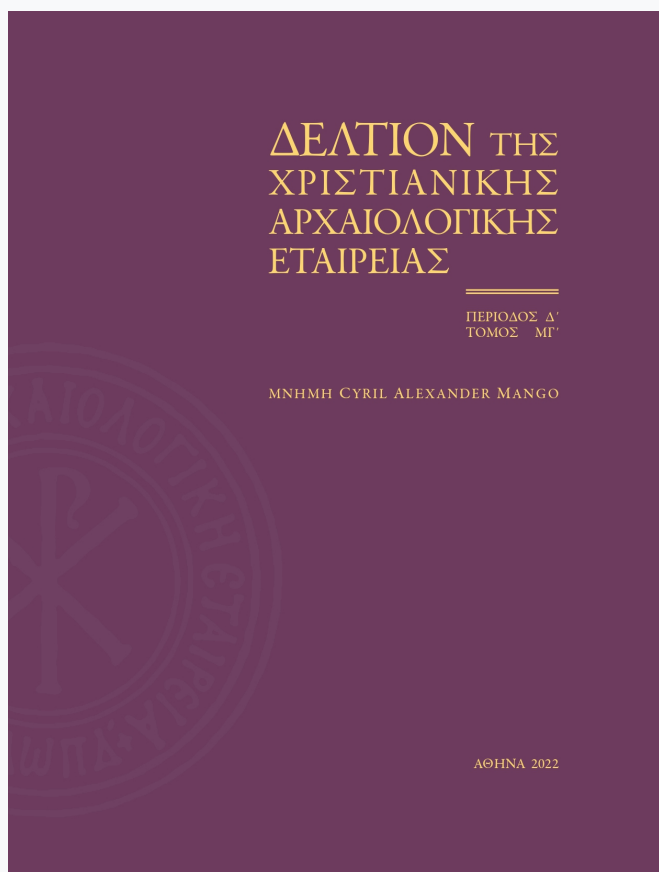


## Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας

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Η εικονογραφία της εικόνας της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου (αρχές του 13ου αιώνα) στην Πινακοθήκη Τρετιακόφ της Μόσχας

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## THE ICONOGRAPHIC ASPECT OF *THE DORMITION OF THE VIRGIN MARY* (EARLY 13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY) FROM THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW

Η έκδοση του νέου καταλόγου της συλλογής της Πινακοθήκης Τρετιακόφ έχει συμβάλει στη λεπτομερή μελέτη μεσαιωνικών ρωσικών έργων ζωγραφικής. Από τα δεκαέξι αντικείμενα που περιλαμβάνονται στον τόμο, ο οποίος είναι αφιερωμένος στις πρωιμότερες εικόνες, τοιχογραφίες και ψηφιδωτά, περιλαμβάνεται μία εικόνα του 13ου αιώνα με παράσταση της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου. Η σημασία αυτής της εικόνας για την ιστορία της βυζαντινής τέχνης, παρά την προέλευσή της από το Νόβγκοροντ, είναι ιδιαίτερη σχετικά με την τεχνοτροπία της, η οποία θυμίζει μνημεία ελλήνων καλλιτεχνών των αρχών του 13ου αιώνα, καθώς και σχετικά με την εικονογραφία της, η οποία εξετάζεται στο παρόν άρθρο.

*The publication of the new catalogue of the Tretyakov Gallery collection has encouraged the detailed study of medieval Russian paintings. Among sixteen items included in the volume dealing with the earliest icons, frescoes and mosaics of the collection, is a thirteenth-century icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. The importance of this icon for the history of Byzantine art, notwithstanding its provenance from Novgorod, is proved by its style, which is similar to that of the monuments created by Greek artists in the early 13th century, as well as by its iconography which is examined in the present article.*

### Λέξεις κλειδιά

12ος αιώνας, 13ος αιώνας, μεσαιωνική τέχνη, βυζαντινή τέχνη, ρωσική τέχνη, εικόνες, εικονογραφία, Κοίμηση της Θεοτόκου, Νόβγκοροντ, Συλλογή Πινακοθήκης Τρετιακόφ (Μόσχα).

### Keywords

12th century; 13th century; Medieval art; Byzantine art; Russian art; icons; iconography; Dormition of the Virgin; Novgorod; Tretyakov Gallery Collection (Moscow).

In 1934 the Tretyakov Gallery acquired a thirteenth-century icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 1). According to the archives, this icon originates from Desyatynny (i.e. “of Tithes”) monastery in Novgorod, and is mentioned by the inventory books dated back to 1802-1804 and 1919. However, scholars have some reasonable doubts about the existence of Desyatynny monastery before the 14th century because of the lack of reliable written accounts. Thus, the icon could have been created for another monastery or church –presumably for the convent of Saint Barbara, situated near Desyatynny monastery and ascribed to it after the empress

Catherine the Great’s decree of 1764. In the 1780s, the relics and, apparently, the most venerated icons were transferred from the demolished Saint Barbara church to Desyatynny monastery. Considering a rather big size of the icon of the Dormition (154.9×127.8×5 cm), which suggests a significant place in the church interior, and its old age, it might be one of the transferred items<sup>1</sup>.

Notwithstanding the refined quality of the icon painting and the profound iconographic conception, the icon

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\*\* My sincere gratitude should be expressed to Oksana V. Tchoekha for her assistance in editing the translation of the present paper.

<sup>1</sup> For the provenance of the icon, with the literature and references to the sources, see *Drevnerusskaya zhivopis’ XII-XIII vekov: Gosudarstvennaya Tretyakovskaya galereya. Katalog sobrania* (= *Early Russian Painting of the 12th to 13th Centuries: State Tretyakov Gallery. Catalogue of the Collection*), 3, Moscow 2020, cat. no. 10 and figs 10.1-47 on pp. 282-331, in part. 284, 288-289, 294 (S. N. Tatarchenko – S. V. Sverdlova – D. S. Pershin).

of the Dormition has been rarely examined until recently<sup>2</sup>. The aim of the present paper is to present some results of the research conducted by the Tretyakov Gallery during the last years, focusing on the iconography of the icon.

The legend of the last days of the Virgin Mary's earthly life and her Dormition ("ἡ κοίμησις") was expounded in apocryphal texts in Syrian, Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Ethiopian manuscripts or their fragments, the most ancient of which could be dated back to the late 5th – mid-7th century<sup>3</sup>. The examination of these documents has revealed several separate versions of the Dormition story, of which only two achieved a canonical status in medieval Byzantium<sup>4</sup>. The first and probably the earliest

one formed the basis for the homily composed by John the archbishop of Thessaloniki in the first half of the 7th century<sup>5</sup>. The second one<sup>6</sup> is reflected in the writing traditionally attributed to the apostle John (i.e. Pseudo-John), although it didn't spread until the official establishment of the feast of the Dormition by the emperor Maurice (582-602)<sup>7</sup>. By that time, the principal Marian relics –the girdle, the robe (maphorion?) and the burial shrouds– had been transferred from Jerusalem to Constantinople and deposited at the shrines of Chalcoprateia and Blachernae, with the relevant liturgical processions, related to the relics, having taken the final form<sup>8</sup>.

These early sources contain such important motifs for the iconography of the Dormition as the apostles led through the air to the Virgin Mary's house, the vision of the Saviour holding Her soul (described as a baby in white cloths), the story of a Jew who dared to overturn the bier, while it was transferred to Gethsemane, as well

<sup>2</sup> Among the general works on Early Russian icon-painting, in which the icon under consideration is mentioned, the most accurate analysis and interpretation of the icon style were offered by late prof. Olga S. Popova in her papers, published in Serbian (1983) and in Russian (1988): "Dve russkie ikony rannego XIII veka" (= "Two Russian icons of the early 13th century"), Eadem, *Problemy vizantijskogo iskusstva. Mosaiki, freski, ikony* (= *The problems of the Byzantine art. Mosaics, frescoes, icons*), Moscow 2006, 451-492, with the references. In 2006-2020 the State Tretyakov Gallery conducted the complex research of the earliest collection items (and the icon of the *Dormition of the Virgin Mary* in particular), that included investigation into the archival and historical sources, technique and technology analysis, i.e. the analysis of the wooden panel and its construction, canvas, gesso, preliminary drawing, pigments, the quantity and order of the painting layers, X-ray-, IR-, UV- imaging, as well as the iconography and style examination. See *Drevnerusskaya zhivopis' XII-XIII vekov*, op.cit. (n. 1), 284-331, with the complete list of the previous bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that some peculiarities of the early Dormition texts as well as some Christian communities' rites encouraged the scholars to accept some Dormition apocrypha by the 4th century at the latest (S. J. Shoemaker, "Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the early Dormition narratives: the cult of the Virgin in the fourth century", Id., *The Dormition and Assumption apocrypha*, Leuven 2018, 195-225). I am grateful to Dr Andrey Vinogradov for drawing my attention to Stephen Shoemaker's works.

<sup>4</sup> M. van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption avant le Xe siècle", Idem, *Aux origines de la Dormition de la Vierge. Études historiques sur les traditions orientales* (Variorum Collected Studies Series 472), Aldershot 1995, ch. 1, 265-285. S. J. Shoemaker, *Ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford 2002, 25-77. Idem, "Death and the Maiden: the early history of the Dormition and Assumption apocrypha", Idem, *The Dormition and Assumption apocrypha*, Leuven 2018, 21-23, 36-39, 43. It should be noted here, that European Medieval tradition accepted as "canonical" the Pseudo-Melito version (ibid., 23).

<sup>5</sup> John of Thessaloniki based himself upon an earlier Greek apocrypha, the leading motif of which was the palm (branch) of the Tree of Life brought by the Archangel to the Virgin as a kind of symbol of her near demise: A. Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VIe au Xe siècle: études et documents*, Paris 1955, 17-67, 209-241. Van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption", op.cit. (n. 4), ch. 1, 268-269; see also: Shoemaker, *Ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, op.cit. (n. 4), 32-46.

<sup>6</sup> This version is known as the "Bethlehem" one, because a large place there is taken by the motifs of the Jews' hatred that forced the Virgin Mary to quit and look for a shelter in Bethlehem. One of the distinctive features of the Bethlehem version is the mention of the permanent censing, accompanying the prayers and preparing the Saviour's coming, –that introduces the liturgical aspects to the narration in general: Van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption", op.cit. (n. 4), 269. Shoemaker, *Ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, op.cit. (n. 4), 46-57.

<sup>7</sup> Van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption", op.cit. (n. 4), 269-276. Shoemaker, "Death and the Maiden", op.cit. (n. 4), 22, 47-53. For the Dormition feast ceremonies commemorated in Palestine before the institution of the feast in Constantinople and throughout the Empire, see: Shoemaker, *Ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, op.cit. (n. 4), 78-141.

<sup>8</sup> R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. Première partie : Le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Œcuménique*, 3. *Les églises et les monastères*, Paris 1969, 161-169, 237, 241. M. van Esbroeck, "Le culte de la Vierge de Jérusalem à Constantinople aux 6e-7e siècles", Idem, *Aux origines de la Dormition de la Vierge*, op.cit. (n. 4), ch. X, 181-190; see also: J. Wortley, "The Marian Relics at Constantinople", *GRBS* 45/2 (2005), 171-187.



Fig. 1. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, early 13th century.

as the disappearance of the Virgin's body from the grave. Both John the archbishop of Thessaloniki and Pseudo-John confirm that St John the Theologian takes a special part in the events: as the disciple, to whose care the Mother of God was entrusted by Christ at the moment of His Passion, St John was the first to arrive at the Virgin Mary's house after she realized her demise was near<sup>9</sup>.

In the 9th to 12th centuries, Byzantine service books for the liturgical year or six-month period, *menologia* and *enkomia* involved both texts<sup>10</sup>. However, the essential part of the festive readings for the Dormition was presented by homiletic writings of Andrew of Crete (†740), Germanos of Constantinople (†754) and John of Damascus (†prior to 754)<sup>11</sup>. Some typical iconographic details, not mentioned by John of Thessaloniki and Pseudo-John, could be taken from the 8th-century theologian's works, provided that these details didn't spring in iconography and texts simultaneously. Thus, following Dionysius the Areopagite, John of Damascus and Andrew of Crete (in line with some other writers) report that the Virgin Mary's Dormition was attended by St James of Jerusalem, St Timotheus of Ephesus, St Hierotheos of Athens (the *Thesmothete*) and St Dionysius himself<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the homilies (both earlier and later ones) became the source for emphasizing the figures of St Peter and St Paul in the iconography of the Dormition. According to John of Thessaloniki, it was St Peter

who took place near the head of the Virgin's deathbed, started prayers accompanied by censing and then recited a very long sermon<sup>13</sup>. St Paul, as reported in St Germanus's oration, came later than others and immediately bended forward to the Virgin's feet, exclaiming: Ἐγὼ σε τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἕως χθές, Θεὸν σαρκικῶς ἐκλήρυττον γεγεννημέναι ἀπάρτι καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν μετατεθῆναι σε διδάξω... (*Until yesterday, I have preached to the Gentiles that you have given birth to God in the flesh; from now on, I shall also teach that you have been allowed to pass over into his presence...*)<sup>14</sup>.

Presumably, for the earliest reference to the Dormition image we are indebted to St Andrew of Crete, who probably mentions an actual one<sup>15</sup>, while describing the church of Sion in Jerusalem and trying to make the Dormition narrative "visible" for the minds' eyes of his public<sup>16</sup>. However, the earliest examples of such images go back essentially to the 9th-10th centuries<sup>17</sup>. The fresco of the Dormition in

<sup>13</sup> Daley, *ibid.*, 56-62.

<sup>14</sup> PG 98, col. 368; Daley, *ibid.*, 175. For the homiletic texts correlating to the iconography of the Dormition, see also: A. I. Kirpichnikov, *Uspenie Bogoroditsy v legend i v iskusstve*, Odessa 1888. L. Wratislaw-Mitrovic, N. Okunev, "La Dormition de la Sainte Vierge dans la peinture médiévale orthodoxe", *Byzantinoslavica* 3/1 (1931), 134-180. I. Zervou Tognazzi, "L'iconografia della Koimisis della Santa Vergine specchio del pensiero teologico dei Padri Bizantini", *Studi e ricerche sull'Oriente cristiano* 8/1-2 (1985), 21-90.

<sup>15</sup> *RbK*, v. 4, "Koimesis", 145 (K. Kreidl-Papadopoulos).

<sup>16</sup> PG 97, col. 1064-1065. For an English translation of this fragment, see: Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, op.cit. (n. 9), 129-130.

<sup>17</sup> Among the examples are wall-paintings in Agač-Alty and Yalanlykilisse dated to the 8th and to the second half of the 9th centuries respectively: N. Thierry – M. Thierry, *Nouvelles églises rupestres de Cappadoce: Région du Hasan Dağı*, Paris 1963, 79-80, 105-106, fig. 19, pls 51b, 52. N. Thierry, "L'illustration des apocryphes dans les églises de Cappadoce", P. Geoltrain – J.-C. Picard – A. Desreumaux (eds), *Apocrypha. Le champ des apocryphes. 2. La fable apocryphe*, II, Turnhout 1991, 222-223. A distinctive feature of these images is the narrative character of their iconography when the scene is interpreted as a part of a cycle. The most ancient example of such cycles, dated back to the time of the Pope John VIII (872-882), is conserved in the temple of Fortuna Virilis (the temple of Portum) in Rome. There are the scenes of the announcement to the Virgin about her forthcoming decease, the meeting of St John the Theologian with the other apostles in the Mother of God's house and the travelling of three of them upon a cloud, see *RbK*, "Koimesis", op.cit. (n. 15), 145-146. However, it was to the beginning of the 10th century, when the iconography, that later would become traditional, was crystallized. It can be proved by the fresco in the church of Saint John at Güllü-Dere in Cappadocia (913-

<sup>9</sup> C. Tischendorf, *Apocalypses apocryphae Mosis, Esdrae, Pauli, Johannis, item Mariae dormito*, Leipzig 1866. 95-112. M. Jugie, *Homélies mariales byzantines*, II (Patrologia Orientalis 19), Paris 1926, 375-438. For the references to the modern translations of these texts, see: Shoemaker, *The Dormition and Assumption apocrypha*, op.cit. (n. 4), 344, 348. In this paper Brien E. Daley's translation is used: *On the Dormition of Mary: early patristic homilies*, New York 1998.

<sup>10</sup> A. Ehrhard, *Überlieferung und Bestand der hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der griechischen Kirche von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts*, I-III, Leipzig 1937-1952, Pseudo-John: I. 145, 158, 269, 297, 674, 677; II. 64, 117, 644, 649 and John of Thessaloniki: I. 218-219, 291, 684, 694; II. 178.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g.: Ehrhard, Ehrhard, *Überlieferung und Bestand*, op.cit. (n. 10), St German of Constantinople: I. 141-143, 167, 190, 201, 218-219, 265, 269, 279, 281, 334, 677, 684, 694; II. 5-6, 9, 101, 117, 649; St Andrew of Crete: I. 163, 173, 218-219, 225, 265, 330, 434, 674-675, 677, 684, 694; II. 5-6, 9, 22, 68-69, 101, 117, 194, 204; St John of Damascus: I. 265, 279, 281, 368, 674-675, 677, 684, 694; II. 9, 101, 117, 194, 204.

<sup>12</sup> PG 96, col. 749. PG 97, col. 1065. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, op.cit. (n. 9), 128-130, 225.

New Tokali Kilise (950s – early 960s), despite its freely interpreted composition, involves all basic components of the developed iconography, including the scene of the apostles travelling upon the clouds<sup>18</sup>. This scene is also represented on the west wall of Saint Sophia in Ohrid (1037-1056)<sup>19</sup>, the miniature on a liturgical scroll, that dates from the second half of the 11th century and preserved in the Greek Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Σταυροῦ 109)<sup>20</sup> and on the Byzantine enamelled revetment of the 11th century from Kotzcheri monastery in Georgia that decorates a more recent icon of Christ (National Museum of Georgia)<sup>21</sup>.

Meanwhile, another version –the so-called classical or canonical<sup>22</sup> composition (i.e. without the apostles on clouds)– was widespread in the Middle Byzantine period. The former is characterized by the lapidary scheme with the Virgin lying on a high couch, paralleled to the icon's lower borderline, in the centre, the apostles grouped symmetrically on both sides of the couch and Christ behind, raising the Virgin's swaddled soul and handing it to the angels, who fly down with cloth-covered arms. The classical composition particularly emphasizes the figures of three apostles: St John the Theologian stands behind the deathbed and leans towards the Virgin's face, St Peter is near the headboard keeping the censer in his hand,

and St Paul embraces the Virgin's feet. There are some examples with the emphasized figure of St Andrew, who could be simply identified due to his tousled hair<sup>23</sup> and great emotiveness. From the early times, the composition has laconic and extended (with the figures of saint bishops and mourning women) variations and is represented in "direct" (the Virgin's head to the left of the image) and "mirror-like" configurations.

The iconography of the icon from Novgorod brings together three episodes of the Dormition cycle, i.e. the earthly death of the Virgin or the Dormition, the apostles miraculously arriving on clouds to her deathbed and the assumption of the Virgin's soul to the Heaven. The first episode follows the canonical scheme. The apostles flanking the deathbed aren't named, but they could be quite simply identified by their iconographic features and by comparing them with the apostles travelling on clouds, whose images are captioned. Thus, St Luke and St Mathew are to the right of St Paul, and in the second row are St Simon and St Philipp to the right of St Andrew. In the left group is St Peter together with St Mark, who is known to have been Peter's disciple and is consequently represented next to him; they are followed by St Thomas, and in the second row –by St James the son of Zebedee and St Bartholomew. Besides, one can see saint bishops: St James the brother of the Lord, who became the first bishop of Jerusalem (in the right group), St Hierotheos of Athens with the *katsion* (censer) and St Dionysius with his hand raised in the oratorical gesture (in the left group). Apart from the images of Sts John, Peter and Paul, whose positions were traditionally fixed, the icon particularly emphasizes the image of St Andrew. He is the only person wearing a dark brown himation, contrasting to the light colours of the other apostles' clothes, with his left hand sorrowfully touching the face and his right hand raised in prayer. The gesture, similar to that of St Andrew, can be also seen in the miniatures of some lectionaries of the 11th to the first half of the 12th century<sup>24</sup>, as well as on an ivory plaque

920), despite the fact that the composition of the Dormition slightly differs from the traditional one, because Christ is represented leaning toward the bier and taking out the Virgin's soul from her lips (Thierry, "L'illustration des apocryphes", see above, 223). For the present subject, noteworthy is a 6th-century eulogia token from Bet She'an probably depicting the Dormition, see: Shoemaker, *Ancient traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, op.cit. (n. 4), 108-109, fig. 8.

<sup>18</sup> A. Wharton Epstein, *Tokali kilise: tenth-century metropolitan art in Byzantine Cappadocia* (Dumbarton Oaks Studies 22), Washington, D. C. 1986, 77, figs 100, 101.

<sup>19</sup> V. Djurić, *The church of St. Sophia in Ohrid*, Belgrade 1963, pl. 37.

<sup>20</sup> A. Grabar, "Un rouleau liturgique constantinopolitain et ses peintures", *DOP* 8 (1954), 161-199, 176, fig. 20.

<sup>21</sup> N. Kondakov – D. Bakradze, *Opis' pamyatnikov drevnosti v nekotoryh hramah i monastyryah Gruzii* (= *Description of the Ancient monuments in some churches and monasteries of Georgia*), Saint-Petersburg 1890, 99-101, fig. 46. L. I. Lifshits – V. D. Sarabianov – T. Y. Tsarevskaya, *Monumental'naya zhivopis' Velikogo Novgoroda. Konets XI – pervaya chetvert' XII veka* (= *Wall-painting of Veliky Novgorod. Late 11th – first quarter of the 12th century*), Saint-Petersburg 2004, fig. on p. 710.

<sup>22</sup> The term put forward by K. Kreidl-Papadopoulos [RbK, "Koime-sis", op.cit. (n. 15), 146-147].

<sup>23</sup> K. Weitzmann, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, 3. *Ivories and steatites*, Washington, D. C. 1972, 71.

<sup>24</sup> The manuscripts from the Iviron monastery on Mount Athos (Cod. 1, fol. 300: St. M. Pelekanidis et al., *The treasures of Mount Athos: illuminated manuscripts*, 2. *The Monasteries of Iveron, Saint Panteleimon, Esphigmenou, and Chilandari*, Athens 1975,



Fig. 2. Pskov, Mirozhsky monastery, church of the Transfiguration. Wall-painting of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, 1140s.

of the 12th century from the State Hermitage in Saint-Petersburg<sup>25</sup>, and an icon dating late 11th – 12th centuries

29, fig. 6), the Dionysiou monastery (Cod. 587, fol. 163v: Pelekanidis et al., *ibid*, 1: *The Protaton and the monasteries of Dionysiou, Koutlounmoussiou, Xeropotamou and Gregoriou*, Athens 1974, 216, fig. 272), the Sceuphyllacium of the Great Laura (Cod. A1, fol. 134v: St. M. Pelekanidis et al., *Οἱ θησαυροὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Ὁρους. Εἰκονογραφημένα χειρόγραφα, παραστάσεις, ἐπίτιπλα, ἀρχικά γράμματα*, 3. Μ. Μεγίστης Λαύρας, Μ. Παντοκράτορος, Μ. Δοχειαρίου, Μ. Καρακάλου, Μ. Φιλοθέου, Μ. Ἀγίου Παύλου, Athens 1979, 33, fig. 8), Morgan library in New York (Ms. M639, fol. 366: K. Weitzmann, "The Constantinopolitan Lectionary, Morgan 639", *Idem*, *Byzantine Liturgical Psalters and Gospels*, London 1980, ch. 14, 370-371, fig. 330). For the manuscripts dating, see: M.-L. Dolezal, *The Middle Byzantine Lectionary: Textual and Pictorial Expression of Liturgical Ritual* (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Chicago 1991, 150, 183-215, n. 3 on p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> A. V. Bank (ed.), *Iskusstvo Vizantii v sobraniyakh SSSR: katalog*

from Saint Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai<sup>26</sup>, on a fresco painting in Saint Sophia in Ohrid (between 1037-1056)<sup>27</sup> and in the churches of Saint John the Chrysostom at Koutsovendis and of Panagia Forviotissa at Asinou in Cyprus, both of the early 12th century<sup>28</sup>.

The iconographic scheme with the laconic symmetrical composition represented in these examples could

*vystavky* [= Byzantine art in the collections of the USSR: exhibition catalogue], 2, Moscow 1977, 105, cat. no. 595.

<sup>26</sup> K. Weitzmann, "Byzantium and the West around the Year 1200", *Idem*, *Art in the Medieval West and its Contacts with Byzantium* (Variorum Collected Studies Series 148), London 1982, ch. IX, 66-67, fig. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Djurić, *St. Sophia in Ohrid*, *op.cit.* (n. 19), pl. 37.

<sup>28</sup> C. Mango – E. J. W. Hawkins – S. Boyd, "The Monastery of St. Chrysostomos at Koutsovendis (Cyprus) and its Wall Paintings. Part I: Description", *DOP* 44 (1990), pl. 6b. D. C. Winfield – E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Church of Our Lady at Asinou, Cyprus: A Report on the Seasons of 1965 and 1966", *DOP* 21 (1967), pl. 7.



Fig. 3. Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine's Monastery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, 12th century.

refer to a Constantinopolitan source. It was alleged that the now-lost miraculous icon of the Dormition, sent in the 1070s from the Byzantine capital to the Pechersky monastery near Kiev, had the same iconographic scheme, which is corroborated by later replicas in icon-paintings and engravings of the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>29</sup>. Approximately the same iconography was used for the fresco-painting on the east wall of the north arm of the cross-domed Transfiguration church in Mirozhsky monastery (Pskov), commissioned in the 1140s by archbishop

Niphont who had taken vows in Kiev Pechersky monastery<sup>30</sup>. On both Mirozh fresco (Fig. 2) and icon from the Tretyakov Gallery those who are attending the Virgin's Dormition are separated in two rows, two of the saint bishops are to the left, and one to the right. In addition, some apostles are represented in pairs, inclining towards each other, which provides a conversation-like motif, appearing in Byzantine monuments from the 11th century onward<sup>31</sup>. The icon, however, doesn't depict any architectural background or the mourning women, which are

<sup>29</sup> E. S. Smirnova, "Kievo-petcherskoe Uspenie. Ikona-relikviri XI veka v svete pismennyh i izobrazitelnyh istochnikov" [= "La Dormition de la Vierge – une icône-reliquaire (XIème siècle) du monastère des Grottes à Kiev dans le contexte des sources iconographiques et écrites", (in Russian, with French summary), A. M. Lidov (ed.), *Vostochno-khristianskie relikvii* (= *Eastern Christian Relics*), Moscow 2003, 422-423, 425, figs 1-7].

<sup>30</sup> V. D. Sarabianov, *Spaso-Preobrazhensky sobor Mirozhskogo monastyra* (= *The Transfiguration church of the Mirozhsky monastery*), Moscow 2010, 176-181, figs 155-159.

<sup>31</sup> For example, in the crypt church of Hosios Lucas (N. Chatzidakis, *Hosios Loukas*, Athens 1997, 75), Saint Sophia in Ohrid and Daphni (E. Diez – O. Demus, *Byzantine mosaics in Greece: Hosios Lucas and Daphni*, Cambridge 1931, pl. 108).



Fig. 4. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, early 13th century. The Assumption of the Virgin (detail of the Fig. 1).



Fig. 5. Mount Sinai, Saint Catherine's Monastery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, 12th century. The Assumption of the Virgin (detail of the Fig. 3).

looking out of the windows in the fresco of Mirozh, and shows two long candlesticks instead of the archangels with *loros*, accompanying Christ on the fresco.

The episode of the Assumption of the Virgin's soul in the Novgorodian icon upper part (Figs 1, 4) can also be traced back to Byzantine art tradition, where it is known at least from the late 10th century on the ivory plaques, e.g., from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Musée de Cluny in Paris, and the State Hermitage in Saint-Petersburg<sup>32</sup>. Although this episode wasn't frequent in wall-paintings and icons of the 11th to the first half of the 13th century, it was always alluded by the figures of flying angels, which had their hands cloth-covered to take Mary's soul in a reverent manner. One of the examples of this episode included in the Dormition composition can be found on a tiny icon of the late 11th – 12th centuries from the collection of Sinai monastery (Fig. 3)<sup>33</sup>. It depicts three angels, in the right side of the icon, who are ascending with the Virgin's soul (Fig. 5) to the heavenly throne flanked by two cherubs. This image might be considered as a nearly literal

<sup>32</sup> A. Goldschmidt – K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.-XIII. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1930-1934, 2, Berlin 1934, pl. XLI no. 111a; pl. XLII no. 113; pl. LIX-LX nos 174-180; Weitzmann, *Ivories and steatites*, op.cit. (n. 23), 70-72, no. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Weitzmann, "Byzantium and the West", op.cit. (n. 26), 66-67, fig. 34.



Fig. 6. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, early 13th century. The apostles Philip, Andrew and Mathew arriving on clouds (detail of the Fig. 1).

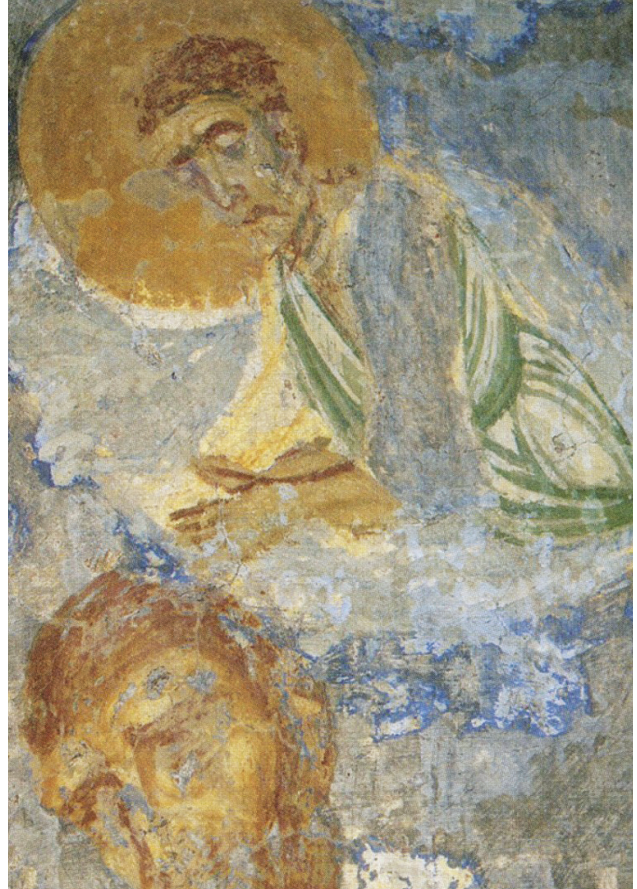


Fig. 7. Polotsk, Saint Euphrosynia monastery, church of Saviour. Wall-painting of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, detail of an apostle on a cloud, ca. 1161.

illustration of St John of Damascus's words: (Ὁ Κύριος) τὴν μὲν ψυχὴν δι' ἀγγέλων εἰς τὰ Ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων, τὰ ἀρχέτυπα τὰ ἀληθινὰ καὶ οὐράνια εἰσοιχίζεται, ἐπ' αὐτὰς τῶν τετραμόρφων ζώων τὰς πτέρυγας, καὶ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ παρεστήσατο θρόνῳ, εἰς τὸ ἐνδότερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, ὅπου πρόδρομος αὐτὸς Χριστὸς σωματικῶς εἰσελήλυθε. [(The Saviour) led her soul, accompanied by angels, into the real and original Holy of Holies in Heaven, resting on the very wings of the four "living creatures"; he seated her next to his own throne, within the veil where Christ himself, our forerunner, has gone in his own body]<sup>34</sup>. The cited Ἅγια τῶν ἁγίων, interpreted as "Heaven itself", is mostly represented in Byzantine

<sup>34</sup> PG 96, col. 740. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, op.cit. (n. 9), 216.

iconography as a “heavenly” segment, sometimes starred, e.g., in the frescoes of Asinou church in Cyprus, and the icon from the Tretyakov Gallery (Fig. 4). Along with that, the throne guarded by two floating cherubs was traditionally associated with the Second Coming of Christ – exactly this meaning was inserted, according to K. Kreidl-Papadopoulos, into the Sinaï icon by its painter (Fig. 3) as well as by his predecessor, who had executed the New Tokali Kilise fresco with the Saviour on the rainbow in “heavenly glory” surrounded by the hosts of angels<sup>35</sup>.

On the icon in question, the episode of the Assumption of Mary’s soul and the main Dormition scene are separated by the image of the apostles miraculously arriving on clouds to the Virgin’s house on Mount Sion from the places of their missions (Figs 1, 6). Such images, known in Byzantine art from the mid-10th century, remained mainly in Greek provinces or in the areas under Byzantine religious and cultural influence. In Rus’, according to Vladimir D. Sarabianov’s reconstruction, the earliest example of the Dormition with the apostles on clouds was represented on the north wall of Kiev Pechersky monastery Dormition cathedral, which was decorated by Constantinopolitan artists in 1083-1089. Described by Pavel of Aleppo in the 17th century, the Dormition scene in Kiev Pechersky cathedral was claimed to have had an important peculiarity, i.e. the images of the apostles on clouds occupied not a marginal (as in the frescoes of New Tokali Kilise or Saint Sophia at Ohrid), but a considerable place in the whole composition, the prototype of which was suggested to trace back to the decoration of Blachernae church, where the Virgin’s robe (maphorion) was kept<sup>36</sup>. This could have probably been the first appearance of the Dormition cycle iconography that spread in the Balkan wall-paintings during the 13th and 14th centuries<sup>37</sup>. As far as Russian tradition is

concerned, it might have been the lost representation of Kiev Pechersky cathedral that served as a source for the later replicas of the “cloudy” Dormition compositions. Among them, according to V. D. Sarabianov, were the frescoes of Saint Cyril church in Kiev (last quarter of the 12th century), the Nativity of the Virgin in the church of Saint Anthony monastery in Novgorod (ca. 1125) and Saints Boris and Gleb church in Kideksha near Suzdal (the 1150s)<sup>38</sup>. The “cloudy” scheme can also be seen on the north wall of the Saviour church of Saint Euphrosynia monastery in Polotsk (ca. 1161) (Fig. 7)<sup>39</sup>. *The Dormition* from the Tretyakov Gallery belongs to these early Russian examples, and its iconography could have been influenced by monumental painting, characterized by spacious and more complicated compositions packed with narrative details.

Despite carrying on the previous iconographic tradition, the painter of the icon also shifts the emphasis from the simple story narration to the liturgical commemoration of the event by adding some liturgical items, like high candlesticks, a thurible (held by St Peter) and two *katsia* (hand-censers) – one is held by St Hierotheos instead of the Gospel book, and the other one by the angel accompanying Mary’s soul to Heaven (Fig. 1). These items are mentioned among other Old Testament prefigurations of the Mother of God in the feast canticles. Furthermore, the images of candles, known in the Dormition scenes from the second half of the 12th century<sup>40</sup>, could have some symbolic significance, linked

<sup>35</sup> RbK, “Koimesis”, op.cit. (n. 15), 152.

<sup>36</sup> V. D. Sarabianov, “Rospisi Uspenskogo sobora Kievo-Pecherskoy lavry v traditsiyah drevnerusskoy hramovoy dekoratsii” (= “The wall-painting of the Pechersky monastery Dormition cathedral in the tradition of the Early Russian church decoration”), *Iskusstvoznanie* (= *Art Studies Magazine*) 2 (2004), 195-199. The Dormition cathedral of Kiev Pechersky monastery was demolished by blowing up during the World War II.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 200-201, 204. Only a fragment of the composition in Saint Anthony monastery is preserved [see: Lifshits – Sarabianov – Tsarevskaya, *Monumental’naya zhivopis’ Velikogo Novgoroda*, op.cit. (n. 21), 705, 708, figs on pp. 697, 706], while the paintings of the Kideksha church are known merely from archive notes made by Nikolay P. Sychev; see: Sarabianov, “Rospisi Uspenskogo sobora”, op.cit. (n. 36), 201.

<sup>39</sup> V. D. Sarabianov, *Spaso-Preobrazhenskaya tserkov’ Eufrosinievskoy monastyr’ i ego freski* (= *The Transfiguration church of St. Euphrosynia monastery and its fresco-paintings*), Moscow 2009, 136, 139, figs on pp. 133-135.

<sup>40</sup> The candlesticks in the Dormition scene can be found, e.g., on the fresco-painting in the Dormition church of Vardzia monastery (Georgia), 1184-1186: G. Gaprindashvili, *Vardzia*, Leningrad 1975 (in Russian), fig. 118; on the icon from the collection of the Byzantine Museum in Kastoria, dated back to the late 12th – first

with comparisons made by John of Thessaloniki in his homily. For instance, looking at the burning candles and remembering the *Parable of the wise and foolish virgins*, the apostle Peter addressed with the sermon those who were attending Mary's Dormition and encouraged them to light a "lamp of the inner person" and illuminate their bodies, souls and spirits with the "veritable flame" –the one that was chosen by the Virgin Mary, whose "lamp fills the world, and will not be quenched until the end of the ages"<sup>41</sup>. Another reference to the liturgy may be seen in the angels' gestures that are addressed to the apostles pointing towards the Virgin's Dormition and also to all the Christians, inviting them to venerate this miracle: Δεῦτε ἅπαντα τὰ πέρατα τῆς γῆς, τὴν σεπτὴν Μετάστασιν τῆς Θεομήτορος μαχαρίσωμεν... etc<sup>42</sup> (Figs 1, 8).

The representation of the Virgin's shoes on the footstool seems to be a rare iconographic detail, that cannot be explained by any homiletic or hymnographical text, since no one contains this motif. We managed to find it only in two examples dated up to the Palaiologan period –on the icon of the Dormition from the Byzantine Museum in Kastoria and on the wall-painting of Boïana church (Bulgaria)<sup>43</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that in Byzantine and Russian paintings, the Mother of God, laying on the deathbed, was mostly depicted in traditional clothes, i.e. dark-cinnamon maphorion, blue tunic and red shoes (sometimes overlapped with the apostle Paul's figure). The only exception is the icon from Kastoria, where Mary's

feet (as well as the whole body) are swaddled. Thus, the purple shoes –an important attribute of the Byzantine emperor's costume– that indicated the Queen of Heaven status of the Mother of God<sup>44</sup> cannot be seen, and the icon-painter depicted quite gallant pointed-shoes with pearls on the footstool. The shoes on the icon from Novgorod are represented twice (Fig. 1), a fact that enables guessing if the painter borrowed that detail from the composition, in which the Virgin's feet were swaddled or covered with a piece of fabric, or if he added it to follow the desire of the ktetor, for whom this detail could have had a specific meaning<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> M. G. Parani, *Reconstructing the reality of images: byzantine material culture and religious iconography (11th-15th centuries)*, Leiden 2003, 30-31, 227.

<sup>45</sup> According to some scholars, the shoes on the icon in question are interpreted as the "leaving-of-the-earth-life symbol" (*Drevnerusskoye iskusstvo X – nachala XV vekov. Gosudarstvennaya Tretyakovskaya galereya: Katalog sobrania [= Early Russian painting of the 10th to the early 15th century. State Tretyakov gallery: catalogue of the collection]* [in Russian], 1, Moscow 1995, 58). Although this interpretation hasn't been supported by any literary source, it might not be that impossible, while considering the text of the 118 (119) Psalm, which was included in the order of the Byzantine funeral service as early as the 10th and 11th centuries [E. Velkovska, "Funeral Rites According to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources", *DOP* 55 (2001), 31, 37] and appointed for the Dormition Matins in the Slavic Studite Typika manuscripts dated to the 12th and 13th centuries: M. Skabalanovich, *Khristianskie prazdniki: Uspeenie Presvjatoi Bogoroditsy (= The Christian Feasts: The Dormition of the Virgin Mary)*, Kiev 1916, 95. Some verses of the 118 (119) Psalm compare the pious life to the path (or pilgrimage) conducting the man to the Kingdom of Heaven, which was exactly the way of the Virgin Mary: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord... They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways", "I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies", "I have chosen the way of truth: thy judgments have I laid before me", "I am a stranger in the earth...", etc. Turning to the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, where the meaning of shod feet or footprints representations (sculptured or in mosaic) must have been variable and mostly obscure for us now, it's worth noticing that such representations, however, should be consistent with the idea of divine or human presence: K. Dunbabin, "Ipsa deae vestigia... Footprints divine and human on Graeco-Roman monuments", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990), 86. Keeping that idea in mind, the shoes on the Dormition icon could probably have one more interpretation: although Mary was taken to Heaven, she didn't leave mankind and stayed with it in her prayers, as could be confirmed by the feast troparion.

quarter of the 13th century by Euthymios N. Tsigaridas ["Φορητές εικόνες στη Μακεδονία και το Άγιον Όρος κατά το 13ο αιώνα", *DChAE* 21 (2000), 125-126, fig. 6. Idem, *Εικόνες τοῦ Βυζαντινοῦ Μουσείου καὶ ναῶν τῆς Καστοριάς (12ος-16ος αἰώνας)*, Athens 2018, cat. no. 8 on pp. 74-77 and figs 24, 25]; and on the fresco-painting of the Boïana church in Bulgaria, 1259 (A. Grabar, *L'église de Boïana*, Sofia 1978, 53-54).

<sup>41</sup> Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, op.cit. (n. 9), 58. For the symbolic interpretation of the censer in the Dormition scene, see: M. Evangelatou, "The symbolism of the censer in Byzantine representations of the Dormition of the Virgin", M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of the God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Aldershot 2005, 117-131.

<sup>42</sup> Ακολουθία τοτ (sic) ἐσπερινοῦ, τοῦ ὁρθρου καὶ τῆς λειτουργίας τῆς Κοιμήσεως τῆς Θεοτόκου ψαλλομένη τῇ ΙΕ' Ἀυγούστου, publishing house of A. Kollarakis and N. Triantafyllos, Athens 1887, 10.

<sup>43</sup> For the references, see above note 40.



*Fig. 8. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, early 13th century. An angel pointing towards the Virgin's Dormition (detail of the Fig. 1).*

Notwithstanding the limits of this brief paper, some remarks on the icon's style should be made. The amalgam of the aesthetic features of 12th-century Komnenian art and the stylistic trends that would be elaborated during the next period, specified the "transitional nature" of the style of the icon, created around 1200 or in the very beginning of the 13th century. The masterful technique (Figs 1, 4, 6, 8), that was fluently modified, and the use of the artistic methods well-known in Byzantine icons of Mount Sinai and Mount Athos monasteries' collections, allow attributing the icon to a painter, whose manner reflected the stylistic mainstream of the age (cf. frescoes of Studenica, 1208/9) and who might have been educated in Byzantium (Constantinople? Thessaloniki?) or, less likely, had studied under a very qualified Byzantine master in Rus'. Probably he was one of those Greek painters, who would bring the contemporary stylistic trends to Rus', but also accepted the regional spiritual flavour –that was one of the characteristic features of the Russian icon-painting of the pre-Mongol time.

The refinement and high artistic quality of the Novgorodian Dormition icon painting and its sophisticated iconographic programme encouraged scholars to address the ktetor issue. Since the reliable records on Desyatiny monastery do not appear earlier than the 14th century, it should not be excluded that the icon was transferred there later, having originally been painted for another convent, monastery or church. As it was noted in the beginning of this paper, the convent of Saint Barbara, situated very close to Desyatiny monastery, seems to be the most likely place for such a commission. According to the chronicle, the stone church in this convent, known at least from the first half of the 12th century, was built in 1218/19 by the archbishop Anthony, who occupied the Novgorod cathedra twice, in 1209-1218 and 1225-1228<sup>46</sup>. The historian Dmitry Prozorovsky claimed<sup>47</sup> that

the building of that church could have been a memorial: the commander Yadrej, Anthony's father<sup>48</sup>, was killed during the military campaign on the river Yugra on the Eve of St Barbara's feast day in 1193<sup>49</sup>. As Alexandre S. Preobrazhensky presumed, not only could the archbishop of Novgorod have built the church in the convent of Saint Barbara in his father's honour, but also commissioned the icon of the Virgin Mary's Dormition<sup>50</sup>.

There are some other pieces of art linked by scholars with Anthony of Novgorod's name. Vasily G. Putsko regarded him as a commissioner of the Khutyn Euchologion miniatures (Moscow, State Historical Museum, Sin. 604), the style of which late prof. Olga S. Popova related with the early-13th-century Byzantine stylistic trend, to which the icon of the Tretyakov Gallery belongs (i.e. the so-called "Studenica style")<sup>51</sup>. The author of the *Palomnik* book, written under the impression of his trip to Constantinople in around 1200, Anthony of Novgorod seems to have been an educated and perhaps versed in arts person, who would have been able to influence the icon's iconographic programme and invite an extremely qualified painter to execute it.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony's secular name was Dobrynya Yadrejković.

<sup>49</sup> *Novgorodskaya Pervaya letopis'*, op.cit. (n. 46), 40-41.

<sup>50</sup> I should express my gratitude to Alexander Preobrazhensky, who shared with me his ideas about the memorial character of the icon's commission which hadn't been expressed in a published form.

<sup>51</sup> V. G. Putsko, "Davn'orus'ky pisemnist' i kniga u vizantijsko-slavjan'skomu sviti" (= "The Early Russian writings and manuscripts in Byzantine and Slavonic context") (in Ukrainian), *Evropeyske vidrodzhennya ta ukrainska literature XIV-XVIII st.* (= *European Renaissance and Ukrainian literature of the 14th to 18th centuries*), Kiev 1993, 45. O. S. Popova, "Miniatura Khutynskogo Sluzhebника rannego XIII veka" (= "The Khutyn Euchologion miniatures of the early 13th century"), Idem, *Vizantiyskie i drevnerusskie miniatury* (= *Byzantine and Old Russian Miniatures*), Moscow 2003, 113.

<sup>46</sup> See *Novgorodskaya Pervaya letopis' starshego i mladshogo izvodov* (= *The Novgorod First Chronicle of the "older" and the "junior" versions*), ed. by A. N. Nasonov, Moscow – Leningrad 1950, 25, 30, 33, 42, 57, 59.

<sup>47</sup> D. Prozorovsky, "O rodoslovii sv. Antonia, archiepiskopa Novgorodskogo" (= "On the ancestry of St. Anthony the archbishop of Novgorod"), *Izvestia Imperatorskogo russkogo archeologicheskogo obshchestva*, Saint-Petersburg 1880, 86.

#### Illustration credits

Figs 1, 4, 6, 8: Photograph by Dmitry Pershin, Courtesy of the State Tretyakov Gallery. Fig. 2: Photograph by Daria A. Skobtsova. Figs 3, 5: Permission of Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai (Egypt) / Photograph courtesy of Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. Fig. 7: *Istoria russkogo iskusstva v 22 tomakh*, v. 2/1: *Iskusstvo 20-60 godov 12 veka* (= *The History of Russian Art in 22 volumes*, 2/1: *The Art of the 20-60s of the 12th century*), ed. by L. I. Lifshits, The State Institute of Art Studies, Moscow 2012, 304.

## Η ΕΙΚΟΝΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΕΙΚΟΝΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΚΟΙΜΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ (ΑΡΧΕΣ ΤΟΥ 13ου ΑΙΩΝΑ) ΣΤΗΝ ΠΙΝΑΚΟΘΗΚΗ ΤΡΕΤΙΑΚΟΦ ΤΗΣ ΜΟΣΧΑΣ

Στο άρθρο παρουσιάζεται μία εικόνα των αρχών του 13ου αιώνα από την Πινακοθήκη Τρετιακόφ στη Μόσχα, με παράσταση της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου (Εικ. 1, 4, 6, 8). Αν και η εικόνα της Κοίμησης είναι γνωστή σε ένα σχετικά ευρύ κοινό, δεν είχε γίνει αντικείμενο συστηματικής μελέτης πριν από το πρόσφατο ερευνητικό πρόγραμμα της Πινακοθήκης Τρετιακόφ, στο πλαίσιο του οποίου αναλύθηκαν λεπτομερώς τα πρωιμότερα αντικείμενα της συλλογής. Το πρόγραμμα περιλάμβανε έρευνα σε αρχαικές και ιστορικές πηγές, τεχνική και τεχνολογική ανάλυση, δηλαδή την ανάλυση του ξύλου και της κατασκευής της εικόνας, του υφάσματος, του γύψου, του προκαταρκτικού σχεδίου, των χρωμάτων, του αριθμού και της αλληλουχίας των ζωγραφικών στρωμάτων, με ακτίνες Χ, υπέρυθρες και υπεριώδεις, καθώς και τη μελέτη της τεχνοτροπίας και της εικονογραφίας. Το παρόν άρθρο εστιάζει στην εικονογραφία.

Η εικόνα παρουσιάζει πλούσια εικονογραφική παράσταση της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου, η οποία, επιπλέον της «κλασικής» σύνθεσης (πρβλ. Εικ. 2), περιλαμβάνει τη σκηνή της ανάληψης της ψυχής της Παναγίας στον ουρανό (Εικ. 4) και τις μορφές των αποστόλων να μεταφέρονται επάνω σε σύννεφα (Εικ. 6). Ανακαλώντας τη μακρά βυζαντινή εικονογραφική παράδοση, παράλληλα με αναφορές στις γραπτές πηγές, διαπιστώνεται στενή συνάφεια με την εικόνα και τίθεται το ερώτημα της προέλευσης και του παραγγελιοδότη της.

Ως προς τις αρχαικές πηγές, το 1934 η εικόνα περιήλθε στη συλλογή του μουσείου από τη μονή Desyatiny

στο Νόβγκοροντ. Οι ερευνητές έχουν εύλογες αμφιβολίες σχετικά με την ύπαρξη αυτής της μονής πριν από τον 14ο αιώνα, λόγω της απουσίας αξιόπιστων γραπτών πηγών. Επομένως, η εικόνα θα μπορούσε να έχει φιλοτεχνηθεί για άλλο μοναστήρι ή ναό –όπως προτείνεται σε αυτή την εργασία–, ο οποίος θα βρισκόταν κοντά, και κατέληξε στη μονή Desyatiny κατά το δεύτερο μισό του 18ου αιώνα, οπότε τα λείψανα και οι πιο σεβάσιμες εικόνες μεταφέρθηκαν από τον πλησιόχωρο κατεστραμμένο ναό της Αγίας Βαρβάρας στη μονή Desyatiny. Σε αυτήν την περίπτωση η εικόνα θα μπορούσε να έχει ζωγραφιστεί αρχικά για τον ναό της Αγίας Βαρβάρας, ο οποίος κτίστηκε το 1218/19 από τον Αντώνιο, αρχιεπίσκοπο του Νόβγκοροντ –έναν από τους πιο μορφωμένους ανθρώπους της εποχής του, συγγραφέα του βιβλίου για τα λείψανα και τους αγίους τόπους της Κωνσταντινούπολης, την οποία επισκέφθηκε στις αρχές του 13ου αιώνα. Λαμβάνοντας υπόψη την υψηλή ποιότητα της εικόνας και τη βαθιά εικονογραφική σύνθεση, μια προσωπικότητα όπως ο Αντώνιος μπορούσε πιθανότατα να είναι ο παραγγελιοδότης της εικόνας της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου και να έχει συμβάλει όχι μόνο στον εμπλουτισμό της εικονογραφίας της, αλλά και να είχε καλέσει ένα εξαιρετικό δεξιότέχνη αγιογράφο, για να τη ζωγραφίσει.

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