

The Icon of Resurrection: the Transformations in the Russian Art of the 16th-17th Centuries

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Abstract: *The article deals with the problem of Easter iconography. The changes that have taken place in the Russian art of the 16th- 17th centuries are examined. During this time, new samples for Russian icon painters have appeared. These are Western European engravings and Bibles with illustrations. The images from there are borrowed by Russian artists. This is how an engraving is copied from the cycle of illustrations of the Apostolic Creed. This creed is different from the Orthodox one. The fifth illustration includes dogma, that is not named in the Orthodox creed.*

There are different stages of image change. They correspond to the understanding of engraving by Russian icon painters. Firstly, the icon painters interpret the engraving and arrange the images differently from the composition of the engraving. Secondly, they create icons as an exact copy of the engraving. Finally, they create a multi-figure image with a central dominant. This new image is associated in culture with the ancient image of Anastasis, or rather, it is defined as its detailed version. Therefore, the ancient icon of Anastasis is connected with a new context. This makes it difficult both to understand the icon and the history of the "Descent into Hell" image. Only by taking into account the transformation of the icon can we talk about the meaning of the ancient image.

Keywords: *Easter iconography, Orthodox icon, Anastasis, Descent into Hell, Resurrection, Theatrum Biblicum, Piscator, Easter icon.*

The image of the "Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Anastasis) (Fig. 1) is now also called the "Descent into Hell", although there is no basis for this either in iconography or in church tradition¹.

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¹ This problem investigates in monography: Иванова С.В. Воскресение и Сошествия во ад: история двух сюжетов в христианском искусстве. СПб.: Российский институт истории искусств, 2019. – 398 с. For a study of the ancient images of Anastasis, see the book Kartsonis A. D., *Anastasis: The Making of an Image*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1986.

The Orthodox iconography of the great Easter feast has an ancient, but at the same time complicated history. More than once over the past hundred years, the question whether it is even possible to depict the most joyful, but also completely incomprehensible event - the Resurrection of Christ - has been raised. Moreover, it is not described in the Gospel, which only says that the women who came to anoint the body of the Lord and did not find It received the news of the Resurrection from the Angel - therefore, sometimes the image of the "Myrrh-Bearing Woman at the Tomb" is associated with this feast.



Fig. 1. Anastasis (Resurrection of Christ). Icon from the church of the Assumption in the village of Volotovo near Novgorod, 1470s–1480s.

But the studies show that there is an icon of Easter in Orthodox art. It is the icon "Anastasis", where two deeds of Christ are shown: the trampling of the destroyed hell and the salvation of mankind represented by the image of Adam.

In this case, it is visibly shown what it is said in the Orthodox Paschal troparion: Christ conquers death and gives eternal life to mortals. This iconography reflects the teaching of the Church about the salvation of man by God (soteriology) - that for which the Lord incarnated, died, and what happened in His Resurrection.

The inscription explains what is depicted as "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ" - in Greek "Anastasis" (Fig. 2). This image appeared in

Byzantium and, together with Christianity, was adopted in Russia. It is difficult to explain what this renaming as the "Descent into Hell" is based on.



Fig. 2. Anastasis (Resurrection of Christ). Miniature. Athos, 11th century.

Controversies of the modern renaming of the icon as the "Descent into Hell"

Firstly, such a name contradicts the signature on the icon. It is important that the new name began being referred to not so long ago, a little over a hundred years ago, from the end of the 19th century - what is more, in art history literature. Recall that, according to Father Pavel Florensky, giving an icon a name that is not accepted by the Church is, in essence, the same as signing an official document for another person in civil life.

Secondly, by inscribing the icon "Resurrection", the master testified that it depicted nothing other than what he called - and implying something else means committing perjury.

This discrepancy - the names and inscriptions - for some reason it is not disputed. On the contrary, attempts are being made to explain it - what gives rise to arguments about a certain "tradition"² - but why then do we not see it in Byzantium? Why is it absent at the time of the heyday of ancient Russian art?

In attempts to interpret such a strange discrepancy, one can reach the passionate assertion that "there is no icon of the Resurrection of Christ in

² For example, see: Loerke M.-M.-O. Höllenfahrt Christi und Anastasis. *Ein Bildmotiv im Abendland und im christlichen Osten*. Regensburg, 2003.

Orthodox iconography!". Similar opinions were expressed by other modern theologians: since the Church commemorates the Descent of Christ into Hell on Holy Saturday, Leonid Uspensky has proposed to bring out the image of the "Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Anastasis) on this day, on Great Saturday, and on Easter itself, the icon of the "Wife -myrrh-bearers at the tomb".

But, as we can see, here is the second discrepancy with what is accepted in the Orthodox Church: such a proposal runs counter to the ancient church tradition, according to which Anastasis is placed on the lectern both on Easter and on every Sunday of the year.

Thirdly, despite such a double contradiction - both the inscription of the icon and the sacred church tradition - even theologians do not question the correctness of the new name and the interpretation corresponding to the name. On the contrary, they are trying to find out and justify why the image, supposedly related to the Holy Saturday, is recognized by the Orthodox as joyful! If here is the event of the Descent into Hell, then Christ is shown at the moment of his *kenosis* (Greek), that is, humiliation³. But, most importantly, then Christ is also shown before His Resurrection ("in hell with the soul"), in the separation of soul and body, that is, in the state of death! Let us ask the question, is such an image possible in Orthodoxy?

But even this third, most striking contradiction, oddly enough, does not raise questions and doubts about the injustice of renaming the 19th century, when the image "The Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ" began to be called the "Descent into Hell".

We emphasize this idea once again: if we look at the history of renaming, we will see that it did not take place in the Church, but in the works of art historians. Therefore, it is in the history of art that one must look for answers, without offering any innovations in the church and without making loud statements that the Easter icon supposedly does not exist. And when we turn to the history of art, many questions become apparent.

Because it really exists an image of the "Descent into Hell" (Fig. 3), but it is not in any way connected with the Orthodox icon of the Resurrection. It appeared at a different time and in a different culture, as an illustration of a creed not accepted in Orthodoxy⁴.

Image "Anastasis" (Resurrection of Christ)

Concerning Anastasis, judging by the peculiarities of its expressiveness, it appears in the 4th-6th centuries. In it, we see the figurative techniques characteristic to late Antiquity and early Byzantine art.

³Иларион (Алфеев), архиепископ. Христос – победитель ада. Тема сошествия во ад в восточнохристианской традиции. СПб., 2009

⁴ See: Simor S. B. «I believe». *Images of the Credo from Charlemagne to Luther*. Dissertation. Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1996.

The “grasping of the wrist” - the way Christ holds Adam - is a symbol in both ancient and early Byzantine art. It appears in plots related to returning home, escaping from danger, passing under the power of the one who holds the wrist.



Fig. 3. Harrowing of hell. Hjembaek, Denmark, ca. 1475.

The victory of Christ is also shown in a way characteristic to the art of that time. For example, the emperor Justinian, who built the church of St. Sophia, after the suppression of the Nika uprising (532), marked his triumph over the instigators of the riots by sitting on the hippodrome (where the largest number of people could see him), putting his feet on his two defeated opponents. On the mosaic "Christ the Triumphant" in the Archbishop's Chapel in Ravenna (494-520), the Savior tramples on a lion and a serpent (which correlates with the words of the 90th psalm). On the icon "Anastasis", Christ tramples Satan and the defeated gates of hell - that denotes His triumph, victory in the Resurrection over the forces of hell and death.

The canon of the image "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Anastasis) is strictly defined, and each image in it has an additional theological significance. Christ holds Adam by the wrist - and this shows the transition of the forefather into the power of the Saviour, his deliverance from the bonds of the fall. Eve, created from Adam's rib, is always depicted next to Adam, she raises her hands in joy to the side of her husband. In addition to Christ and the Ancestors, King David and his son Solomon are also represented here; John the Baptist and Abel.

The whole image is filled with the shine of Glory, the background of this icon is golden, but even against this background the Saviour is shown in the *mandorla*, revealing the divine light. The gradation of mandorla is from black in the center (which, according to the word of Dionysius the Areopagite, means that divine light, which is darkness for an ordinary sinful person) - to the bright edge (the light accessible to human contemplation).

And only below, as a sign of triumph, as a reminder of the already accomplished victory in the completed battle, there are the destroyed gates of hell, which Christ tramples on.

As for ancient monuments, as research shows, in the era of iconoclasm, it was the image of the Resurrection (Anastasis) that was subjected to especially fierce persecution. Despite this, the image of Anastasis has survived up to nowadays, which modern science refers to the 4th-6th centuries: a bas-relief of the columns that are now in the Cathedral of St. Mark in Venice⁵. Reliquary crosses of the 8th-9th centuries (i.e. the period of iconoclasm) indicate that the iconography of Anastasis was widely known at this time.

The image of Anastasis arose before iconoclasm - and long before the appearance of the image of the "Descent into Hell" in the Western tradition.

The Image "Descent into Hell"

The image "Descent into Hell" (Herowing of Hell, in Latin *Descensus ad inferos*) is completely unrelated to the Orthodox icon of the Resurrection and it appeared in Western European art in the 9th century, in the Carolingian Renaissance.

Its origin is due to the "Apostolic Creed", which, in the time of Charlemagne, in the early 9th century, receives a special status. This creed, despite its name, is later than the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is accepted in Orthodoxy. It differs in composition from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, in particular, that its fifth formula speaks not only of the Resurrection, but also of the Descent into Hell. Therefore, it is quite rightly that in the illustrations of the "Apostles' Creed" there also appears that image that correlates with this event.

For the first time, the "Harrowing of hell" image appears in a miniature - an illustration to the "Apostolic Creed" in the Utrecht Psalter (816-830). It is shown how Christ leans towards the abyss, from which flames soar, and raises naked people from there.

At a later time, hell began to be designated as a monster, and people are in its mouth, "the mouth of hell". All people in this image are most often naked, there are no specific persons among them - and Adam and Eve can

⁵ Weigel T. *Die Reliefsäulen des Hauptaltarciboriums von San Marco in Venedig*. Rhema Verlag, 1997.

only be identified hypothetically. Their torment is still going on, the flame is still burning, the monster is still alive. Hell is depicted as active, not ruined - and the demons are preparing to attack the unarmed Christ. In the hands of Christ, there is a holy battle banner, oriflamme. The outcome of the battle from what is shown is unknown.

The iconography of the "Anastasis" until the 16th-17th centuries, although it includes new accents, remains basically unchanged; icon painters turn to those main variants of the composition that appeared in Byzantium. We can only talk about stylistic features that are characteristic to certain eras or schools of icon painting.

On the contrary, a completely different thing can be said about the history of the image "Descent into Hell". It is undergoing major changes. In Renaissance art, these changes occur, perhaps even under the influence of the Byzantine iconography of the "Resurrection of Christ" - which we see in Italian art⁶. Only during the Renaissance, the image of the "Descent into Hell" becomes known in Italian art. Until this time it has not appeared there. The miniatures of "Exultet", the Paschal scrolls, common in Benevento church tradition, have another plot and only similar, but not the same iconography. The old Roman creed, despite its closeness to the "Apostles' creed", does not contain the word "descended into hell".

Italian Renaissance artists, depicting hell, do not use either zoomorphic images or flames, designating it as a cave. This decision then influenced the iconography of the plot in the north of Europe – in Germany and Netherlands. In a specifically Italian style, this image is created by Dürer. The tradition of the usage of the image "Descent into Hell" after the Renaissance is dying out - but once again it becomes relevant in Protestantism, in the 16th century. In this period, it is mainly replicated in engravings.

When creating engravings, the image is inverted from left to right. If in miniatures and frescoes, hell was located to the left of Christ, now it is on the right, and the Savior is heading in this direction.

At this time, another important change should be noted. The illustrations of the Apostolic Creed do not show each event separately named in it, but combine all the events named in a certain formula into one engraving⁷. For example, in the illustration of the third formula, both the

⁶ About this: Иванова С.В. Образ «Сошествие во ад» в творчестве итальянских художников (XIV-XVI вв.) // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета технологии и дизайна. СПб., 2018. Вып. 4. С. 24-31

⁷ See: Иванова С.В. Апостольский Символ веры в книжных иллюстрациях в западноевропейском искусстве. // Вестник Православного Свято-Тихоновского Гуманитарного Университета. Серия 5: Вопросы истории и теории христианского искусства. М. 2015. Вып. 1 (17). С. 45-54.

Annunciation and Christmas are depicted at the same time, framed together as one image. Thus, in the illustration of the fifth formula, "Descent into hell" and "Rise from the grave" are combined (Fig. 4).

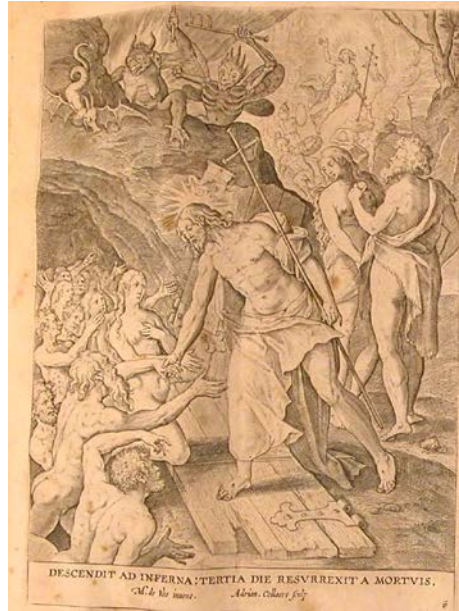


Fig. 4. Resurrection (as "Rising from the grave") and Descent into hell. Fifth engraving of the "Apostles' Creed" from the Piscator's Bible. Adrian Collaert, by M. de Vos. 1674. F. 453.

The way of association of two images

So, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Anastasis) and "The Descent into Hell" are two different images that arose in different cultures - Byzantine and Latin - not connected with each other either by their history or iconography, moreover, they have different scenes.

The action of Anastasis takes place in the heavenly world, this is the moment of the Resurrection of Christ, His triumph over death, the complete victory over hell and the devil, the return of paradise to man. All the action in the "Descent into Hell" takes place in the underworld, which he (he= the devil?) enters having a unique purpose: to destroy the Saviour. How could these two so different images be associated with each other?

The answer to this question can be found in the history of Russian art of the 16th-17th centuries, when Western European influences become strong in Russia.

Namely, when icon painters begin to use various Western European engravings as models for creating new images. Between the 16th-17th

centuries, Protestant albums of engravings and illustrated Bibles appeared in Russia, and Russian icon painters turned to the images of such “Face Bibles” as models for their work. Recall that at the moment of confrontation with Catholicism in Protestantism, they once again turned to the "Apostles' Creed" - which is presented on Protestant engravings.

For example, in the “Theatrum Biblicum”, printed in the Netherlands by Nicolas Ioannes Piscator, in the section illustrating the gospel narrative, the West-European image of Resurrection, “Rise from the tomb” is placed (Fig. 5). This image was unusual for the Orthodox art of the 16th-17th centuries. Therefore, when creating icons like “I Believe”⁸ or icons that were supposed to depict the Resurrection, Russian icon painters turned to the next section of this Bible - illustrations of the “Apostolic Creed” - and used its fifth engraving, not assuming the possibility of another Creed, different from the Orthodox one.



Fig. 5. Resurrection (as “Rising from the grave”). Engraving of the Gospel from the Piscator’s Bible.

However, these differences exist, and as we have already noted, just in the fifth formula. The engraving illustrating this formula depicts two

⁸ Иванова С.В. Икона «Символ веры» в русском искусстве. // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского Университета. Серия 15: Искусствоведение. СПб: Издательство Санкт-Петербургского Университета, 2015. С. 64-74.

events: the descent of Christ into hell and his Resurrection (in Western European iconography, as the Rising from the tomb). The descent is shown here as it began to be depicted in Italian art (the 14th-15th centuries), without the hellish mouth. It is this engraving that Russian icon painters have begun to copy, giving it iconographic features.

This is how that image appeared, which is characteristic only for Russian art, created as a copy of an engraving, where two images side by side, the Descent into Hell and the Rise from the Sepulcher - which is typical for the Creed, which is different from the Orthodox one. It could be said that the image of the "Descent into Hell" for the first time (the 16th-17th centuries) becomes a reality of Orthodox art. But here it is necessary to take into account the possibility that the icon painters simply did not understand its meaning and interpreted it differently.

Stages of accommodation of new iconography

The confirmation that the icon painters of the 16th-17th centuries did not understand what is depicted in the engraving can be seen in the iconography of the new image "Rise from the tomb with the Descent into Hell."



Fig. 6. Resurrection (as "Rising from the grave") and Descent into hell. 1679 – 1681. From the Archangel Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin.

On earlier similar icons, we do not see an exact copy, but a modification that reflects the understanding of the icon painter. Since he perceives the first image as corresponding to "Anastasis", he places it above the image of the Rebellion from the Tomb (Fig. 6).

The place of action of the image "Rise from the grave" is our world, the earthly reality, and the icon painters of the 16th-17th centuries placed it in the lower right corner, although copying the engraving, but changing its composition.

Then, in the 17th-18th centuries, "The Rise from the tomb with the Descent into Hell" is depicted as an exact copy of the engraving: the location of the plots relative to each other is preserved (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Resurrection (as "Rising from the grave") and Descent into hell. Mikhey and Savva Slovenins. 1764.



Fig. 8. Resurrection (as "Rising from the grave") and Descent into hell. First half of the 18th century. State Museum of Palekh Art.

For the 18th-19th centuries, the new iconography is already characteristic, where the figure of Christ is twice located along the central vertical (Fig. 8). It turns out a stable compositional dominant, around which other events are located. This includes not only those events that are mentioned in the Gospel, but also apocryphal stories (the story of the Prudent Robber, the myrrh-bearing wife of Tiberius, the story of the ubrus etc.).

An analysis of the composition of these plots allows us to name as their source the collection "The Passion of the Christ" - a translated work from Western European literature, which has had a wide circulation in Russia since the 17th century, and has become popular among the people, especially among the Old Believers.

In the 19th century, the official church art was oriented towards academic models. The Western European image "Rise from the tomb" has become well-known in Russian art - it is this image that we see in the main cathedrals in St.Petersburg. But among the peasants and old-believers, both the Anastasis icon and the multi-figured image "Rise from the tomb with the Descent into hell" continue to exist.

The situation changes with the building of the Church of the Resurrection in St. Petersburg ("Savior on Blood"), which, at the request of Nicholas II, should be decorated in accordance with ancient iconography⁹. The search for the origins begins, which was destined to end with the revolution.



Fig. 9. Anastasis (Resurrection of Christ).1370s–1380s. State Russian Museum.

Art criticism works, which were published in the 19th century, accept a new designation of the image (for example, N.P. Pokrovsky uses the names

⁹ Иванова С.В. Анастасис: в поисках канона. Образ Воскресения в русской иконографии на рубеже XIX-XX веков. Верующий разум. СПб., 2014. № 1 (3). С. 64-77.

“Anastasis” and “Descent into Hell” as identical). But there has been no study showing the legitimacy of such an association. This is how that “tradition” arises, which at present seems to be “old”, and therefore time-honored.

Just as not a single dogma of the Creed can be changed, so in icon painting any random change can lead to the loss of the meaning of the icon. Unfortunately, such a rough change was allowed in relation to the image of the “the Feast of Feasts” (Fig. 9) - the Resurrection of Christ.

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Fig. 3. Harrowing of hell. Hjembaek, Denmark, ca. 1475.

Fig. 4. Resurrection (as “Rising from the grave”) and Descent into hell. Fifth engraving of the “Apostles' Creed” from the Piscator’s Bible. Adrian Collaert, by M. de Vos. 1674. F. 453.

Fig. 5. Resurrection (as “Rising from the grave”). Engraving of the Gospel from the Piscator’s Bible.

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