

Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας

Τόμ. 26 (2005)

Δελτίον ΧΑΕ 26 (2005), Περίοδος Δ'. Στη μνήμη του Γεωργίου Γαλάβαρη (1926-2003)



Νέα στοιχεία για τη σπάνια εικονογραφία της Εις
Ἄδου Καθόδου

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doi: [10.12681/dchae.448](https://doi.org/10.12681/dchae.448)

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

SMIRNOVA, E. (2011). Νέα στοιχεία για τη σπάνια εικονογραφία της Εις Ἄδου Καθόδου. *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*, 26, 303–310. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dchae.448>



ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

More about the Rare Iconography of the Descent into
Hell

Engelina SMIRNOVA

Τόμος ΚΣΤ' (2005) • Σελ. 303-310

ΑΘΗΝΑ 2005

MORE ABOUT THE RARE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE DESCENT INTO HELL

The many variants of the Descent into Hell in Byzantine iconography and the depth of meaning in its details are explained by the importance of this subject, which links the stories of the Old and the New Testament and concerns the theme of the salvation of mankind through Christ's redemptive sacrifice. One rare version, preserved in a Russian icon of the late fourteenth century from the town of Kolomna near Moscow (Tretyakov Gallery), but not found in either Late Byzantine or Post-Byzantine painting, has already been discussed by the author of this article¹. The most striking feature of the Russian icon is the representation of numerous virtues, in the form of angels, in the aureole around Christ. With the help of long spears, they are struggling with sins depicted as devils in a black inferno². This iconography became widespread in Russian icon painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in the art of Moscow and the northern regions (see Fig. 5). It is found not in icons of the festival cycle, but in large works in the bottom tier of the iconostasis or on walls and pillars. This iconography was often used in churches dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ.

This developed iconographical scheme can be found in Byzantine art in embryo, for example, in a fresco of the church of the Assumption in Gračanica, Serbia (c. 1320), where four human figures symbolizing the forces of evil conquered by Christ's redemptive sacrifice are depicted in hell. The inscriptions by the figures explain that ἡ σκυθρωπότης, ὁ θάνατος, ἡ κατήφεια, ἡ φθορά (or ἡ διαφθορά) are depicted³. As the virtues in the Russian icon coincide with those described in Christian patristics as models of monastic virtues, it has been suggested that in Russia Byzantine iconographic

impulses were developed in a monastic milieu. The Russian version of the iconography could have been created in Moscow or one of the large monasteries not far from it.

In analysing the Tretyakov Gallery icon, I did not pay sufficient attention to the composition of the two groups on either side of Christ, particularly the three women, apart from Eve, in the right-hand group. The figures of the two women huddled together, one in a dark blue and the other in a pale blue maphorion, appear to be an iconographical allusion to the images of the myrrh-bearing women by the Holy Sepulchre. This allusion is of a secondary nature, however. Both figures, as well as the third in a yellow maphorion, are Old Testament characters.

In connection with the development of the antique market in Moscow, two icons of the Descent into Hell came to light recently. These contain unusual details, which testify to the existence in Byzantine art of a rare iconographic version with several Old Testament women already in the first half of the fourteenth century⁴. Both icons come from a wooden chapel in the small northern village of Pyoltasy, in the north-east of the Vologda Region. The first, produced, judging by its style, in the first third or first half of the fourteenth century, found its way into the Vladimir Logvinenko Collection (Moscow), while the second, which is closer to the end of the century, was purchased by an unknown buyer and its whereabouts are now unknown.

The first icon (53×47 cm) (Fig. 1), in which the lower part of the composition has been slightly trimmed, reveals straight away a similarity with the above-mentioned late Russian version of the Descent into Hell. As in the icon from Kolomna, the figure of Christ in the middle zone of the composi-

¹ E. Smirnova, Une icône de la Descente aux Limbes d'une rare iconographie, *Zograf* 22 (1992), 54-59.

² The surviving inscriptions include: 'almsgiving', 'chastity', 'repentance', 'fasting', 'church-going', 'meekness', 'charity', 'loving one's neighbour', 'life', 'peace', 'truth' and 'justice'.

³ J. Radovanović, *Ikonoografska istraživanja srpskog slikarstva XIII i XIV veka*, Beograd 1988, 89-102.

⁴ Detailed publication: E.S. Smirnova, *Ikony Severo-Vostochnoy Rusi. Sredina XIII-seredina XIV veka*, Moscow 2004, cat. nos 26, 27.

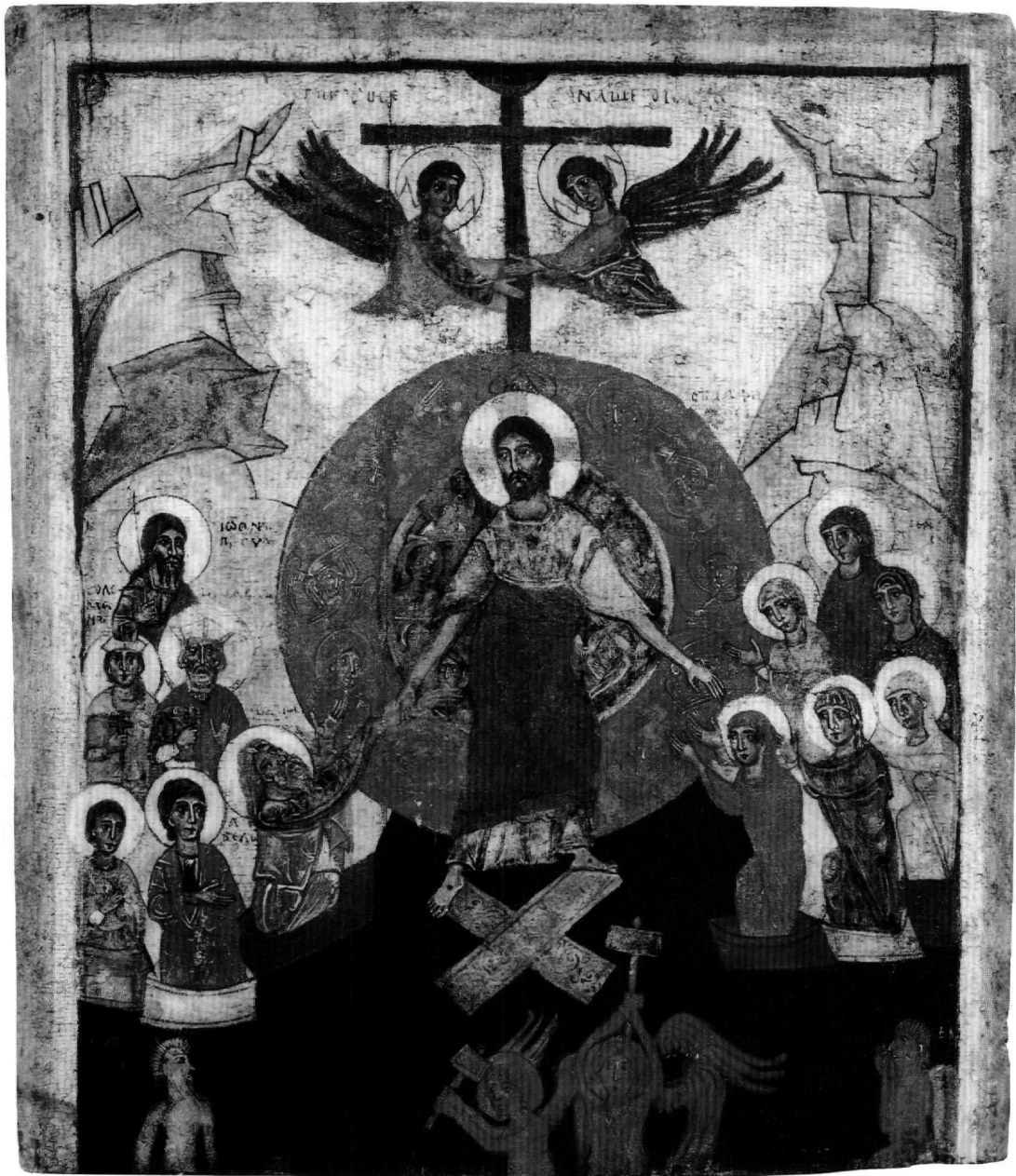


Fig. 1. Descent into Hell. Russian icon of the first half of the fourteenth century. Province of Rostov. Moscow, Collection of Vladimir Logvinenko.

tion is frontal. There is no sense of physical effort in his pose. He seems to be hovering, both hands stretched out towards the groups on either side. The upper zone contains a cross with an angel on either side, a reminder of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. In the lower zone, in the dark cavern of Hell, are two red angels in the middle, who are fighting with Satan (his figure has not survived), with Beelzebub on the left

(painted grey) and Death personified on the right. Both aureoles round Christ, the pale-blue inner one and the red outer one, are full of angels and six-winged seraphim. If they were replaced by the figures of angel-virtues with long spears the northern icon would be even more similar to the variant known to us.

The uniqueness of this icon lies in the composition of the left



Fig. 2. *Descent into Hell*. Detail of Fig. 1: Cain (?), Abel, and Adam.

and, particularly, the right-hand group of Old Testament characters. On the left, from top to bottom, are John the Baptist, David and Solomon, Adam, and next to Adam in a bright red himation Abel (the name is written next on the figure, on the background). Left of Abel, in the same row, but on a somewhat smaller scale, is another young man, in a green himation (Fig. 2). He is holding the thin red staff, which is usually an attribute of Abel. The name of this figure is not indicated, but I believe that it is most likely Cain. In the art of the Byzantine circle during the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century, the composition of the *Descent into Hell* occasionally includes the figure of Cain⁵, as a reminder that God's mercy is stronger than sin, and that the sins of mankind were redeemed by the suffering of Christ. Christian patristics stress that God's mercy shows Cain the way to repentance and salvation. Cain and Abel are likened to images of the Old and the New Testament. Abel symbolized redeemed mankind and Cain that which had to be redeemed⁶. These are the ideas underlying the inclusion of the figure of Cain in the iconographic scheme of the *Descent into Hell*.

Turning to the right-hand group of persons (Fig. 3), we find that it includes female figures only, the other group being all male. In the bottom row, closest to Christ and symmetrical to Adam, is Eve, in her traditional red maphorion. The other

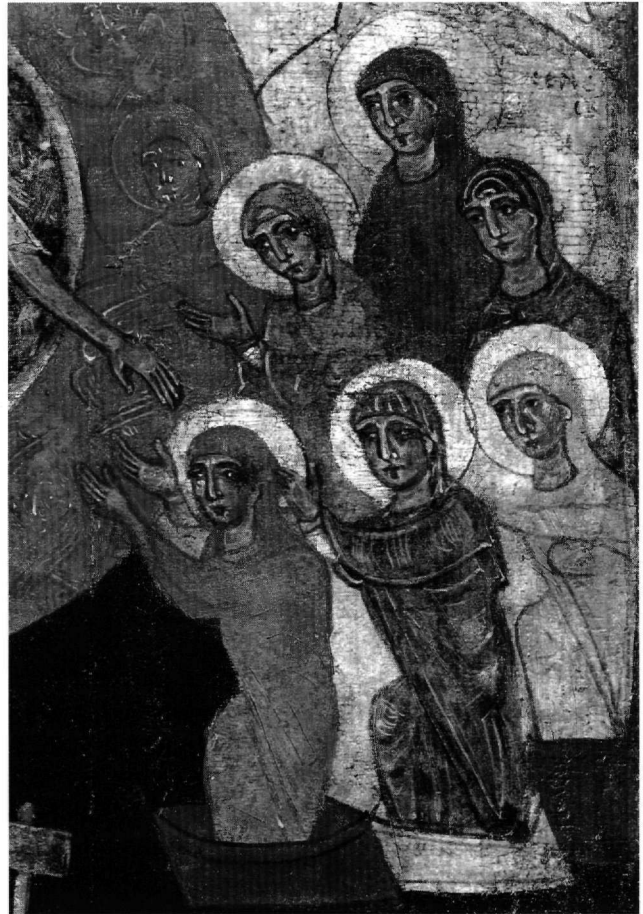


Fig. 3. *Descent into Hell*. Detail of Fig. 1: the Old Testament women.

five figures have been identified with varying degrees of certainty. Next to Eve on the icon in the Logvinenko Collection is a foremother in a dark-blue maphorion, and slightly higher up, almost in the same register, is another in a yellow maphorion. A careful study of late Russian icons of the *Resurrection-Descent into Hell*, widespread in Russian painting of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, has shown that Eve is usually depicted accompanied by one or two foremothers. Where the inscriptions to these figures have survived, one of them is named Sarah, and the other Rachel⁷. We can assume that in the newly discovered icon, Sarah

⁵ For instance, in the wall-painting of 1265, at Kipoula (Mani), in the Peloponnese (N. Δρανδάκης, *Οἱ τοιχογραφίες τῶν Ἁγίων Ἀναργύρων Κηπούλας* (1265), *AE* 1980, 109-110, pl. 30α) and in the fourteenth-century wall-painting in Asinou, Cyprus (A. and J. Stylianiou, *The Painted*

Churches of Cyprus, Nicosia 1997, 132).

⁶ A. Ulrich, *Kain und Abel in der Kunst. Untersuchung zur Ikonographie und Auslegungsgeschichte*, Bamberg 1981, 231.

⁷ For instance, some seventeenth century icons in the Museum of Art,

(next to Eve, in a dark-blue maphorion) and Rachel (in yellow) are depicted.

The middle row contains two figures of foremothers. Their identification presents some difficulty, as there are no iconographical analogies for them and the inscriptions are almost illegible. The barely discernible letters over the left figure in a bright green maphorion can be read as the name *Ρυφβ* (Ruth), but over the right one in a dark-blue maphorion only two letters are legible: *CK*. The surface of the painting on this spot suggests that the other letters in the inscription were lost during restoration, as well as part of the first remaining letter. We believe that the two remaining letters should be read *EK* and were part of the name *PEBEKKA* (Rebecca). Thus, we suggest that the two figures in the middle row are Ruth and Rebecca.

The only figure in the upper register, emphasized by the purple maphorion, is much easier to identify. The Cyrillic letters *CEHE* have survived next to it, which in the present context can only stand for the name *Асенефб* (Asenath). She is the daughter of the Egyptian priest Potipherah, the wife of Joseph, and the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 41:45, 50; 46:20). The legend of Asenath, which was sometimes included in the list of apocryphal books, was widespread in Russian Medieval literature.

If the suggested identification of these female figures is correct, their selection and arrangement indicate a definite system or idea, and this, in turn, confirms the correctness of the identification. Firstly, the Old Testament genealogy is revealed. Sarah is the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac, Rebecca is Isaac's wife and the mother of Jacob, Rachel is Jacob's wife and the mother of Joseph, and Asenath is Joseph's wife. The odd one out is Ruth, the mother of Obed, who begat Jesse, the father of David. Secondly, it is easy to see the analogy in the order of the figures in both groups. The male figures in the left-hand group are placed in chronological order from bottom to top: from the oldest persons in the Old Testament (Adam and his sons) to the following ones (David, who begat the line of the Virgin

Mary, Solomon, connected with the theme of the Holy Wisdom) and, finally, to John the Baptist, whose image connects the Old and the New Testament. The female figures are also in chronological order from bottom to top.

Archimandrite Silas Koukias, one of those who have recently studied rare variants of the Descent into Hell, has drawn the attention of scholars to Greek texts of the third and fourth century dealing with Old Testament figures⁸. Yet neither these works nor early texts of the Holy Fathers concerning the Descent into Hell, including the Sermon on Great Saturday of Epiphanius of Cyprus, pay attention to the images of the Old Testament women. The most intensive focus on these characters is in the texts of the services for Forefathers' Week and Holy Fathers' Week in December, before the Nativity of Christ⁹. The lists of Old Testament foremothers contained in them coincide in part with the representations on the Russian icon.

At the same time, it was precisely in the second half of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth century that Byzantine art took a more active interest in depicting the Old Testament ancestors of Christ: in the frescoes at Sopočani (Serbia) and in the mosaics of the narthex in the Monastery of Chora in Constantinople¹⁰. True, these are mostly male figures, whereas the images of the Old Testament women, with the exception of Eve, Sarah (in the Hospitality of Abraham) and partly Rachel are still rarely found¹¹. An exception, from an earlier period, exists in the series of drawings, which probably served as models for artists, in the margins of a Greek manuscript with the text of St John Chrysostom's commentaries on the Book of Genesis, Oxford, Magdalen College, cod. 3. Among the drawings, produced most probably in Cyprus in the late twelfth and the early thirteenth century, is a line of medallions possibly copied from a wall painting, with half-length representations of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Asenath¹².

We believe that the iconographic variant of the Descent into Hell reproduced in the Russian icon was created in Byzantium in the second half of the thirteenth or early fourteenth

Yaroslavl; some eighteenth-nineteenth century icons in the Collection of the Bank Intesa in Vicenza, Italy (*Icone russe. Collezione Banca Intesa. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan 2003, vol. 2, cat. no. 265; vol. 3, cat. nos 326, 385).

⁸ Ἀρχιμανδρίτης Σ. Κουκιάρης, Οἱ ἀνεπίγραφτοι ἀνιστάμενοι στήν Εἰς Ἄδου Κάθοδον, ΔΧΑΕ ΙΘ' (1997), 305-318.

⁹ Many thanks to the Serbian researcher Professor Janko Radovanović for his consultation.

¹⁰ P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 2, New York 1966, pls 42-84.

¹¹ The woman covered by veil (Sarah?) is represented beside Eve in the Descent into Hell in the monastery of the Transfiguration in Meteora, 1483 (M. Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Greek Art. Byzantine Wall-Paintings*, Athens 1994, pl. 162).

¹² I. Hutter, *The Magdalen College 'Musterbuch'. A Painter's Guide from Cyprus at Oxford, Medieval Cyprus: Studies in Art, Architecture, and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki* (eds N. Ševčenko, Chr. Moss), Princeton 1999, 122, fig. 10.

century, with the aim of stressing by visual means the major importance of the event, Christ's mercy and the greatness of his acts. The inclusion of the Old Testament foremothers in the composition of the Descent into Hell broadened the visible circle of Christ's ancestors and enlarged the image of redeemed mankind, by reminding people of the salvation not only of its male, but also its female component. What is more, the new iconography also touched upon the Mariological theme as one of the aspects of the Old Testament women in their role as prototypes of the Virgin Mary.

The new iconography probably included, apart from the unusual composition of the groups of righteous men and women, a representation of the victory of virtues over vices, as we see in abbreviated form in the Gračanica fresco, and in developed form in the above-mentioned Russian icon of the late fourteenth century from Kolomna. The appearance of these personifications reinforced the iconographic theme of the victory over the forces of evil, which is found in its most abbreviated form in the angels in the cavern of Hell conquering Satan, Beelzebub and Death.

Thus we consider it possible to reconstruct hypothetically a rare iconographic variant of the Descent into Hell, which has not survived in works of Byzantine art, but is reflected by varying elements in Russian icons.

The innovations characteristic of this non-extant Byzantine pattern echo certain motifs in West European iconography. It is there, for example, that we encounter the image of Cain. One of the capitals in the Cathedral of St Lazarus (Autun, France) shows our Lord talking lovingly to a pensive Cain¹³. The didactic contrasting of virtues and vices can be seen in the façade sculpture of many Gothic cathedrals, particularly at Clermont, Chartres (south portal), and Amiens¹⁴. The figures of Old Testament women have long been present in the sculpture of West European cathedrals, as prefigurations of Mary. In the art of the West European Middle Ages, scenes with Cain, paired representations of virtues and vices, and images of Old Testament women exist as individual elements within extensive cycles or series in the compositions of portals and stained glass windows. In Byzantine art, however, as the wall-paintings of Greece, Cyprus and Serbian Gračanica, as well as Russian icons, show, these motifs are included in the concrete composition of the Descent into Hell, inserted into its structure and subject to its rhythmical pattern. Some of the motifs mentioned are also connected with Byzantine soil, because they contain allusions to traditional representations of the Last Judgement: Old Testament foremothers with their touching gestures of hope and expectation remind us of the Righteous proceeding into paradise, and the personifications of virtues casting down vices



Fig. 4. *Descent into Hell*. Russian icon of the end of the fourteenth century. Province of Rostov. Location unknown.

with their spears are like angels punishing sinners. Unlike motifs borrowed directly in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century from West European art (for example, the well-known iconography of the Evangelists, in which one is unrolling a scroll, another sharpening a quill, etc.)¹⁵, the iconographic elements in the Descent into Hell are not direct quotations from the West European repertoire.

¹³ Ulrich, *op. cit.* (n. 6), 208, fig. 291.

¹⁴ E. Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France*, Paris 1948, 201-264.

¹⁵ H. Buchthal, *Toward the History of Palaeologan Illumination*, in: H. Buchthal, *Art of the Mediterranean World, 100 to 1400*, Washington, D.C. 1983, 158-159.

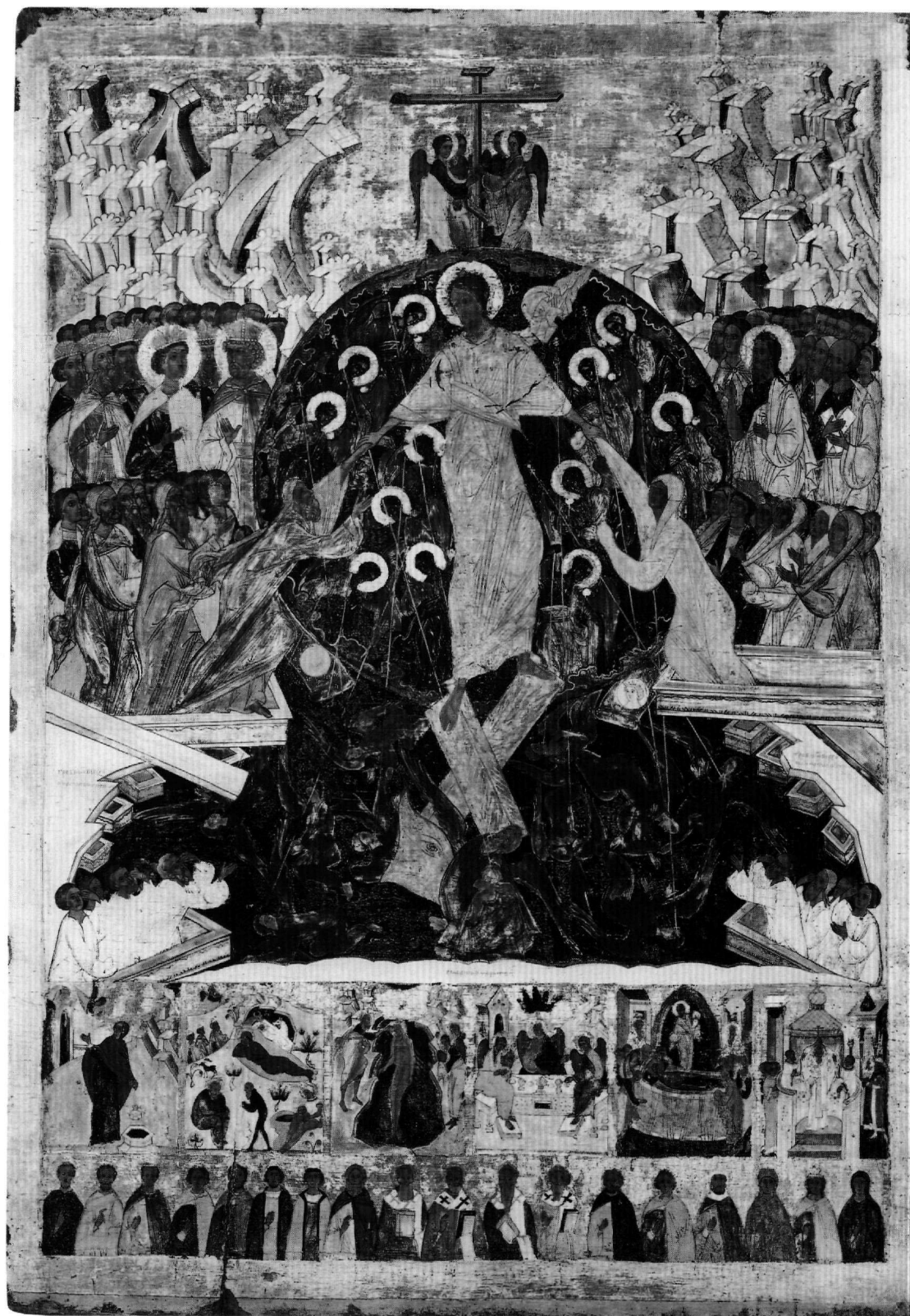


Fig. 5. Descent into Hell. Russian icon of the sixteenth century. Museum of Arkhangelsk.

So how did this new Byzantine iconography, so refined, original and profound, reach the remote Russian province? There can be no doubt that it was through some large Russian centre. Judging from the geographical position of the village where the icon comes from, it could have been either Moscow or Rostov. Most likely it was Rostov, because in the first half of the fourteenth century Moscow was only just beginning to acquire its political and cultural weight, whereas Rostov retained an ancient cultural tradition and connections, and had a great influence on its northern provinces. The north Russian region where the icon was found was part of the Rostov bishopric. Rostov supplied artists to all corners of the bishopric and imported icons that served as models for local masters. One such local icon-painter produced the icon in the Logvinenko Collection.

The fate of this iconography in Russian art varied. In some cases it was simplified, in others enriched. An example of simplification is the second icon from the same village (52×35 cm), the present whereabouts of which are unknown (Fig. 4). Unlike the preceding icon, the whole composition has survived, and visible at the bottom are both red angels with weapons and a vanquished Satan (inscribed *Sotona*, which reflects the north Russian pronunciation of 'a' as 'o'). On the left is Beelzebub, tied to a pillar, and a sadly wilting, conquered Death. Judging from certain stylistic features, in particular, the complex foreshortening of the figure of Christ in the middle zone, this icon was executed later than the one before, probably at the end of the fourteenth century. Compared with the icon from the Logvinenko Collection, the composition of the figures is simplified and their drawing slightly changed. The person next to Abel, whom we interpreted as being Cain, is not depicted, and the figures of David and Solomon are moved to the foreground.

The most interesting changes concern the right group. As before it includes only female figures, but instead of six there are three, and they are arranged on top of one another. In the middle tier is Eve in her traditional red maphorion; below her, in a dark-blue cloak is probably Sarah, by analogy with the figures on the above-mentioned late Russian icons, and above is an unknown foremother. The only name given is that of Eve. Above the upper figures the word *narod* ('people') is inscribed. This word reveals yet another aspect of the meaning of the female figures in this iconography of the Descent into Hell: these are the foremothers of mankind, the embodiment of the female element, of its mysterious power, on which the well-being of the human race depends. It must be said that the popularity of this original

iconography of the Descent into Hell in Russian art of the late fourteenth and the fifteenth century depended not only on the unusual visual nature of the composition and the didactic role of the details, but also on the special role of the female persons in Slavonic Medieval culture.

From the end of the fourteenth century the said iconography of the Descent into Hell became extremely widespread in Russian art. In the upper register of the composition we find angels elevating the Cross, in the middle register Christ in a frontal pose with the personifications of virtues in his aureole, which are casting vices into Hell with their spears. Among the many Righteous is a group of Old Testament foremothers. Angels are vanquishing Satan and Beelzebub in the cavern of Hell. An icon of this kind was painted around 1502 by the famous Moscow artist Dionysius for the Therapont Monastery (now in the Russian Museum in St Petersburg). Subsequently similar icons were made for a number of other churches and monasteries in different parts of Russia. Such compositions are found most often in icons from Russia's northern regions – Vologda and Archangelsk. This is probably also due to the impact of the art of Rostov, the bishopric of which included these regions.

Icons of this sort are sometimes of an encyclopaedic nature. For example, a sixteenth-century icon from Solvychegodsk (Archangelsk Museum; Fig. 5) contains an exceptionally detailed, multi-figured iconography of the Descent into Hell. Under it is a tier of New Testament scenes, to which the Trinity and the Elevation of the Cross have been added. Further down is another tier with half-length representations of saints. In this icon, as in several other Russian icons of the same iconographic type, the group of Old Testament women has an unusual composition. They are depicted as a large crowd following Eve. In seven of them the faces can be seen, while the others are standing in the background and only partly visible. In icons of this type one of the women is wearing a tooth-edged royal crown. She is probably Esther, the wife of King Xerxes I of Persia, who saved the Israelites from destruction.

The works discussed above not only help to reconstruct the original artistic life of Medieval Russia, where Byzantine impulses were given a distinctly local interpretation; but also illustrate the advantage of using works from the Byzantine periphery to restore lost links in the history of Byzantine culture. They open up little-known pages in the history of Byzantine iconography and bear witness to the work, intense, subtle and rich in intellectual nuances, of the compilers of iconographical programmes in the Palaiologan period.

ΝΕΑ ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΓΙΑ ΤΗ ΣΠΑΝΙΑ ΕΙΚΟΝΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΕΙΣ ΑΔΟΥ ΚΑΘΟΔΟΥ

Δύο εικόνες της Εισ Άδου Καθόδου ήρθαν πρόσφατα στο φως στη Μόσχα. Και οι δύο προέρχονται από έναν ξύλινο ναΐσκο στο μικρό χωριό Ryoltasy, στα βορειοανατολικά της περιοχής Vologda. Η πρώτη εικόνα, έργο, όπως προκύπτει από την τεχνοτροπία του, του πρώτου τρίτου ή του πρώτου μισού του 14ου αιώνα, περιήλθε στη συλλογή Vladimir Logvinenko, στη Μόσχα, ενώ η δεύτερη, η οποία χρονολογείται προς τα τέλη του ίδιου αιώνα, αποκτήθηκε από άγνωστο αγοραστή και περαιτέρω πληροφορίες σχετικά με την τύχη της είναι σήμερα άγνωστες.

Η πρώτη εικόνα (53×47 εκ.) (Εικ. 1), της οποίας το κάτω μέρος της σύνθεσης έχει απολεπισθεί, παρουσιάζει ομοιότητες με τη γνωστή εικόνα από την πόλη Kolomna (Μόσχα, Συλλογή Tretyakov) (βλ. υποσημ. 1). Στο

κέντρο της σύνθεσης εικονίζεται ο Χριστός μετωπικός, ενώ ψηλότερα σταυρός με δύο ημίσωμους αγγέλους εκατέρωθεν. Στο μέσο της κατώτερης ζώνης, στο σκοτεινό σπήλαιο του Άδη, εικονίζονται δύο ερυθροί άγγελοι που παλεύουν με τον Σατανά (η μορφή του δεν σώζεται), με τον Βεελζεβούλ αριστερά (σε γκριζο χρώμα) και με την προσωποποίηση του θανάτου δεξιά. Και στις δύο δόξες που περιβάλλουν τον Χριστό –γαλάζια εσωτερικά και ερυθρή εξωτερικά– εικονίζονται άγγελοι και εξαπτέρυγα σεραφείμ. Αριστερά, δίπλα στον Άβελ, παριστάνεται πιθανότατα ο αδερφός του Κάιν (Εικ. 2), όπως συμβαίνει και σε κάποιες άλλες βυζαντινές συνθέσεις της Εισ Άδου Καθόδου κατά το δεύτερο μισό του 13ου και το πρώτο μισό του 14ου αιώνα (βλ. υποσημ. 5).