ces icônes passaient de main en main, au sein des familles ; étaient léguées par testament ; faisaient l'objet de dons envers les églises et les monastères ; etc. Les voies d'exportation des icônes russes vers l'étranger étaient donc des plus diverses. Les documents d'archive ne cessent pas de surprendre avec une variété de nouvelles informations à leur sujet.

MOTS-CLÉS : Église orthodoxe, archives russes, icônes russes, commerce d'icônes, sources écrites.

REZUMAT: În secolul al XVII-lea, multe icoane rusești ajunseseră deja în regiunile post-bizantine aflate sub stăpânire otomană din Orientul creștin: țările grecești și balcanice, Africa de Nord și Asia Mică, Creta, Cipru, Palestina, Siria și Liban. Arhivele (puțin studiate) ne arată că exportul de picturi religioase rusești luase amploare în zona mediteraneană. O mare parte din această documentație se află în Arhivele Naționale de Documente Vechi din Rusia (RGADA). Aceste documente care au aparținut cândva administrației diplomatice, *Posol'skij Prikaz*, sunt păstrate în Fondul 52 și privesc relațiile Rusiei cu centrele eclesiastice ortodoxe situate în Imperiul Otoman. În secolul al XVII-lea, operele rusești care circulau în est erau în mare parte rodul activității evergetice a marilor prinți și țari, dar comerțul a jucat și el un rol important în transmiterea lor. Patriarhii au fost comanditarii cei mai importanți, judecând după numărul mare de lucrări pe care le dețineau, după costul suportat și după calitatea artistică a acestor lucrări. Cu toate acestea, emisarii țarului călătoreau în est cu diferite misiuni și au distribuit la rândul lor icoane. Grecii care locuiau în Rusia sau care rămăseseră acolo mult timp au trimis icoane rusești în patria lor. În cele din urmă, icoanele rusești au fost importate de negustori greci. La Moscova, străinii puteau comanda icoanele direct de la pictori sau le puteau cumpăra de pe piață. Arhivele păstrează încă numeroase testamente ale grecilor care au murit la Moscova, în care se află o mulțime de informații despre icoanele pe care le aveau în posesia lor. Un număr mare de maestri ruși au lucrat în străinătate, în special în Țara Românească și în Moldova. Unii au fost pictori de biserici, dar alții au pictat icoane la comandă. Icoanele treceau din mână în mână, în familie; erau lăsate moștenire; erau donate către biserici și mănăstiri; etc. Căile pe care s-au răspândit icoanele rusești în străinătate au fost dintre cele mai diverse. Documentele de arhivă ne surprind încă cu o varietate de informații noi despre ele.

CUVINTE CHEIE: Biserica Răsăriteană, arhive rusești, icoane rusești, comerț cu icoane, surse scrise.

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VISUAL CULTURE, PIETY
AND PROPAGANDA:
TRANSFER AND RECEPTION OF
RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS ART IN THE BALKANS
AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
(16TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY)



News about Russian works of art in the Orthodox churches on the territory of the former Byzantine Empire reached us in many ways. Some of them are mentioned in the works of Greek authors or in those of Russian travellers and scholars (Vasily Grigorovich Barsky, A. N. Muraviov, reverend Porphyrius Uspensky, A. A. Dmitrievsky, etc.). A systematic study of these monuments began in the 19th century, but the use of written evidence in the analysis has so far been the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps only in the last decades did such studies become regular.¹ The implementation of projects such as *The Russian Icons of Mount Sinai*² and *The Routes of Russian icons in Greece and the Balkans* gave impetus to new research. They are complex art critic and historical works, in which written evidence plays an essential role.

In-depth information about the Russian icons and works of applied art exported abroad is preserved in the documents of Russian archives. A lot of information may also be found in archives of Oriental Orthodox monasteries. In the history of the existence of Russian icons in the East, several chronological periods should be distinguished, each of which differs in the circumstances of the creation and the artistic features of the monuments, as well as in the specifics of how they were transferred from Russia. To present, these archives were rarely used, so there is little information about these works of art, about their stories, or about the monuments hosting them. The cases in which icons and works of applied art can be correlated with preserved written sources are very rare, but their study surprises every now and then. Here is one such example.

In one of our research missions to Jerusalem, Natalia Komashko identified one of the icons in the Cathedral of Saint-James (the image of the patron saint) as a work of a Kremlin Armory Chamber master from the 17th century (Fig. 1). My goal, on the other hand, was to find historical documents related to this work of art. It turned out that this was one of the twelve icons ordered in Moscow by Patriarch Theophanes III of Jerusalem in 1643. Fortunately, the file containing documents related to the visit to Moscow of his envoy, archimandrite Anthim, was preserved and contains a detailed amount of information. It provides us with precise details on the works included in the order: the list of the icons and materials spent on their production, the names of the icon painters and silversmiths, information about the organization of the entire artistic process, as well as the various costs.³ Another example is that of the icon of the Saviour of Edessa (Mandylion) at the Sinai monastery. Its author, court painter Nikolai Solomonov, was identified with high probability⁴ from an entry of the memorial book of Sinai. It referred to the Sinai archimandrite Cyril and his stay in Moscow in 1687-1689.⁵ This means that the written evidence of the 17th century, present in archival documents or in testimonies of contemporaries, including pilgrims, needs to be corroborated with other sources, as well as with epigraphic data.

For the 16th and the 17th centuries, the provenance of the most significant works found in the East is closely linked to charity activities of great princes and tsars. Russian rulers regularly sent subsidies to eastern Patriarchs and made contributions to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or to the monasteries of Athos and Sinai. The first tsars of the Romanov dynasty were particularly generous benefactors. They attached great importance to the ties with the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church. Under tsar Michael I

(1613-1645), all the delegates of Greek and Slavic monasteries who came to him for material assistance (as well as those accompanying them, including interpreters) received icons at the ceremonial receptions in the Kremlin.⁶ As for the reign of his son, Alexis I (1645-1676), it was truly a climax in the Greek-Russian relations of the 17th century. Moscow was a haven for Greek, Slavic, and Christian Arab clergymen at that time, as well as for countless who were responsible for the transfer of Russian icons to the East.

Archival sources provide information, above all, on the royal gifts, *i. e.* on the icons painted following a special order. However, this happened quite infrequently, for – as a rule – such works were intended for patriarchs and important hierarchs. More often, icons were granted from the royal repository of icons or purchased at the expense of the state on the market (the *Icon row*) or from individual icon painters. For instance, during the visit of Macarius III of Zaim, patriarch of Antioch, to Russia (1654-1656), the patriarch received thirty icons in revetments (*rizas*) from the treasury.⁷ During his second visit to Moscow, when he came to pronounce the deposition of the Russian patriarch Nikon at the Great Synod (1666/67), the patriarch asked tsar Alexis I for more icons needed for four churches of Antioch. But since the court painters were rather busy at the time, this large order was entrusted to the masters of Yaroslavl, Nizhny-Novgorod, and Kostroma. The princely order urged them to do the work straightaway, but with particular diligence and skill.⁸ Given these precedents, one shouldn't be surprised that the patriarch of Constantinople, Dionysius IV, asked the co-ruling tsars Ivan V (1666-1696) and Peter I (1682-1725) to send icons and church objects in 1686. And almost a decade later, in 1694, the same patriarch wrote once again to Moscow about the icons he needed, since much of the decoration of the Patriarchate cathedral had burned in a fire.⁹ These patriarchal orders are the most noteworthy ones in terms of number of works, value, and artistic skill. They also provide us with the most detailed written information. Apart from them, archival documents contain ample, if not always detailed data on the icons sent to many Orthodox monasteries in the Ottoman Empire.

But there were also less conspicuous ways in which icons travelled from Russia to other Orthodox lands. Russian icons were carried by the tsars' envoys when they performed various errands abroad. Arseniy Sukhanov, who travelled to Athos in 1649 and in 1651-1653, wrote with accurate details which icons he had personally offered and to whom.¹⁰ The Greeks who lived in Russia permanently or had stayed there for a longer time purchased icons which they sent back home. It is common knowledge by now that Arsenius of Elasson, archbishop of Suzdal and Tarusa, who constantly maintained contacts with his homeland, sent icons to Greek monasteries.¹¹ And there are many other similar examples.¹² In Moscow itself, Orthodox foreigners could negotiate with local painters about the icons they needed, or to buy ready-made icons in the markets. They also turned to the ruler for compensation of their costs, and these requests were granted. The former patriarch of Constantinople Athanasius III Patelarios visited Russia in 1653 and 1654, where he purchased local icons from Muscovite painters for the monastery of Saint-Nicholas in Galati (Wallachia), where he lived. Their list is preserved.¹³ And after the death of the former patriarch, the elders of the same monastery who came to Moscow in 1658 looking for material assistance took two more boxes of icons with them.¹⁴

An interesting case of an independent acquisition of

◀ Fig. 1. Sidor Pospeev and Ivan Borisov. *The icon of Holy Apostle James. Fragment*. Credits: Natalia Komashko.



▲ Fig. 2. *The mitre of the archbishop of Sinai. Kremlin workshops, 1640. The monastery of Saint-Catherine at Mount Sinai.* Source: Manafis, Kantos, Kantos 1990, p. 300.

icons by the Greeks in Moscow are the Russian icons of the monastery of Saint-John the Theologian on the island of Patmos. In 1705, the archimandrite of the monastery, Nicephorus, informed tsar Peter I that the grant he had given him had been spent to pay the debts of the monastery and to paint two large local icons: the image of the Pantocrator and that of saint John the Theologian with the Apocalypse. He therefore asked for more money, in order to pay for the way back and deliver the said icons to Patmos.¹⁵ However, A. A. Dmitrievsky studied the icons of Patmos and doubted this testimony, assuming that the icon of John the Theologian had been brought in 1698 from Wallachia, not from Moscow.¹⁶ The case is rather intriguing

and a final conclusion will be possible only at the end of a future extensive study of the written documentation. For the time being, we must acknowledge only that the story of Nicephorus could be true, since the metropolitan bishop of Chalcedon, Constantine, also asked tsar Peter I for a grant in 1706. He needed to pay for several local and twelve festal icons ordered by him for the iconostasis of his metropolitan cathedral church.¹⁷

Private orders are not usually recorded in the official documents. In the rare instances they are known, it is usually the case of foreigners who asked Russian authorities to compensate their costs,¹⁸ or when there was a misunderstanding between the master painter and the customer, for instance, about the payment for the work. The controversy would then be settled in the ambassadorial office (*Posolsky Prikaz*), to which we owe most of the sources preserving such information. The rest of these private orders

is a matter of speculation. One may argue that they could be related to the visits of many Orthodox foreigners from the Ottoman Empire (monks, priests, or merchants) to Muscovy in the 16th and the 17th centuries. These visitors must have seen the famous Russian monasteries of Troitse-Sergiev, Savvino-Storozhevsky, or Voskresensky in New Jerusalem, and they received icons as a blessing from the monastery, hence the wide spread of the theme 'Appearance of the Theotokos to saint Sergius of Radonezh' in the entire Orthodox East. In rare cases, Greek hierarchs reached more remote dioceses. The production of icons for blessing was well established in many Russian monasteries,¹⁹ although such icons could also be purchased at the Moscow fairs.

An introductory presentation would be nevertheless incomplete without any mention of the work of Russian painters abroad, particularly in the Danubian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia), where they were usually employed for the mural decoration of churches. But there were also icon painters working in such places. For instance, Sidor Pospeev was asked to paint icons to be sent abroad. In 1628, he painted together with Bazhen Naprudny three icon-stands for Moldavian churches at the request of the local prince Miron Barnovschi-Movilă (1626-1629, 1633). Later on, he also worked abroad. In 1641, Pospeev, Yakov Gavrilov, and other Russian and Romanian painters worked in the monastery of the Three-Hierarchs in Iași.²⁰ It is therefore quite plausible to imagine that a painter like him could paint icons there as well, if he received a special order. There were many other ways to obtain Russian icons indirectly, from other places than Russia: through wills, through contributions to churches and monasteries, as heirlooms, etc. Among the documents of the same ambassadorial office are certain testaments of the Greeks who died in Moscow and they contain precious information about the icons in their possession. There were also situations in which icons intended for the monasteries of Athos for instance did not reach the Holy Mountain for various reasons and remained in Moldavia, Wallachia, or Ukraine. For example, the metropolitan bishop of Gaza, Paisios Ligaridis, did not return to the East and died in Kiev in 1678. The Russian icons in his possession remained in the monastery of the Kiev Brotherhood, where Ligaridis lived.²¹

Another way of identifying information about the circulation of Russian artefacts is through epigraphic means: the inscriptions on the objects the contributors and icon owners once possessed. Similar cases in the Sinai monuments showed that such data needs to be corroborated with

written sources, especially if the records were transcribed outside of Russia. I will only mention the case of the Greek inscription on a mitre from the monastery of Saint-Catherine, bearing the date 7150 (1641/1642), which needs to be corrected in light of the information provided by documents from the ambassadorial office. This mitre is one of the most remarkable donations made to the archbishopric by Russian sovereigns. Archival documents testify to the fact that the hierarch's headdress was made and handed over to archimandrite Joachim of Sinai in September 1640. Its original design differed from the present one (Fig. 2). The original mitre ended with an ermine trimming surrounding a crown with the troparion of the Annunciation of Our Lady inscribed on it. The gilded silver medallion (*drobnitsas*, 'insets with miniature images') were surrounded by pearls and the top of the mitre had a round plate with the image of Our Lady of the Sign, with cherubs. The current state shows that the fur was removed, precious stones were set on the lower hoop, with a Greek inscription between them: ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΠΙΣΤΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΜΟΧΟΒΙΑΣ 3PN – with the date 7150 (1641/42).²² This demonstrates that Russian artefacts still have stories to tell about the manner in which they were used in the Orthodox East. However, despite the heterogeneous nature of the current study, all the ways in which Russian icons circulated abroad in the 17th century cannot be exhausted in such a short presentation. Doubtless, new observations need to be added before drawing any conclusions.

Later on, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the changing pattern of relations between Russia and the Orthodox nations of the Ottoman Empire led to new ways in which artefacts circulated from Russia to Greece, to the Balkans and to the Danubian Principalities. From the reign of Peter I onwards, Greek sailors, shipmasters, doctors, translators, and many others would visit Russia and bring icons on their way back home. During the 18th and 19th centuries, artefacts of Russian origin reached the churches of Patmos, Paros, Tinos, Chios, Kerkira, and other Greek islands, sometimes as a result of the First (1768-1774) and Second Archipelago Expeditions (1805-1807). By that time, the Greeks could interact with Russians at home. Other rich material on the subject may be found in the collections of the Sinai monastery of Saint-Catherine and its metochion, but also in the Balkans. During the 19th century, many priestly vestments, church objects, icons, and books were sent to churches in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Epirus, Thessaly, etc. These donations became a permanent item of government spending in the Russian Empire. Archive documents from the 1880s describe how these items were sent from Russia in entire boxes filled to the brim.

Notes:

1 Tschesnokova 2002, p. 407-410; Комашко, Саенкова 2008a, p. 191-204; Комашко, Саенкова, 2008b, p. 237-250; Игошев 2010, p. 4-28; Чеснокова 2011, p. 100-104, 107-108; Игошев 2013, p. 38-67; Игошев 2014a, p. 315-326; Игошев 2014b, p. 88-93; Boycheva 2015, p. 219-234; Чеснокова 2017, p. 64-70; Τσεσνοκόβα 2017, p. 15-21; Чеснокова 2019.

2 *Русские иконы на Синае* 2015; Boycheva 2016.

3 Chesnokova 2016, p. 89-104.

4 Комашко, Чеснокова 2015, p. 57-65; *Русские иконы на Синае* 2015, p. 294-297.

5 Altbauer, Ševčenko, Struminsky 1989, p. 188.

6 See for example: РГАДА. F. 52/1. 1625. № 5. F. 147-150; 1628. F. 74; 1629. № 9. F. 31, 32, 32a, 35, and other files.

7 Чеснокова 2011, p. 107-108.

8 Брюсова 1982, p. 47-48.

9 Чеснокова 2011, p. 102.

10 Белокуров 1894, p. 4,15.

11 Δημητράκοπουλος 1984, p. 127-150; Vocotopoulos 1992, p. 167-170; Комашко, Саенкова 2008a, p. 191-206.

12 See for example: Каптерев 2008, p. 168-169. A special study should be devoted to this topic.

13 РГАДА. F. 52/1. 1651. № 8. F. 262.

14 Чеснокова 2011, p. 101.

15 Чеснокова 2012, p. 378-386. Boycheva 2015, p. 219-234.

16 Дмитриевский 1894, p. 168-194.

17 РГАДА. F. 52/1. 1706. № 10.

18 РГАДА. Ф. 52/1. 1683 № 8; 1692 № 10 and other files.

19 Чеснокова 2011, p. 99-100.

20 Сидор Поспеев // *Словарь русских иконописцев XI–XVII веков*

(http://rusico.indrik.ru/artists/p/pospееv_isidor/index.shtml?ad m=60dbb8c75ba200fb0aec87da20b5d24b).

21 See for example: РГАДА. Ф. 52/1. 1693 № 4. F. 239.

22 Чеснокова 2019.

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