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## Two new stone icons from Kiev

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## *Two New Stone Icons from Kiev*

Sergej Ivanovič Klimovskij, Kiev

Small stone sculptures from the era of Ancient Rus' have been the objects of scientific study and collection for more than two centuries. The commonest group of artefacts in this category are stone icons intended to be carried on the person. They were introduced into Rus' from Byzantium at the same time as Christianity itself, replacing the former pagan amulets. At the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries began the mass production by Russian craftsmen working from Byzantine prototypes. This did not however end the import of these graceful objects of religious cult from Byzantium.

In 1972 323 such icons were known on the territory of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> In a catalogue published in 1983 379 icons are listed, including some made in the 15th century.<sup>2</sup> Today, although exact information is unavailable, this total can be increased by 20-30 items. Only a small part of these icons are strictly Byzantine work. So, any discovery of new examples is of great interest. The rarity of such discoveries is shown by the fact that in Kiev, between 1990 and 2001, when excavation took place on a large scale, only two icons were found, both of them imported.

One icon was found in 1998 on Volodymyrs'ka street opposite the south gate of the 11th century cathedral of St. Sofia (ill. on the cover). The icon was discovered in the filling of a household pit, where it had fallen during its backfilling in the 13th century.<sup>3</sup> It is made, as are nearly 58 % of ancient

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<sup>1</sup> N. G. Porfiridov, 'Drevnerusskaja melkaja kamennaja plastika i ee sjužety', *Sovetskaja arheologija*, III, 1972, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> T. V. Nikolaeva, *Drevnerusskaja melkaja plastika XI-XV vv*, Moskva 1983.

<sup>3</sup> I. I. Movčan, Ja. E. Borovs'kij, S. I. Klimovskij, E. I. Arhipova, Zvit pro arheolohični doslidžennja Starokijivs'koji ekspedyciji IA NAN Ukrajinu u m. Kyjevi v 1998 r. po vul. Volodymyr'skij (typescript). Naukovyj arhiv Instytutu arheolohiji nacionalnoj Akademiji Nauk Ukrajinu, p. 13.

Russian stone icons, from argillaceous slate.<sup>4</sup> This slate has a brown colour, reminiscent of darkened wood. The size of the icon is 4,0 x 3,3 cm, its thickness 0,4 cm. One lower corner was broken off in ancient times. The back is well polished from being carried next to the body.

On the front of the icon is shown a scene of saints Cosmas and Damian in full figure. Their cult was popular in Rus, though the number of known stone icons with their images is far less than those of St Nicetas and the holy warriors. For comparison, according to the reckoning of N. G. Porfiridova, 88 stone icons of St. Nicetas (not counting the cheaper and more common metal icons) are known, and 30 of St. George. Icons portraying Cosmas and Damian, including that found on Volodymyrs'ka St., number eight. Quantitatively this is comparable with eight discoveries of icons with images of the holy princes Boris and Gleb.<sup>5</sup>

The portrayal of the saints is distinguished by careful modelling, detailed reproduction of strands of hair, exact details of their clothing and haloes, decorated with small pearl ornaments. The proportions of the body are splendidly kept. All this is indicative of the high professionalism of the artist. In general, the iconography of these saints is very similar to those on the Filofeevskaja stavroteka of the 12th century, which was made in Byzantium.<sup>6</sup>

It is necessary to call attention to one more detail. On the icon and on the stavroteka the saints are shown beardless, only Damian has some facial hair, indicated by fine lines. But on the icon from Novgorod, executed by a local master in the 16th century, both saints are depicted as bearded men.<sup>7</sup> This departure from the canonical iconography of these saints can be explained by two reasons.

First, the desire to make the saints look like the typical local population is characteristic of all cultures up to our own time. Secondly, the icon from Novgorod belongs to the northern group of these artefacts, as classified by T. V. Nikolaeva. Icons of this group were made not on Byzantine models, but on those of southern Rus', from Kiev, or of western Rus', which, in turn, were themselves copied from originals from the Byzantine Chersonese. This brought about changes in iconography, which are not on the icon from Kiev. In addition, the icon found on Volodymyrs'ka is distinguished

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<sup>4</sup> N. G. Porfiridov, *O masterah, materialah i tehnikе drevnerusskoj melkoj kamennoj plastiki*, 3, 1975, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, 'Drevnerusskaja melkaja kamennaja plastika...', p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> A. Bank, *Prikladnoe iskusstvo Vizantii IX-XII vv.*, Moskva 1978.

<sup>7</sup> T. V. Nikolaeva, *op. cit.*, Table 39, no. 7.

by more careful execution of details and the quality of its workmanship in comparison with the icon of the same saints from Perejaslav-Hmelnicky, belonging to the southern Russian group.<sup>8</sup> All of these considerations, as well as the resemblance to the iconography of the Filofeevskaja stavroteka, allows us to identify this icon as the work of a Byzantine master.

At the same time, on the Kiev icon Cosmas and Damian are shown without their characteristic attributes – jars for medicines and sticks, which they usually hold in their hands. This gives a reason to S. A. Vysockij, who first investigated the icon, to conclude that the figures depicted were not Cosmas and Damian, but other saints.<sup>9</sup> However, it is impossible to agree with this.

These attributes in the hands of Cosmas and Damian are absent from their images on the amulet-zmееvik<sup>10</sup> ('zmееvik' is an amulet with the portrayal of a saint on one side and the Gorgon Medusa on the other.) On the Filofeevskaja stavroteka both saints hold only sticks; the jars in their left hands are hidden under their clothing and only their shape is seen. Such departure from the canon is not unusual. It is possible to cite an instance of more severe deviation from a canon. For example, on the other icon from Kiev, which we will be considering later, in the scene of the Crucifixion such a fundamental detail as the cross is missing. So, the absence of the necessary attributes of Cosmas and Damian cannot be considered as an argument that the icon shows not them but other saints. Obviously, the artist refrained from showing the necessary attributes in the saints' hands because of the icon's small size. Additionally, S. A. Vysockij, while denying that the saints are Cosmas and Damian, could not offer any other suggestion of who was portrayed on the icon.

The names of the saints are scratched fairly crudely and do not correspond to the general style of carving. Obviously, they were added later, and not by the person who had carved the figures. The word "saint" written in Greek – άγιος – is normal on the majority of icons of this time, made by local masters, and is due to copying of Byzantine examples. The abbreviation of this word – α, in a circle or with a macron is also met with on stone icons from this time. Sometimes it precedes the word άγιος; this repetition shows that local carvers thought more of its mystical meaning, rather than

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Table 11, no. 6.

<sup>9</sup> S. A. Vysockij, 'Dovidka do ikonki, znajdenij u Kyjevi na vul. Volodymirs'kij v červni 1998 r.', [in:] I. I. Movčan, Ja. E. Borovs'kij, S. I. Klimovskij, E. I. Arhipova, *op. cit.*, Dodatok no 1.

<sup>10</sup> T. V. Nikolaeva, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79.

trying to observe the rules of spelling of Greek, which they hardly knew. It is interesting that before the name Cosmas the abbreviation shown is not alpha, but omega. It is possible that the carver thought that this was to emphasize its connection with both saints.

The names of saints are written in cyrillic. Their paleographic analysis, executed by S. A. Vysockij, allows us to conclude that the inscription was made in Kiev or in another settlement of southern Rus'. So, in the name Cosmas, after „K” stands „Б”, instead of „Y” or „O”. In the same word after „3” stands „Є” instead of „b”. This is characteristic of the dialect of this region.

The style of expression and the perfect technology of the execution of the icon show that it was made in one of the developed centres of the art of stone-carving in the Byzantine empire. Later it was taken to Rus', where the inscription was added. As an archeological find the icon is dated to the 13th century. However, such belongings were used for quite a long time and could be passed on by inheritance. Considering this circumstance, its manufacture could be referred to the 12th th century. As scholars have repeatedly noted, art historical analysis and iconographic study of such objects do not give a sufficient basis for their exact dating.

A few words must be added about how the icons were carried on the body. The presence of metallic hooks or special holes for hanging on some icons does not leave any doubt as to how they were carried. But on the majority of icons these devices are absent. It is logical to expect that in antiquity similar mounts existed on these icons as well, but are not preserved today because of the frailty of the materials. It is most likely that they were made from leather or bark, which are hardly ever preserved in the ground. The flimsiness of such fastenings from these materials explains that the majority of these icons, according to the circumstances of their discovery, were lost accidentally.

The second stone icon was discovered in Kiev in 2001 at excavations on Velyka Žytomyrs'ka street, 20.

It is made, like the first, from argillaceous slate, but of a dirty-white colour with a light blue hue. The upper edge of the icon is rounded. The back is cut crudely and unevenly, so its thickness varies from 0,4 to 0,6 cm. The icon was broken into several parts in antiquity. The degree of its preservation and the radius of the arched vault, framing the higher part, allows us to determine its size, which was 12,8 cm long and near 8,8 cm wide. On the icon are placed six gospel scenes: *The Entry into Jerusalem*, *The Descent into Hell*, *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*, *The Crucifixion*, *The*

*Ascension* and *The Assumption of the Virgin*. The last three are almost completely preserved.

The scenes are framed by twisted columns, supporting an arched vault, decorated by a cimation. Such decoration of architectural details is traditional for expressing the gospels in small sculptures (stone and bone icons) as well as in Byzantine painting. In this respect the most significant are icons from steatite, very widespread from the second half of the 11th century.<sup>11</sup> In the opinion of A. V. Bank, the presence on these icons of simplified ornamental bases and capitals of columns, a very schematical cimation and a single scroll on the ornamental columns are signs that they were made at a relatively late period.<sup>12</sup>

Almost the whole obverse the icon is covered in well preserved gilding. It overlays a fine layer of red paint. In the scenes of *The Crucifixion* and *The Assumption* in the haloes of Christ and the Virgin one can see faint remains of blue paint.<sup>13</sup> Probably, the icon was originally painted and only after some time was it gilded. Traces of gilt or paint are preserved on many icons from that time. For instance: on the icons with the figures of Christ and *Convincing of St. Thomas*, found in Kiev, on an icon of the Virgin Mary from Vščizkoe Old Town, on a fragment with the Virgin Mary from green steatite, found in Athens, and others.<sup>14</sup>

Such an extremely important element in the scene of *The Crucifixion* as the cross is absent on the icon. Only the lower end of a beam for the legs is shown. The crucified Christ forms the essential element of the scene. This fact and the roughness of the carving of the back and sides of the icon show that the master, even if he was a skilful artist, tended to reduce the expense of his labour, without having impaired the quality of the object. Only this can possibly explain such a crude breach of the canon. Really, the icon looks elegant. It is packed with small figures of people, and even the absence of the cross is not so obvious, because the figure of the Saviour attracts our attention. The absence of the cross is only noticeable after carefully examining the icon.

This breach of the canon and a certain roughness in the work can be explained by the function of these icons. In the opinion of A. V. Bank they were made as icons intended as gifts for the church. This is confirmed by

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<sup>11</sup> A. Bank, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, figs. 84, 85.

<sup>13</sup> The remainder of the blue paint on these areas were discovered by I. Kostuk in the process of restoration of the icon under the microscope.

<sup>14</sup> A. Bank, *op. cit.*, pp. 89, 103; T. V. Nikolaeva, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

that fact that the majority of known icons of this type come from the collections of Athonite and other Balkan monasteries. In this case one can understand the defects of workmanship of the master and his breach of the canon, obscured by the general magnificence of the icon. Such details had little interest for the buyer, for whom the rich appearance of icon was more important, because it was to be presented in church immediately. In the church the icon became inaccessible for detailed examination.

The iconography of *The Assumption* is nearly identical to a similar scene on an icon from the monastery of Vatopedi on Athos, where all twelve scenes were shown. A certain resemblance is also detectable in the scene *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*. A. V. Bank dates the icon from Vatopedi to the 14th century and considers that it was made in Serbia. In her opinion, some of the icons of this type were made in the 13th-14th centuries in those cities of Italy, which for a long time had been under the strong cultural influence of Byzantium or had been included in the empire. She attributed the beginning of the wide use in art of carving on different varieties of slate, often called "lithographic stone", to the time of the Palaeologi.<sup>15</sup>

For dating the Kiev icon we have to consider the circumstance of its archeological discovery. All fragments of the icon were collected from an area of about 5 square metres. The largest part with four scenes (*The Crucifixion*, *The Entry into Jerusalem* and others) was found in the upper layer of the backfilling of a pit for storing grain. The pit was located on the site of a rich homestead of the 11th-13th centuries, burnt at the capture of Kiev by the army of Batu in 1240. The pit was filled with earth soon after 1240, when the house here was rebuilt. At precisely this time this part of the icon, broken at the time of the destruction of the house, fell into the filling of the old corn pit. The remaining three fragments with scenes of *The Assumption of the Virgin*, *The Ascension* and *The Descent of the Holy Spirit* were discovered close to the pits in a layer of the 12th-13th centuries. Thus the circumstances of discovery allow us to date the ending of the icon's use to the year 1240. Its creation, accordingly, must be referred to a rather earlier time. In view of the dating of icons of this type by A. V. Bank, this time must be limited to the first half of the 13th century.

However, within this time, in 1204 Constantinople was taken by the Crusaders and Byzantine trade was transferred to the hands of Italian merchants. They also took over trade with Rus'. Even after the destruction of Kiev by Batu they did not stop their own commercial operations there.

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<sup>15</sup> A. Bank, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-105, 112, fig. 95.

Plano Carpini found more than ten Italian merchants in Kiev in 1246-1247.<sup>16</sup> Considering this, the opinion of A. V. Bank about Italian centres of production of icons of this type looks rather attractive. However, it is impossible to exclude the possibility that icons were made in the Balkans, now included in the Latin kingdoms, and that Italian merchants only transported them. This also explains the discoveries of icons in southern Italy that afforded the evidence for A. V. Bank for her hypothesis of their Italian origin. The second possibility seems more likely, because objects of Christian cult were a traditional import from Byzantium to Rus and their production did not stop after the capture of Constantinople.

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<sup>16</sup> R. de Vilgelm, *Putešestve v vostočne strany*, Sankt Peterburg 1922, p. 68.