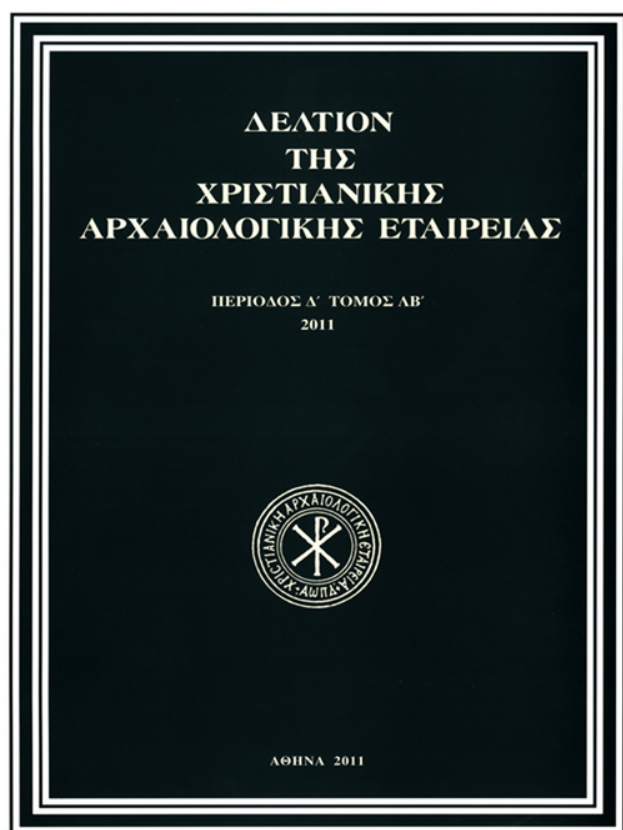


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Δύο εικόνες του υστέρου 15ου-πρώιμου 16ου αιώνα από το τετραμελές σύνολο «Άξιον Εστί»

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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

Two Late 15th-16th Century Icons from the Four-part
Series Axion Esti..."

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TWO LATE 15th-EARLY 16th CENTURY ICONS FROM THE FOUR-PART SERIES “AXION ESTIN...”

Δύο εικόνες με σχεδόν παρόμοια σύνθεση (η Θεοτόκος σε ένα κεντρικό μετάλλιο περιβαλλόμενο από αγγέλους και αγίους) είναι τα δύο μέρη του τετραμερούς συνόλου με θέμα το «Ἄξιον ἔστί...». Το σύνολο ζωγραφίστηκε στη Μόσχα περί τα τέλη του 15ου-αρχές 16ου αιώνα. Και οι δύο εικόνες δωρήθηκαν πιθανότατα από τη Μόσχα στο Ἅγιον Ὄρος. Η μία από αυτές φυλάσσεται σήμερα στη μονή Ξενοφώντος. Η άλλη εικόνα επεστράφη στη Ρωσία από κάποιον συλλέκτη, πιθανότατα κατά το 19ο αιώνα, και φυλάσσεται σήμερα στο Ρωσικό Μουσείο τῆς Αγίας Πετρούπολης.

Two icons with almost similar compositions (the figure of the Virgin in the central medallion and the angels and saints around it) are the two parts of the four-part series “Axion Estin...”. This series was made in Moscow around the late 15th-early 16th century. Both existing icons were probably donated from Moscow to Mount Athos. One of them is now at the Xenophontos monastery. The other icon was taken back to Russia by one of its collectors, most likely in the 19th century, and is now in the Russian Museum at Saint Petersburg.

A book on icons at the Xenophontos Monastery on Mount Athos was published in 1999¹. The section entitled “Icons with Slavonic inscriptions” with text by Ioannis Tavlakis included an image of “Our Lady Axion Estin”, an icon of the Virgin with saints (Fig. 1)².

An enthroned Virgin and Child in the middle of the icon’s central medallion is surrounded by thirteen half-figures of bishops (Fathers of the Church), along with Saints Equal-to-the-Apostles, Emperor Constantine (with a Cross) and Empress Helena. On the upper mountain slopes on either side of the medallion stand Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria; below the medallion monks kneel at the foot of the mountains, three

figures on either side. Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria hold a narrow white strip with a Slavonic text written in fine ligatured script. Despite wear of the paint layer, the inscription can be deciphered as: БЕБЪ / ИСТЛЭНІ[Я] / БГА / СЛОВА / РОЖШУЮ / СУЩУЮ / БОГОРОДИЦУ / ТЯ / ВЕЛИЧАЕМЪ («Τὴν ἀδιαφθόρως Θεὸν Λόγον τεκοῦσαν, τὴν ὄντως Θεοτόκον σὲ μεγαλύνομεν» - “you incorruptibly gave birth to God the Word, we magnify you the true Theotokos”). This is the fourth and final part of the prayer customarily referred to by its opening words: «Ἄξιον ἔστί» (Dostoino est).

The Russian Museum in St. Petersburg has an icon with a central figure of the Virgin in a medallion³ (Fig. 2). This full-

Λέξεις κλειδιά

Τέλη 15ου-αρχές 16ου αιώνα.

Μόσχα.

Ζωγραφική φορητῶν εικόνων.

Εικονογραφία τῆς Θεοτόκου - Δωρεές.

Keywords

Late 15th-early 16th century.

Moscow.

Icon-painting.

Iconography of the Virgin - Donations.

¹ Evangelos N. Kiriakoudis, Nikos Minos, Nikos Nikonanos, Ioannis Tavlakis, Chryssanthi Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, Kriton Chryssohoidis, *The Holy Xenophontos Monastery. The Icons*, Mount Athos 1999.

² Ibid., Fig. 101 (p. 229). Text 226, 231, n. 20, 21 (p. 294).

³ Inv. no. ДРЖ 1182. We know that from 1855 to 1880 this icon was the property of Empress Maria Alexandrovna, consort of the Emperor Alexander II. Subsequently it was transferred to the collection of the St.

Petersburg Society of Lovers of Ancient Literature, and in 1930 to the Russian Museum. According to verbal tradition recorded in Russian Museum documents, the icon originated from Mount Athos. See: *Prechistomu obrazu Tvoemu poklonyaemysya... Obraz Bogomateri v proizvodyeniakh iz sobraniya Russkogo muzeya, State Russian Museum*, St. Petersburg 1995, cat. no. 72 (Nadezhda Pivovarova).



Fig. 1. «Τὴν ἀδιαφθόρως Θεὸν Λόγον τεκοῦσαν...». Composition from the series on the theme "Axion Estin". Russian icon of the late 15th-early 16th century. Xenophontos Monastery, Mt. Athos.

length image on a gold pedestal shows the Virgin Orans with arms upraised. Angels within the medallion incline towards the Virgin, three on either side. Figures of a Church Father and the four Evangelists are depicted above the medallion. On the upper mountain slopes at the sides of the medallion are full-length images of the apostles Peter and Paul with arms up-lifted and higher still, angels bear a narrow white banner with the words: ПРИСНОБЛАЗЕНУЮ / И / ПРЕНЕПОРОЧНУЮ / МАТЕРЬ БОГА / Η[Α]ΨΗΓΟ («Τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμώμιτον, καὶ μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν»—"ever-blessed and most pure and mother of our God"). This is the second part of the same prayer.

The corresponding dimensions of both icons (37 x 30.5 cm at the Xenophontos Monastery and 36.5 x 28 cm at the Russian Museum), the uniformity of composition and proportion, the small delicate figures, extensive gold backgrounds, similar banners with prayer texts and the inscriptions obviously written by a single hand, all indicate that both icons must belong to one and the same series and to a single ensemble.

This lends support to another hypothesis. In both cases the panels are so badly eaten by insect larvae that the wood is porous as a sponge and fragmented around the edges, something especially noticeable in the icon at the Russian Museum. In Russian icon collections such an advanced state of damage to panels from insect boreholes is more common in Byzantine than in Russian icons, and, moreover, not in the works that came to Russia in ancient times by the "historic" route⁴ but in those brought from parts of the former Byzantine Empire during the post-Petrine period, usually in the 19th century⁵. Quite occasionally, this kind of damage affects Russian icons too, but only those smaller works that were probably transferred to a Byzantine centre, for example one of the Mount Athos monasteries, before being returned to Russia⁶. In the context of this paper the type of panel damage is an important indication that the Russian Museum icon was brought from Mount Athos.

The author of this paper has not actually examined the icon from Xenophontos Monastery and is unlikely to ever do so. Judging from the reproduction, the dark blue color of the Athos icon is more muted than in the Russian Museum icon, although this may be due to poor quality printing in the book

on Xenophontos Monastery. There are two further differences. On the Russian Museum icon, the gold on the background, borders, haloes and angels' wings is well preserved. On the Xenophontos icon it appears to be worn, if not totally erased. Possibly this resulted from intervention by restorers and the different methods they may have used. Another distinction is the nature of the craquelure, the fine cracks in the ground. In the case of the Xenophontos Monastery icon, the cracks are quite long and horizontally placed. In the Russian Museum icon they take the form of a lattice and look like tiny squares. This (considerable!) divergence can probably be attributed to the different conditions in which the icons were preserved, at least for the last 160 years (if we suppose that the Russian Museum icon was brought from Mount Athos shortly before 1850).

We may assume that both icons belong to a series consisting of four parts, with each part illustrating one of four verses:

- 1) «Ἄξιον ἐστὶν ὡς ἀληθῶς, μακαρίζειν σε τὴν Θεοτόκον» ("It is truly worthy to bless you Theotokos").
- 2) «Τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμώμιτον, καὶ μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν» ("ever-blessed and most pure, and mother of our God").
- 3) «Τὴν τιμωτέραν τῶν Χερουβὶμ καὶ ἐνδοξοτέραν ἀσυγκρίτως τῶν Σεραφίμ» ("more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim").
- 4) «Τὴν ἀδιαφθόρως Θεὸν Λόγον τεκοῦσαν, τὴν ὄντως Θεοτόκον σὲ μεγαλύνομεν» ("you incorruptibly gave birth to God the Word, we magnify you the true Theotokos").

Different parts of the quoted text originate from different periods. The verse «Τὴν τιμωτέραν τῶν Χερουβὶμ...» was composed by Cosmas of Majuma in the 8th century. However, the words «Ἄξιον ἐστὶν ὡς ἀληθῶς μακαρίζειν σε τὴν Θεοτόκον», the opening line of the hymn, were supposedly spoken by Gabriel when the Archangel miraculously appeared in the young monk's cell on Mount Athos. According to tradition, this event occurred in the 10th century. The epithet «Ἄξιον ἐστὶν» was used for the celebrated (and often copied) icon of the Virgin and Child at the Protaton Monastery on Mount Athos, whose original paintwork dates back to the 14th century⁷.

⁴ No such damage can be seen on the early 12th-century Byzantine icon "The Virgin of Vladimir" (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) brought to Kiev in the 1130s.

⁵ Numerous examples can be found among reproductions in the following publication: *Byzantine Art in the Collections of Soviet Museums*, Text and selection by Alice Bank, Leningrad 1985.

⁶ For example, the small icon (29 x 17.5 cm) "The Virgin of Vladimir", acquired by the Russian Museum in 1898 from the private collection of V.A. Prokhorov (see Engelina Smirnova, *Moscow Icons 14th-17th Century*, Leningrad 1989, pls 95 and 97).

⁷ Evthymios N. Tsigaridas, «L'icône de la Vierge "Axion Estin" du Protaton et ses copies», *ZVI XLIV/2* (2007), 341-352.

Images of the “Virgin of the Sign” and the Holy Trinity accompanied by the hymn text («Τὴν τιμωτέραν τῶν Χερουβιμ...») appear on the panagiarion – a small liturgical paten, intended to carry the bread offered to the Virgin by monks during a meal or in the course of the orthros service⁸ – and on pectoral plates from the 15th century onwards, while icons depicting the “Virgin of the Sign” surrounded by the heavenly hosts with the hymn text («Ἄξιον ἐστὶν...») first appear in the 16th century⁹. (Russian works use the appropriate Russian version of these Greek texts.) However, the compositions from the Xenophontos Monastery and the Russian Museum discussed in this paper belong to a different iconographic tradition, seen in surviving Russian icon painting from the 16th century onwards. This is the series of four images with separate illustrations of each verse mentioned above. The earliest fully preserved series of four compositions on one large panel (156 x 115 cm) was painted for the Solovetsky Monastery in the 1550s to 1560s and is now kept in the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin¹⁰ (Fig. 3). Assemblages of four compositions on separate panels, similar to the two icons under examination, also existed¹¹.

It was particularly difficult to illustrate the verses from all four parts of «Axion Estin...», since the text offers few possibilities for the creation of visual images. The first composition, of which the earliest example is preserved in the Solovetsky Monastery icon, recalls the iconography «Ἐπί σοι χαίρει, Κεχαριτωμένη...» (“In Thee Rejoiceth...”): the “Synaxis of Angels” surrounds the enthroned Virgin and Child while “humankind” is represented below by a group of Prophets and another of Apostles.

The Russian Museum icon depicts the second scene, «Τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμόμωτον, καὶ μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν». There is an overall similarity to the Akathistos Virgin scene, with angels bowing down before the Holy Virgin on both sides. Taking into consideration the featured hymnal text, this image of the Virgin Orans without the Child is reminiscent of the celebrated mosaic in the apse of Kiev’s St. Sophia Cathedral, where the Greek inscription quotes Psalm 44/45, verse 6: «Ὁ Θεὸς ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς...». Inclusion of the four Evangelists and the Apostles Peter and Paul is an allusion

to the earthly life of Christ after He was brought into the world by the Holy Virgin (The image in the Solovetsky Monastery icon, which is assigned a later date, depicts the Virgin nursing the Child and surrounded by Prophets, which show some similarity to the Prophets tier of the iconostasis, where the Prophets are represented on either side of the Virgin of the Sign).

Judging by the Solovetsky Monastery icon, the third composition «Τὴν τιμωτέραν τῶν Χερουβιμ καὶ ἐνδοξοτέραν ἀσυγκρίτως τῶν Σεραφίμ...» shows the Virgin and Child encircled by a star-shaped effulgence, with the “heavenly hosts” on each side above, in seven rectangles of various colors, and the Archangels below.

Finally, the arrangement of the fourth composition «Τὴν ἀδιαφθόρως Θεὸν Λόγον τεκοῦσαν, τὴν ὄντως Θεοτόκον σὲ μεγαλύνομεν» (a large medallion with the enthroned Virgin and Child) bears some resemblance to the first scene of the cycle, but contains more complex symbolism. The Church Fathers turned towards the Virgin and Child with closed Gospels or unfurled liturgical scrolls in their hands, call to mind the composition of the Concelebrating Holy Hierarchs in the cathedral apse. Letters of abbreviated names have been preserved on the haloes of several figures. An image in the upper middle part probably depicts St. John Chrysostom (this type of representation is found in both Byzantine and Russian art). Beside him stand the figures of Sts Helena and Constantine, evidently referring to the Triumph of the Holy Cross. Next to St. Helena is Gregory the Theologian. St. Nicholas of Myra can be seen on the left-hand side of the medallion. Visible on the right-hand side are two Johns (second and third figures from the bottom), almost identical in appearance, with the inscription IOA on each halo. One of them probably represents John Eleemon. An image in the lower section to the right of the central axis apparently represents Athanasios of Alexandria (ΑΘ on the halo), and the figure on the left is probably Leo of Catania (ΙΕ).

The motivation for including Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria in this iconographic scheme of full-length figures has been examined by Tatyana Tolstaya, using the Solovetsky Monastery icon as an example¹². Basil the Great composed

⁸ ODB 3, 1569.

⁹ See N.P. Kondakov, *Pamyatniki khristianskogo iskusstva na Afone*, St. Petersburg 1902, 222-234. Variations in the iconography related to these texts have been studied by Tatyana Tolstaya (T.V. Tolstaya, Solovyetskaya ikona “Dostoino yest” iz Muzeev Moskovskogo Kremlya”, in *Ot Tsar’ grada do Byelogo morya. Sbornik stat’ei po srednevekovomy iskusstvu v chest’ Ye.S. Smirnovoi*, Moscow, Severny palomnik, 2007, 557-570.

¹⁰ Smirnova, op.cit., pl. 186. Tolstaya, op.cit., pls 1, 5-7.

¹¹ Four icons of this type are mentioned in an Inventory of the Moscow Kremlin Dormition Cathedral compiled in the early 17th century «Opisi Moskovskogo Uspenskogo sobora ot nachala XVII veka po 1701 god vklyuchitel’no», in *Russkaya istoricheskaya biblioteka*, vol. 3, Moscow 1876, Col. 309.

¹² Tolstaya, op.cit., 566-568.



Fig. 2. «Τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμώμητον...». Composition from the series on the theme "Axion Estin". Russian icon of the late 15th-early 16th century. St. Petersburg, Russian Museum.

the Liturgy that replaces the chant «Ἄξιον ἔστιν...» with “In Thee Rejoiceth...”. The inclusion of his figure thus refers to another hymn in honor of the Holy Virgin. As for Cyril of Alexandria, during the 3rd Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 he accused Nestorios of heresy for refusing to recognize the Virgin Mary as Mother of God and insisting that Mary gave birth to a mortal man rather than to God. Saint Cyril of Alexandria defended this theological premise, which is contained in the text inscribed above the represented scene.

In Russian art of the late 15th century there was increasing interest in the creation of compositions based on hymnological subjects, and in alterations to other previously well-known iconographic types (e.g. “Intercession of the Holy Virgin”), with the aim of emphasizing the theme of unanimous praise to the Heavens by representatives of this earthly world. Artistic compositions based on the hymn “In Thee Rejoiceth...” by John of Damascus were widely common. As already mentioned, these compositions are similar at first sight to images from the «Ἄξιον ἔστιν...» series: the Holy Virgin inside a medallion in the centre, surrounded by angels and saints in adoration. However, in accordance with the text of John of Damascus’ hymn, which likens the Holy Virgin to a church, there is a church in the background of the illustration of this hymn, which lends a certain monumentality, naturalness of pictorial structure and rhythm to the composition. As compared to this configuration, scenes illustrating the «Ἄξιον ἔστιν...» appear somewhat artificial and unconvincing, intended to appeal to the intellect rather than to our artistic sensibilities. Such characteristics apply particularly to the Solovetsky Monastery icon, painted in the mid-16th century, during the rule of Ivan the Terrible and Metropolitan Macarius, a period when allegory and symbolic form acquired new significance in Russian art. In three of the four scenes the structure is determined by medallions associated with the glorious effulgence of the Virgin Mary, while the scene «Τὴν τιμωτέραν τῶν Χερουβιμ...» features an eight-pointed star, the symbol of divine energies. An analogous arrangement is seen in 16th-century Russian icons of the “Holy Virgin of the Burning Bush”, where the same motif of a star-shaped aureola surrounds the figure of the Virgin and numerous symbols and allegories are included in the composition.

Let us turn to the inscriptions that designate the compositional subject matter in the “Axion Estin...” cycle. These inscrip-

tions are written on long horizontal ribbons, reminiscent of the banners customarily carried during street parades and processions. In our icons the ribbons with inscriptions seem to participate in the action and are borne aloft by angels or saints. From an artistic point of view the icons in the Xenophontos Monastery and the Russian Museum are more aesthetically pleasing than the four-part icon from the Solovetsky Monastery. Both compositions are not overburdened, but feature a broad expanse of empty background. They are also remarkable for their refined rhythmic organization, fine silhouettes and delicate, exquisite figures. The icons date from a period when traditions of 15th-century poetic images were still important in Russian art, and in particular themes seen in the work of Moscow artist Dionisy.

Attribution of both the works under examination requires clarification. The Russian Museum icon is described in a 1995 publication as the work of “a Slav master” of the early 16th century¹³, whilst the icon in the Xenophontos Monastery is included among icons “with Slavonic inscriptions”. From the text we assume that the author considers the Xenophontos icon to be Russian, but sees its closest analogies in mid-16th-century art – in the four-part icon “Axion Estin” from the Solovetsky Monastery (Fig. 3) we have already discussed.

In our opinion both icons were painted by Russian icon painters working in Moscow at the turn of the 15th century, but no later than the very beginning of the 16th century¹⁴. The idea of a non-Russian “Slav master” as author of the Russian Museum icon may have arisen because of the tradition that it came from Mount Athos, and because the panel is damaged by insect boreholes. Since the inscription is written in Cyrillic, it was impossible to ascribe the icon to a Greek painter, hence the supposition of a “Slav master”. The bright, clean coloring of the Russian Museum icon and the striking combination of blue and vermilion-red tones with gleaming gold are consonant with the aristocratic culture of late 15th- to early 16th-century Moscow. The type of script is also indicative of this epoch – ornamental ligatured Russian inscriptions on white bands. A similar ligatured hand can be seen in Russian manuscripts of this period.

There is also another feature of both icons that may be interpreted as an indication of late 15th- to early 16th-century Moscow culture. This is the depiction of kneeling monks in the lower part. These figures play an important role in both

¹³ See n. 2.

¹⁴ As regards style, terminus ante quem – these are Gospel miniatures by Muscovite painter Feodosy, son of Dionisy, dated 1507 (Russian

National Library, St. Petersburg, Annual 133. See O. Popova, *Les miniatures russes du XIe au XVe siècle*, Leningrad 1975, pl. 88).

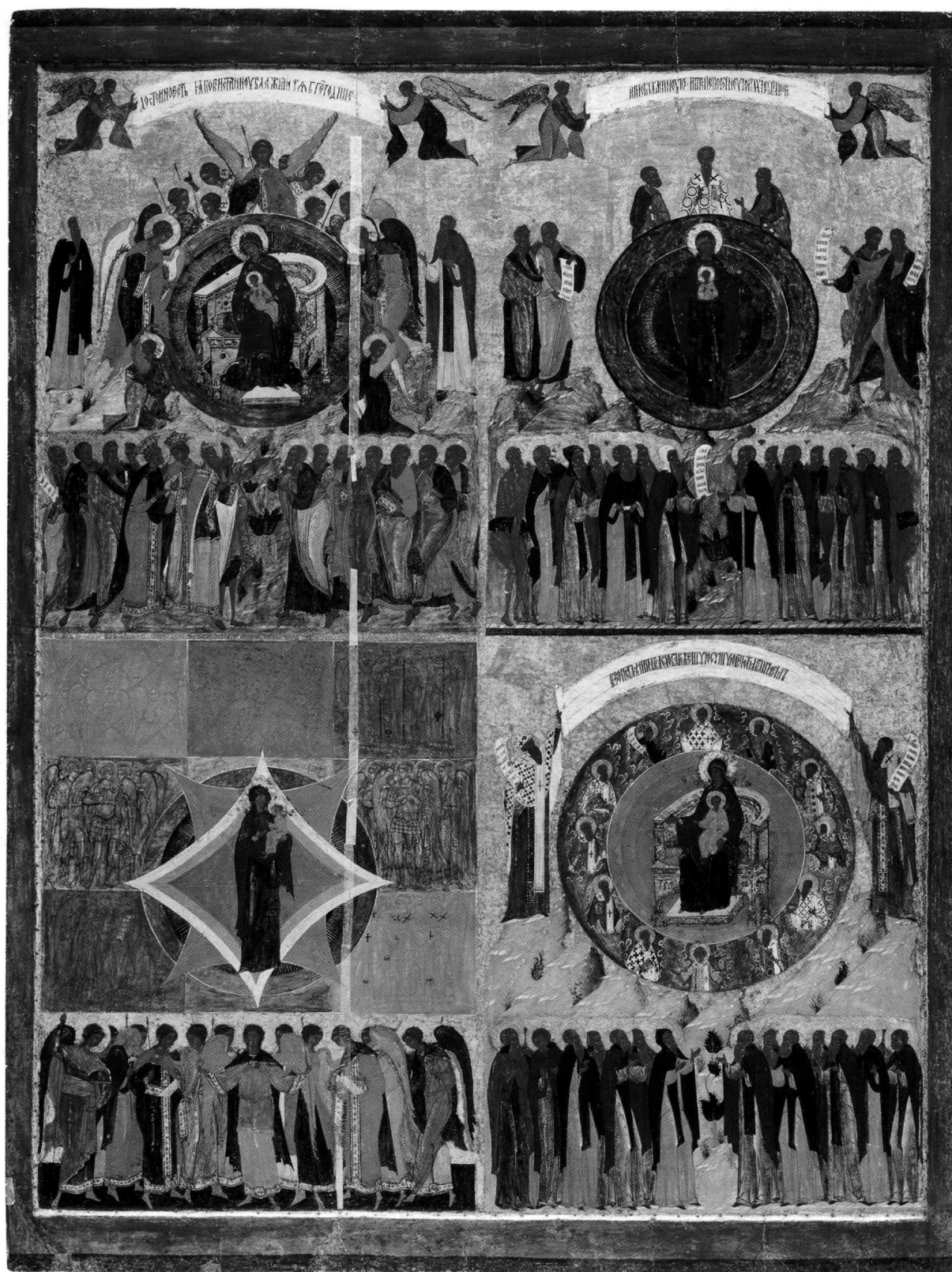


Fig. 3. "Axion Estin...". Russian icon of the 1550s -1560s. From the Solovetsky Monastery. Dormition Cathedral, Kremlin.



Fig. 4. Holy Virgin of the Burning Bush with selected saints. Embroidered podea. Late 15th century. Russian Museum. From the Kirillo-Belozersk Monastery.

compositions. In each case two monks with unfurled scrolls lead a group of three figures. Nadezhda Pivovarova has identified the scroll-bearing monks in the Russian Museum icon as John of Damascus (wearing a white headcloth) and Cosmas of Majuma. In the Xenophontos Monastery icon analogous figures are impossible to identify. All that can be deciphered on the scroll held by the monk on the left are the letters: КТО / ИЗРЕД [В?] / ...ТВО / Е ДОСТ / ОЯН... The halo of the monk on the right shows the first letter of his name: К. Only the upper line is discernible on his scroll: СВѢТ... The name of the third monk in the group on the right is plainly visible: ПАВ, i.e. Paul. This is certainly not Paul of Thebes, since the latter was a hermit and wore garments woven from leaves rather than a mantle.

In Russian iconography of the 14th to 16th century, representations of monks assumed an important role in monumental art (for example on pre-altar columns and altar screens), icon painting and church embroidery. Surviving small icons and embroidered *podeae* or *soudaria* for liturgical vessels from the late 15th to early 16th centuries depict the Holy Virgin as a central image or as part of a narrative composition, with various "selected saints", including monks, on the borders. Included among them are Theodosios the Cenobiarch, Euthymios the Great, Sabbas the Sanctified – founder and protector of cenobitic monasteries, and also Antony the Great, St. Barlaam and the Indian Prince Joasaph. Russian saints can also be seen, including Sergius of Radonezh, Dimitry of Prilucky, Cyril of Belozersk and Barlaam of Khoutyn¹⁵ (Fig. 4). As a rule such works come from major Russian monas-

teries that played an important role in Russia during the 15th and 16th centuries.

There is every possibility that the creation of new compositions using subjects from hymns in the «Ἀξιὸν ἐστὶν...» cycle occurred no later than the early 16th century and reflected the tendencies in Russian iconography. The monks depicted in these scenes appear as men of prayer interceding for Orthodox Christians before the Holy Virgin.

Thus we may conclude that the icons from the Russian Museum and the Xenophontos Monastery belong to a single cycle of four images. All four icons were probably a donation to the Xenophontos Monastery on Mount Athos. As we know, during this difficult period for the entire Orthodox world Muscovy often sent «alms» to Mount Athos¹⁶, and in all likelihood monetary assistance was accompanied by other contributions such as icons, embroidery and other works of art. One of the icons from the four-part «Ἀξιὸν ἐστὶν» series was later returned to Russia (probably in the 19th century, by a collector of Orthodox antiquities) and included in the Empress's collection before its transferral to the Russian Museum. Another remained on Mount Athos and is still kept at the Xenophontos Monastery. The fate of the other two is unknown. These icons were painted in the late 15th to early 16th century by an artist of the Moscow school and reflect the stylistic traditions and iconographic preferences of 15th-century Muscovite art. The difficulty of expressing hymnal texts in visual form imposed a certain conditionality the iconographic arrangement, with numerous symbolic motifs, a characteristic that was further developed in 16th-century art.

¹⁵ The small icon "Virgin Hodigitria" (Smolensk type) from the diaconicon of the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery, approximately last third of the 15th c. (Tretyakov Gallery); the veil "Appearance of the Holy Virgin to St. Sergius of Radonezh" (Moscow Kremlin Museum-Preserve); the veil "Holy Virgin of the Burning Bush with interceding saints and selected saints on the borders" from the St. Cyril of Be-

lozersk Monastery (Russian Museum).

¹⁶ See for example the Nikon Chronicles, c. 1497 ("alms" to St. Panteleimon Monastery "and other monasteries of the Holy Mountain"; see *Polnoye sobraniye russkikh letopisei*, vol. XII, Moscow 2000, 244) and several other 16th-century annals.

ΔΥΟ ΕΙΚΟΝΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΥΣΤΕΡΟΥ 15ου-ΠΡΩΙΜΟΥ 16ου ΑΙΩΝΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΤΕΤΡΑΜΕΡΕΣ ΣΥΝΟΛΟ «ΑΞΙΟΝ ΕΣΤΙΝ»

Το άρθρο αναφέρεται σε δύο εικόνες που φυλάσσονται σε διαφορετικές συλλογές. Η μία βρίσκεται στη μονή Ξενοφώντος του Αγίου Όρους (Εικ. 1), η δεύτερη στο Ρωσικό Μουσείο της Αγίας Πετρούπολης (Εικ. 2). Οι συνθέσεις στις δύο εικόνες είναι σχεδόν όμοιες, καθώς η μικρή μορφή της Θεοτόκου βρίσκεται στο κεντρικό μετάλλιο και μορφές αγγέλων και αγίων γύρω από αυτό. Οι όρθιες μορφές αγίων αριστερά και δεξιά από το κεντρικό μετάλλιο κρατούν επιμήκη λευκά λάβαρα με σλαβονικά κείμενα. Κάτω από το μετάλλιο μοναχοί γονατίζουν στους πρόποδες βουνών.

Η αντιστοιχία στις διαστάσεις των δύο εικόνων (37x30,5 εκ. η εικόνα της μονής Ξενοφώντος, 36,5x28 εκ. εκείνη του Ρωσικού Μουσείου), η ομοιομορφία στη σύνθεση και στις αναλογίες, οι μικρές, κομψές μορφές, ο εκτεταμένος χρυσός κάμπος, τα παρόμοια λάβαρα με κείμενα προσευχής και το γεγονός ότι οι επιγραφές σε αυτά γράφτηκαν από το ίδιο χέρι δηλώνουν ότι οι δύο εικόνες πρέπει να προέρχονται από την ίδια σειρά, από ένα και το αυτό σύνολο, που φιλοτεχνήθηκε στη Μόσχα στον ύστερο 15ο-πρώιμο 16ο αιώνα. Η απόδοση αυτή επιβεβαιώνεται όχι μόνο από τα τεχνοτροπικά στοιχεία, αλλά και από ορισμένες εικονογραφικές λεπτομέρειες, κυρίως από τις μορφές μοναχών που εικονίζονται εκείνη την εποχή συχνά στη Μόσχα, στο κάτω μέρος φορητών εικόνων και κεντημάτων (Εικ. 4).

Μπορούμε να υποθέσουμε ότι οι δύο εικόνες ανήκουν σε μια σειρά αποτελούμενη από τέσσερα μέρη, από τα

οποία το καθένα εικονογραφεί έναν από τους τέσσερις στίχους:

Ἄξιον ἐστὶν ὡς ἀληθῶς, μακαρίζειν σὲ τὴν Θεοτόκον.

Τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμώμητον καὶ μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν (η σλαβονική εκδοχή του κειμένου αναγράφεται στην εικόνα του Ρωσικού Μουσείου).

Τὴν τιμιωτέραν τῶν Χερουβὶμ καὶ ἐνδοξοτέραν ἀσυγκρίτως τῶν Σεραφίμ.

Τὴν ἀδιαφθόρως Θεὸν Λόγον τεκοῦσαν, τὴν ὄντως Θεοτόκον σὲ μεγαλύνομεν (η σλαβονική εκδοχή του κειμένου αναγράφεται στην εικόνα της μονής Ξενοφώντος).

Οι συνθέσεις στις εικόνες από τη μονή Ξενοφώντος και το Ρωσικό Μουσείο που εξετάζονται στο παρόν άρθρο εντάσσονται σε μια εικονογραφική παράδοση που απαντά σε σωζόμενες ρωσικές εικόνες από το 16ο αιώνα και εξής (Εικ. 3 και υποσημ. 8). Το εικονογραφικό αυτό θέμα, επίσης ως ένα από τα τέσσερα μέρη της προσευχής, είναι γνωστό με τις λέξεις που απαρτίζουν την αρχή της: *Ἄξιον ἐστὶν* (Dostoino est).

Και οι δύο σωζόμενες εικόνες δωρήθηκαν πιθανότατα από τη Μόσχα στο Άγιον Όρος. Αυτό δικαιολογείται από το γεγονός ότι έχουν φθαρεί και οι δύο από σαράκι σε τέτοιο βαθμό, που το ξύλο τους είναι πορώδες σαν σπόγγος. Στη Ρωσία η δράση των εντόμων είναι συνήθως πιο περιορισμένη. Την εικόνα του Ρωσικού Μουσείου επέστρεψε από τον Άθω στη Ρωσία κάποιος συλλέκτης, πιθανότατα το 19ο αιώνα.