Aleksandra Sulikowska

Icons of John the Baptist in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw: The Angel's Body, a Martyr's Death, Holy Remains

Theodoret of Cyrrhus, a popular writer of the Early Byzantine period, wrote a story about a fifth-century Syrian monk who went by the name James and who doubted the authenticity of the relics of John the Baptist from Phoenicia and Palestine. He conjectured that they were the remains of "some other martyr with the same name," and not of the Forerunner of Christ. But a man dressed in white appeared to James one night: "'Brother James,' he said, 'look at the one standing there, whose raiment is like the snow in color, and before whom is placed a furnace of fire.' I moved my eyes in that direction and surmised it was John the Baptist, for he wore his cloak, and was stretching out his hand as if baptizing. 'It is the one,' he said, 'whom you have guessed it to be.'"[1] The motif of appearances in dreams is a topos in the literature of the Byzantine world. We frequently come across stories of people to whom saints appear at night, and no one doubts their identities.[2] Here, it is important to recall another motif in the Middle Byzantine Apocalypse of Anastasia, whose protagonist, in her travels through the heavens at the source of the River Jordan, meets a man dressed in priestly robes. She does not know who he is because he has a camel's skin draped around him, and so he needs to introduce himself as John the Baptist.[3]

These two stories show the enormous role played by iconography in the popular conception of saints. Since icons were the source of the collective imagination, saints appeared to the faithful looking identical to the icons they had seen earlier. John the Baptist, one of the key figures in the Orthodox literary and iconographic tradition, was one of the most easily recognizable, and the esteem in which he was held became one of the oldest and most constant cults of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

This article discusses John the Baptist as a protagonist in the collective imagination and his representations in seventeenth-nineteenth-century icons in the lands spanning the border between East and West. There are significant numbers of them in the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw. They appear in Russian and Ukrainian art, and come from workshops affiliated with the official Orthodox Church and those working for the Old Believers. This period was marked by changes in the iconographic canon, its deconstruction and also – something

[1] *A History of the Monks of Syria by Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, intro. by R.M. Price (Collegeville, Minn.: Cistercian Publications distributed by Liturgical Press, 1985), pp. 133–49 (XXI, 20).

[2] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 4–6.

[3] Jane Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium. Celestian Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 344.

that most scholars agree on – an intensive crisis in Orthodox art brought on by reforms in ritual introduced by Patriarch Nikon in the mid-seventeenth century.[4] Now, a large group of adherents to the old order, the Old Believers, contended that life in imperial Russia had been taken over by the Antichrist.[5] To them, icons were not only religious objects but also special messengers to the past of Holy Rus', its marks in this new world in which the believers in the "Old Orthodoxy" were forced to live.[6]

At this time, the Muscovite state authorities and the official Church repudiated the old culture and the arts. Russian art was confronting the Western tradition and adopted many of its elements, transforming its identity in many ways. Hence, much like the Polish-Lithuanian state after the Union of Brest of 1596, the cohesive model of religious art was shattered. In cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg, "new icons" were being created. They followed Western, often Polish, traditions. In the meantime, Old Believer workshops continued to paint the "old icons" according to the canons of the old art. Centres such as Palekh produced expensive works, which adhered to the models of the historical "schools" of Russian art, while provincial centres made *krasnushki*, whose recipients were the poor masses of the Russian Empire. The coexistence of various artistic formulas, as well as the appearance of large numbers of new iconographic types, which alluded partly to Western graphic models and, to some extent, stemmed from the internal changes in post-Byzantine art, were an important feature of the art of this period.

The cult of John the Baptist was widespread in Byzantium. This is evident in the icons, the popularity of his relics, the naming of churches and the frequent presence of his figure in wall paintings, as well as the recurring references to the saint in literature.[7] It seems that in Rus', however, especially in the lands of Novgorod and Moscow, he was somewhat eclipsed by the cult of Saint Nicholas, a process largely explained by Boris Uspensky in his study of this cult.[8] Yet there is no question that Saint John's relics evoked passionate emotions among the Russians, and were a destination of their pilgrimages to the Mediterranean. Thus, the most popular relics in Constantinople were his head and his hands.[9] They, and especially his right hand, which was adored for having baptized Christ, were especially important.[10] The Rus' knew from Anthony, who had travelled to Constantinople in the twelfth century, that this hand was used to bless a newly appointed emperor.[11] People also paid homage to other parts of John's body, such as pieces of his bones, his fingers and especially his head; as for his head, sources

4 Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion. Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 144–5. See also Barbara Dąb-Kalinowska, *Między Bizancjum a Zachodem. Ikony rosyjskie XVII–XIX wieku* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1990), pp. 7–8.

5 Tarasov, op. cit., p. 144.

6 Aleksandra Sulikowska-Gąska, "Dwie ikony maryjne z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Na temat pojęcia ikony staroobrzędowej," *Ikonotheka*, 18 (2005), pp. 7–8.

7 Kathleen Corrigan, "The Witness of John the Baptist on an Early Byzantine Icon in Kiev," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 42 (1988), pp. 1–11.

8 Boris A. Uspensky, *Kult św. Mikołaja na Rusi*, trans. Elżbieta Janus, Maria Renata Mayenowa, Zofia Kozłowska (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1985), pp. 44–8.

9 George Majeska, "Russian Pilgrims in Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 56 (2002), tables 1, 3.

10 Annemarie Weyl Carr, "The Face Relics of the John the Baptist in Byzantium and the West," *Gesta*, 46 (2007), p. 160.

11 *Puteshestvie novgorodskovo arkhepiskopa Antonia v Tsar'grad v kontse 12-go stoletiya* (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk, 1872), col. 97–8.

about the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople and the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos inform about its preservation,[12] as well as about the saint's dress, hair, right hand and stick, which was also used in imperial ceremonies.[13] While following the fourth crusade in 1204 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Rus' lost direct access to these relics, but they remained important in the life of their Church, especially symbolically.

The questions this essay attempts to answer are: How did the cult of John the Baptist, which was so traditional and deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition, look after the seventeenth century, in the reality of volatility and crisis in Russian culture, which also existed on the Latin-Orthodox border having been created by the Union of Brest? Did this cult adopt elements of Western tradition or did it retain its specific Orthodox identity and an iconographic separateness? Did new elements characteristic of contemporary Russian culture appear in it?

The Holy Body

The icon, which probably originated from Palekh and dates to the first half of the nineteenth century, represents a half-figure of a winged John the Baptist, en trois quarts to the left, holding in his hand a richly decorated poterion (**fig. 1**).[14] It includes a representation of the body of Christ, naked, lying on the baby's back with his legs tucked under and his arms raised. In the same hand, John also holds a scroll with the writing: **Ꙗ҆зъ бⷬдѣ͏ᵡ и сбⷬдѣ҆тѣлс҆твоа͏ᵡ сѐй агнецъ҆ бж҃ій взе́маѧ и грѣхѝ всего́ мі́ра покане́сѧ прⷬбланж** [...]. With his other hand he points to Jesus, who is accompanied by the monogram ĩс хс̃. John's face is covered in many deep furrows, his hair is dishevelled and wings grow out of his shoulders. In the upper section of the kovcheg, on the two sides of the figure, is written his name, **ст҃ы́й і҆ѡа́ннъ прⷬтеча**. An inner glow lights up his face, his hands, wings and some of his clothing. The representation is dynamic, an effect achieved by the artist with trembling lines in John's hair and beard, his facial wrinkles and the hairs of the fur and the folds of his robe. The wings, which seem to be woven out of thin, multi-coloured lines, appear immaterial, as one with the icon's gold background.

By their very nature, icons show a different reality. The faithful believe that icons represent a world inaccessible to the human senses. This representation reflects the image of the world but in a profoundly symbolic way, which is therefore comprehensible to the human mind. Thus, saints are painted in a way that has little to do with realism, their bodies appear transformed, emanating light, and at the same time ignore the principles of anatomy. The corporality of John the Baptist stands out even among the Orthodox icons of saints. It is not only his wings that are unusual, but the exceptional combination of the ascetic characteristics of a saint and a fitting severity, with a fierceness and emotional tension. John the Baptist's corporality seems nonmaterial, lacking earthly weight, fully corresponding to the description

[12] Weyl Carr, op. cit., p. 161.

[13] Michele Bacci, "Relics of the Pharos Chapel: A View from the Latin West," in *Vostochnohristianskie relikvii*, Aleksey M. Lidov, ed. (Moscow: Progress-Traditsia, 2003), pp. 244–5; see also *Puteshestvie novgorodskovo arkhepiskopa...*, op. cit., p. 98.

[14] Panel, battens, "kovcheg," tempera, gold leaf, 53.6 × 45 cm, The National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 81 MNW. See Dąb-Kalinowska, *Między Bizancjum a Zachodem...*, op. cit., pl. VIII; *Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. Arcydzieła malarstwa*, Dorota Folga-Januszewska, ed. (Warsaw: Arkady, 2005), fig. p. 71.

that appears in hymnography, which calls John "an angel who is here on earth among people, embodied"[15] and "God's angel in bodily form."[16]

Scholars agree that it was hymnography that served as the source of the depictions of the saint with wings, which are widely used in Late and post-Byzantine art. In the art of Rus', in which one of the first representations of the Angel of the Desert is probably an icon from the Circle of Theophanes the Greek from the end of the fourteenth century,[17] it became more widespread beginning in the seventeenth century, in both large centres (the icon in the Yaroslavl school from the Uspensky Sobor in Yaroslavl[18]) and in the provinces (for instance, in the north).[19]

John the Baptist's angelic appearance also comes from the fact that he operates between different worlds: he is God's messenger, as he is described in the Gospel According to Saint Mark[20] and as the early Christian theologians called him, as they connected him to the prophesies of the Old Testament, especially its last book of the Prophet Malachi, which says: "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple [...]"[21] (Mal 3: 1). According to Apocryphal sources, in the desert John was accompanied by angels who also conveyed their teachings to him.[22] Origenes explained John's angelic nature thus: "Angels (messengers) of God are so called on account of their office, and are not here called men on account of their nature"[23] – John is called an angel because he is God's "envoy."[24] Cyril of Alexandria connects his angelic image to the mission of the "voice in the wilderness."[25]

John the Baptist thus belongs to a different order of beings from ordinary mortals, or even saints. Paul Evdokimov writes: „The violence of John the Baptist is the violence of the one who is gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11: 29)."[26] To put it differently, John the Baptist can

[15] Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, *Akatyst ku czci Jana, dostojnego i najchwalebniejszego Proroka, Poprzednika i Chrzciciela Pańskiego*, in Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, *Życie i pisma. Wybór tekstów*, Mariola Walczak-Mikołajczakowa, Aleksander Naumow, trans. and eds (Gniezno: Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza, 2007), p. 177; see Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World. A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), p. 236; Grigory I. Vzdornov, "Ikona 'Ioann Predtecha Angel Pustyni' – pamyatnik kruga Feofana Greka," *Pamiatniki kultury. Novye otkrytia*, 1975, p. 171.

[16] Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, "Kanon Janowi Poprzednikowi," in id., *Życie i pisma...*, op. cit., p. 184.

[17] Vzdornov, op. cit., pp. 171–9.

[18] Vera G. Brusova, *Russkaya zhivopis' 17 veka* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), pl. 68.

[19] Ibid., pl. 81.

[20] "As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk 1: 2–4). All quotations are from the King James Bible.

[21] Cf. "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared" (Ex 23: 20).

[22] "Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela przypisywany biskupowi egipskiemu Serapionowi," trans. Father Mariusz Rosik, in *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu*, vol. 1, *Ewangelie apokryficzne*, part 2, *Św. Józef i św. Jan Chrzciciel. Męka i zmartwychwstanie Jezusa. Wniebowzięcie Maryi*, Father Marek Starowieyski, ed. (Krakow: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2003), p. 599 (I, 17).

[23] *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament XIV. The Twelve Prophets*, Alberto Ferreiro, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 300–1.

[24] Tadros Y. Malaty, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Orange, N.J.: Coptic Orthodox Christian Center, 2003), pp. 26–7.

[25] Walter Haring, "The Winged St. John the Baptist. Two Examples in American Collection," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 5 (1922), no. 2, pp. 35–6.

[26] Evdokimov, op. cit., p. 244.

be called God's holy fool. The appearance of his body, the asceticism of his face, his untidy hair and "wild" clothing mean that in icons he appears to be related to representations of the foolishness for Christ, *yurodivy*, for example, to images of Alexios, the Man of God.[27]

The subject of the angel's body has an even broader context in iconography, as in Byzantium both eunuchs and monks were thought of as angels. In the organization of the Byzantine court, eunuchs were seen as the equivalent of angelic forces in the heavenly court.[28] Monks, it was believed, through their ascetic feats, became similar to angelic beings. *Hermeneia* by Dionysius of Fourna tells of a representation of Pachomius, an old Egyptian man of the desert and a founder of Eastern Monasticism, before whom stands "the guardian angel wearing a monk's garb, a cloak and a hood on his head, points to his clothing with his finger and reads from the scroll: 'All flesh dressed in this clothing, Pachomius, will be redeemed.'"[29] The composition that corresponds to this description is known, for example, from a sixteenth-century hagiographic icon in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow.[30]

Texts describe John as an ascetic whose "meat was locusts and wild honey,"[31] "lest impure food enter his mouth,"[32] and who "wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist."[33] His clothing was given to him by his mother, and she dressed him as if he were still a child: "I put on my son a cloak of camelhair and a leather belt, so that the mountain of the sacred desert would be inhabited, and so that convents and monks' communities would grow on it."[34] John the Baptist's life was a fundamental model for Christian ascetics, and many authors show admiration for the saint's power and for his ascetic tenaciousness.[35] Being compared to John the Baptist were the Egyptian ascetics, such as Anthony,[36] and he was even a model for holy women, such as Paraskeva of Trnvovo, who was immensely popular in Rus'.[37] Francysk Skaryna openly wrote about John the Baptist that he "reveals the angelic life"[38] to people and gives "a model for the angels' life."[39]

This icon from Palekh, which formally refers to the seventeenth-century art of the Volga region, shows John's body in virtually Cubist form; the purpose of this presentation is to show his liberation from corporality, while his wings are a link to the non-material world. It is also

27 Brusova, op. cit., p. 147, fig. 157; see also Vzdornov, op. cit., p. 175.

28 Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant. Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 142–62.

29 Dionysius of Fourna, *Hermeneia czyli Objaśnienie sztuki malarskiej*, Ireneusz Kania, trans., Małgorzata Smorąg Różycka, ed. (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2003), p. 207.

30 Janina Kłosińska, *Ikony* (Krakow: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 1973), no. 41, pp. 210–1.

31 Mt 3: 4.

32 *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, op. cit., p. 596. On John the Baptist's diet, see the extensive study by James A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locusts and Wild Honey" in Synoptics and Patristic Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

33 Mt 3: 4.

34 *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, op. cit., p. 595.

35 Kelhoffer, op. cit., pp. 153–65.

36 *The Life and Teaching of Pachomius* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Redwood Books, 1998), p. 2.

37 "The Life of Saint Petka /Paraskeva/. A Seventeenth Century Damascene," in Thomas Butler, *Monumenta Bulgarica. A Bilingual Anthology of Bulgarian Texts from the 9th to the 19th Centuries* (Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2005), pp. 316–7.

38 Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, *Akatyst ku czci Jana...*, op. cit., p. 179.

39 Ibid., p. 172; see also Vzdornov, op. cit., p. 171.

a somewhat typical way of presenting John the Baptist: a nineteenth-century icon from Vetka shows him in similar form, albeit without wings (**fig. 2**).[40] In it, he wears an animal fur and a green coat, his head is encircled by wool-like hair and beard. His face has a subtle beauty, and singular horizontal wrinkles under his lower eyelids give it a slightly demonic look. Written on his scroll are the words Се агнецъ бжїй вземлѧя грѣхи мира, покайтесѧ приближ [...]. The icon also labels John as a prophet, стын пророк іоаннъ предтеча.

Both icons feature a noticeable figure of Christ lying in a poterion, which represents the Amnos iconographic type. It also appears on an icon of John the Baptist from the church in Torki, which can be dated to the seventeenth century (**fig. 3**),[41] and linked to an eighteenth-century icon of John the Baptist that includes scenes from his life and saints, a panel in the *Deesis* triptych (**fig. 4**).[42] The first icon, which presents John as a full frontal figure, holding a scroll with the words Σвѧты ягнуѕ божи вземлѧ грѣхи во сего мира, and with two hagiographic scenes in its lower corners, is a unique combination of various iconographic standards. It may have come from the Peremyshl workshop, which mostly used models from modern West European painting: John's face and body are ascetic and emaciated, but they were painted "realistically," in an effort to show him anatomically correct and with light-and-shadow modelling; making the figure less realistic, however, are the wings on the saint's shoulders and the icon's embossed, ornamental background (**fig. 3**).

The presentation of Christ's Amnos here is one of the most significant elements in John the Baptist's iconography, as it was the subject of one of the earliest doctrinal rulings on icons made by the fifth-sixth council in 692, according to which "on some venerable images is depicted a lamb at whom the Forerunner points with his finger," and it recommended that icons represent Jesus in his human form.[43] Christ the Child in the poterion symbolizes the Eucharist and reveals the deep ties between John and Jesus and the nature of the saint's antecedence and intercession. John appears as a witness to the incarnation of Christ,[44] and by baptizing him he prophesies the Saviour's future glory and resurrection.[45] Appearing on the scrolls in the icons representing this iconographic theme are the words "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Repent, for the Kingdom is near," which refers to the Gospel according to Saint John "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before

[40] Panel, tempera, gold leaf, 44.3 × 35.6 cm, inv. no. IK 399 MNW.

[41] Panel, battens, tempera, gold leaf, 108 × 71, inv. no. IK 107 MNW. For a discussion of the icons in the Torki church, see Aleksandra Sulikowska, "Siedemnastowieczna ikona Trójcy Świętej z cerkwi w Torkach z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie (Kilka uwag na temat ikonografii Starotestamentowej Trójcy Świętej w malarstwie cerkiewnym dawnej Rzeczypospolitej)," in *Do piękna nadprzyrodzonego. Sesja naukowa na temat rozwoju sztuki sakralnej od X do XX wieku na terenie dawnych diecezji chełmskich Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego, prawosławnego, greckokatolickiego*, vol. 1. *Referaty* (Chełm: Muzeum Chełmskie, 2003), pp. 184–5. The icon was published prior to conservation (Monika Branicka, "Ikona św. Jana Chrzciciela – Anioła pustyni z Odrzechowej w zbiorach Muzeum Budownictwa Ludowego w Sanoku," *Materiały Muzeum Budownictwa Ludowego w Sanoku*, no. 35 (2001), pp. 24–44, fig. 12) and was the subject of a Master's thesis, Olga Tkaczenko, *Dokumentacja konserwatorska „Święty Jan Anioł Pustyni" ikona, XVII w.*, inv. no. IK 107 MNW (Warsaw: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 2004).

[42] Panel, battens, tempera, gold leaf, 44 × 37.5 cm, inv. no. IK 45 MNW. See *Ikony. Przedstawienia maryjne z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w* Warszawie, Aleksandra Sulikowska, ed. (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2004), p. 237, cat. no. 94.

[43] Cyril Mango, *The Art of Byzantine Empire 312–1453. Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Jersey Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 139.

[44] Corrigan, op. cit., p. 3.

[45] Ibid., p. 6.

me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water" (Jn 1: 29–31). This call, in the context of the icons discussed here, should be seen with the atmosphere in Russia and Ukraine in mind, with the widespread belief across seventeenth-nineteenth-century society that the end of the world was near.[46]

A Life of Saint John

The story of Saint John has been described in the gospels, but it also has a rich Apocryphal background.[47] According to the Gospel of Saint Luke, "[...] Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her" (Lk 1: 57–58). The Apocryphal Story of John the Baptist, whose author was allegedly Mark the Evangelist, simply states that "six months before five thousand five hundred years had passed since the creation of the world, the Holy Spirit ordered the birth of Saint John the Baptist."[48] This source shows John's birth as a key event in the history of humanity. At the same time, *The Life of Saint John* attributed to Serapion only mentions that "when Saint Elizabeth had given birth, great happiness and joy reigned in her house."[49]

Sources focus extensively on John's public activity, but, above all, address his conflict with Herod. After Herod learnt that John had publicly criticized him for marrying his brother's wife, he decided to imprison John. The Apocryphs quote from the speech John was to have made to the ruler: "Why do you conceal the poison and the vermin that reside in your spoilt heart, and why did you tarnish your brother's bed? Why do you appear manly and gentle on the outside, but inside desire stirs up chaos in your heart and makes you act contemptibly? Why do you neglect piety and indulge in the frailty of dissipation? You may not have your brother's wife!"[50] According to Serapion's source, John "repeated these words, calling out in the wilderness, as he had been taught by the angel,"[51] and his imprisonment led to social unrest. Tradition has it that Herodias's daughter, who had seduced Herod with her dancing (*The Life of Saint John* states that "the bad king lived with both of them adulterously"[52]) wanted the prophet to die. In the sixteenth century, Francysk Skaryna wrote about these events colourfully and bluntly: "Lecherous Herod, not wanting to abandon his brother's indecent wife [...] ordered that you, who had been imprisoned in a dark cell, be beheaded, and the immoral dancer brought it on a tray to the damned feast."[53] It was thanks to Herodias's (whose name is spelt differently in various sources) daughter's pleas that the saint's head was cut off and brought on a platter to the girl, who then gave this peculiar gift to her mother.[54]

46 Tarasov, op. cit., pp. 146–9.

47 Carl R. Kazmierski, *John the Baptist: Prophet and Evangelist* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 12.

48 *Świadectwo...*, op. cit., p. 580.

49 *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, p. 592.

50 *Świadectwo...*, p. 583.

51 *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, pp. 599–600.

52 Ibid., p. 602.

53 Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, *Akatyst ku czci Jana...*, op. cit., p. 172.

54 Mk 6: 26–28; *Świadectwo...*, pp. 586–7.

The story of John the Baptist is discussed at length in sources and forms the foundation of the hymnography of holy days connected to John, which are among the most important celebrations of the Orthodox Church. Three main cycles of feast days focus on the Saviour, his Mother and John.[55] In the last cycle are the holidays of Conception, Birth and Beheading, which have parallels in the two other cycles, Mary's and Jesus'. In a way, there is also a relationship between the being of Deesis and the year-long cycle of liturgical holy days, which is based on these three cycles.[56] In the *Hexaemeron* icon (**fig. 4**),[57] painted in Palekh and dated to the first half of the nineteenth century, which gives a unique vision of the history of the world and of Russia, holy days correspond to the ages of the history of humanity and its salvation, and at the same time illustrate the days of the week.[58] Sunday is marked by Resurrection, Monday by the Synaxis of the Archangel Michael and the other Bodiless Powers, Tuesday by the Beheading of John the Baptist, Wednesday by the Annunciation, Thursday by the Washing of the apostles' feet, Friday by the Crucifixion and Saturday by those Saved before God the Father and Christ. In the context of these paintings, the Beheading of John the Baptist represents the period of the Old Testament that is marked by the figure of John the Baptist and his victim, prophesying the glory of the Messiah.

In the eighteenth-century icon of John the Baptist that is a panel in the *Deesis* triptych (**fig. 5**), the following scenes encircle the main image: *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*, *Theophany*, *The Beheading of Saint John*, *Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem* and *The Elevation of the Holy Cross*. Most of these representations can be connected to the question of relationships of the ideas in the Old and the New Testaments. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Greek: *Hypapante*) shows the instant when Simeon the old man recognizes the child Jesus as the Messiah, Theophany is an image of the Epiphany, while the representation of Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem and the Elevation of the Holy Cross can be viewed as interpretations of the earthly and heavenly glory of Christ. The painting of the beheading of John the Baptist was clearly singled out by its placement below the saint's image and by its slightly larger size; looking at the whole, it appears as an image prophesying the Resurrection.

The Intercessor

In the collective imagination, the saints interceded between the visible and invisible worlds. It is widely accepted that in iconography the essence of this function is conveyed by the iconography of Deesis, which presents the Mother of God and John the Baptist turning in prayer towards Christ. This painting symbolizes the saints' intercession on behalf of all humankind: the prayer before the image of the Saviour by the woman who gave birth to him and by the man who was his Forerunner. This is the most universal and most popular venerated image

[55] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), p. 121.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Panel, battens, "kovcheg," tempera, gold leaf, 44.5 × 37.5 cm, inv. no. IK 61 MNW. See Aleksandra Sulikowska, "The Old-Believers' Images of God as the Father. Theology and Cult," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, XLI, nº 1–4 (2000), p. 112, fig. 3; *Ikony. Przedstawienia maryjne...*, op. cit., pp. 180–1, cat. no. 66; *Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. Arcydzieła...*, op. cit., fig. p. 77.

[58] The icon has a close iconographic analogy among the icons in the collection of Paweł Korin (Vassil Ivanovich Khokholov's work of 1813). Valentina I. Antonova, *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo v sobranii Pavla Korina* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), pp. 135–7, cat. no. 144, fig. 132.

that appears in Orthodox iconography as the ideological centre of the church iconostasis, and it was also usually present in home icons, the so-called domestic iconostases.[59]

Orthodox theology treats the pair, Mary and John, in an archetypal way as the complementary symbols of the feminine and the masculine.[60] Mary is viewed as the first among humanity, and her figure is the prototype of human saintliness. The second "model" is John the Baptist, whose exceptional role lies primarily in being the last prophet of the Old Testament and at the same time the first of the New Testament. He appears at the time when the Law is near and when the state of grace is approaching, and he – much like Mary – therefore links the eras of the Old and New Testaments.[61] This understanding of the cult of John the Baptist is expressed in the works of Skaryna, who in his hymns to honour the saint describes him as "greater than all the prophets," since the others only prophesied the coming of Christ, while John "pointed him out with his finger."[62] Like Mary, John the Baptist is humanity's protector and advocate, and his icons are generally believed to have a beneficial influence on the world. A characteristic tale, which is known from the Russian *Chronograph* of 1512, tells a story about a powerful wind that seized the icons of the Deesis from the two sides of the Saviour from "the great church" in Belgrade in 1472. This event was interpreted as the city's abandonment by Mary and John the Baptist, a prediction of the catastrophes that would befall Serbia at this time, especially the Muslim conquest.[63]

The *Hexaemeron* icon (**fig. 4**) described earlier includes at its centre the painting known as *All Saints' Saturday* (*Subbota Vsekh Svyatykh*), in which we see God the Father and below him Christ Emmanuel surrounded by the praying hosts being led by the Mother of God and John the Baptist. Below is the Tree of Knowledge, with Adam and Eve on its sides, as well as scenes of the original parents' time in the Garden of Eden and their casting out of it, with hosts of saints around them. There is a clear connection between the original parents and Mary and John in the Deesis group. The Tree of Knowledge signifies the earth's axis here, points to its centre: an image of the Son of God is in the tree's crown, and one of God the Father above it. Just as Adam and Eve stand for the primal manhood and womanhood, John and Mary represent the two genders, showing their roles in humanity's renewal through Incarnation. Adam and Eve are the image of fallen humanity, John and Mary of humanity that has lifted itself from the Fall.

An icon from the first half of the nineteenth century, *New Testament Trinity*, of God the Father and the Son of God as co-rulers (**fig. 6**), probably from Vetka, also represents the aspect of John's and Mary's heavenly presence before the Trinity, which in the upper field is described as ѠБРАЗЪ ОТЕЧЕСТВО.[64] The globe, with a symbolic image of the Cross on Golgotha, is placed between the Father and the Son, and above it rises the Dove of the Holy Spirit. The heavenly hosts (including guardian angels shepherding human souls) are on the two sides of this group, and Mary and John stand in their midst before the Trinity, which represents humanity.[65]

[59] Tarasov, op. cit., p. 39.

[60] Evdokimov, op. cit., pp. 232–3.

[61] Malaty, op. cit., p. 29; Kazmierski, op. cit., p. 9.

[62] Francysk Skaryna from Polotsk, *Akatyst ku czci Jana...*, op. cit., p. 171.

[63] Aleksandra Sulikowska-Gąska, *Spory o ikony na Rusi w XV i XVI w.* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2007), pp. 176–7; *Pamiatniki literatury Drevnei Rusi. Konets XV – pervaia polovina XVI veka* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo: Hudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984), pp. 414–5.

[64] Panel, battens, tempera, gold leaf, 44.2 × 37.5 cm, inv. no. IK 386 MNW.

[65] Cf. an analogous example from Vetka in *Vetkavskii muzey narodnogo tvorchestva* (Minsk: Vetka Folk Arts Museum, 1999), p. 114, figs 53–4.

The context in which the figure of John the Baptist appears in iconography as an intermediary between various stages of history and various spheres of existence is much broader, however, than the varieties of Deesis. He is a protagonist in the interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus, the icon of the holy day of Epiphany.[66] In an eighteenth-century icon from an Old Believer workshop,[67] John is shown standing on a high riverbank as he lifts his hand over the head of Jesus, who is immersed in the River Jordan (**fig. 7**). On the other bank are angels, the first two of whom are bowing, their hands concealed under a cloth. A third angel's face is raised to look up at the Lord of Hosts, who is releasing the dove of the Holy Spirit towards Christ. This angel's hand is elevated, in the Old Believer two-fingered sign of the cross. The icon is unique in its artistic form, as it clearly highlights the riverbanks, which seem ragged and whose light colours contrast with the dark blue waters of the Jordan. The figures' bodies are lit up with a glow that comes from more than one source. There is also a stark contrast between the almost naked figure of Jesus, standing erect in the river, and John who leans over him and whose body appears to be twisted in movement: is this intended as a contrast between John the Baptist's "foolishness for Christ" and the Saviour's sacrifice?[68]

The icons of *Christ's Resurrection* and *Pokrov* also have their own way of interpreting the role of John the Baptist. In the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries the common practice of addressing the first motif was to contrast the two images, *The Resurrection* and *The Descent into Limbo*.[69] The first, according to the Western variant, presents Jesus, resurrected, standing over his empty tomb. The second shows Adam and Eve and the other righteous, including John, being led out of Limbo. A nineteenth-century Russian icon[70] with two images of Christ, surrounded by a bright mandorla, shows John the Baptist at the head of a procession of the just leaving Limbo and approaching the heavenly gates (**fig. 8**). The caption for the group reads **ѧнѝкъ прроковъ.** John is wearing an animal fur and a coat, and as he walks towards the mountain, towards Eden, he looks back at those following him out of Limbo (Daniel and Jeremiah can be seen in the group). This representation can be interpreted in the context of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, where John the Baptist is described as "someone like a hermit," preempting Jesus to Limbo with news for the people who are in it, and he tells them "I walk now, preceding Him, and I have descended to announce to you that soon the East itself, the Son of God, will visit you and he comes from the heavens to us, who subsist in darkness and in the shadow of death."[71]

In *Pokrov*, its contemporary (**fig. 9**)[72] that illustrates a miracle said to have occurred in a church in Blachernae in the tenth century,[73] the Mother of God is shown holding a cloth as she turns in

[66] For the iconography of Saint Epiphania, see Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), pp. 164–7.

[67] Panel, battens, "kovcheg," tempera, gold leaf, 33.3 × 27.7 cm, inv. no. IK 180 MNW. See Aleksandra Sulikowska-Gąska, "Tematy propagandowe w sztuce staroobrzędowców," in *Eikon staroobrzędowy. Materiały z konferencji naukowej* „Eikon *staroobrzędowy. Przemiany w sztuce ikonowej na obszarze ziem ruskich Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w XVII–XVIII wieku", 17–19 VI 2005, Dom Pracy Twórczej w Wigrach*, Marcin Olejnik, Joanna Tomalska, eds (Szamotuły: Muzeum Zamek Górków w Szamotułach, 2008), p. 71. Szamotulskie Zeszyty Muzealne, 2; *Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. Arcydzieła...*, op. cit., fig. p. 71.

[68] Kazmierski, op. cit., p. 11.

[69] Ouspensky, Lossky, op. cit., pp. 185–8.

[70] Panel, tempera, gold leaf, 33.5 × 26.5 cm, inv. no. IK 69 MNW.

[71] "Ewangelia Nikodema," in *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu...*, op. cit., p. 655 (III, 18, 3).

[72] Panel, tempera, gold leaf, 31.5 × 27 cm, inv. no. IK 289 MNW.

[73] Neil K. Moran, *Singers in Late Byzantine and Slavonic Painting* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), pp. 126–7; Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), pp. 203–4.

a gesture of prayer to Christ in Heaven. Behind her are the hosts of saints accompanying her; two figures engaged in conversation, John the Baptist and John the Theologian, stand out from the crowd. John the Baptist is dressed in his customary animal fur, his body is ascetic and his hair dishevelled, while his namesake, the author of the Apocalypse, wears an apostle's dress, a chiton and a himation, has short, carefully arranged hair and a fairly long, pointed beard. The Forerunner holds a scroll with the text сѥ агнєцъ бжін вꙁємлан грѣхи мира сѥ. In the background is a domed church with a bell tower. At the centre of the lower tier is Romanos the Melodist at a pulpit, holding a tome in his hand. On the right stands Saint Andrei Yurodivy, showing to his disciple Epiphany a scene in the upper tier of the icon. Also, in the bottom right corner is the Epiphanius of the Virgin to Romanos the Melodist, in which she gives him the gift of the word, represented symbolically by Mary's gesture of placing a scroll in the mouth of sleeping Romanos. On the left bottom tier are Tarasius, the patriarch of Constantinople, surrounded by officials, Emperor Leon under a canopy and Empress Zoe in the gallery. This icon differs from the most common versions of Pokrov by a few elements, most importantly the image of John the Baptist at the centre of the composition, its ideological centre; according to the story about the miracle of Blachernae this points to the importance of this person as the envoy of humanity.[74]

Relics

Even though representing the dead was one of the most difficult challenges for Orthodox iconography, icons of martyrs included depictions of their bodies being tortured, in the process of being killed or freshly dead. This subject is present in the *Hexaemeron* icon, in which the Beheading of John the Baptist illustrates Tuesday (**fig. 4**). It shows the moment when John's executioner is committing the deed over the saint's head. In galleries in the background we see figures; on the left Herod and Herodias, and on the right John. The saint, awaiting death, is bent in half, and under his figure is a large vessel. The inscription ѳсѣкновєнїє главы с їѡана прⷭ̂ is visible over the scene. The eighteenth-century provincial icon shows John's death scene twice (**fig. 5**), as he waits for the sword to drop and as his headless body lies on the ground. We can see the dead man's body, in fact, John's relic; next to him is a soldier who is handing the platter to Herodias's daughter. We are familiar with a similar composition in an icon from an Old Believer workshop in Vetka at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[75] Noteworthy in both cases is the headless body lying in the foreground, with the headless neck and blood streaming out of it. An icon from Torki, which illustrates two related events in the saint's life, has a different take on the last moments of his life (**fig. 3**). Here, John stands before Herod and Herodias who are sitting on their thrones. Above them is written с̃ты̄ нѡ̾ wбличаєт̾ ирода ꙁа нєдостоѧше ємѹ имѣти женѹ брата своєго филиппа. The second scene shows the executioner serving the head of a long-haired man to a young, festively dressed woman. The painting, which is accompanied by the writing повелѣ ирѡ̾ с̃т̾ їѡана ѳсѣкнѹт им [...], resembles the seventeenth-century representations from the churches in Odrekhova[76] and Veremen.[77]

[74] Moran, op. cit., p. 126.

[75] The Folk Art Museum in Vetka. *Vyetkavski muzey*..., op. cit., p. 119, figs 89–90.

[76] The Rural Architecture Museum in Sanok. See Barbara Dąb-Kalinowska, *Ikony* (Olszanica: Bosz, 2008), p. 109; see also Branicka, op. cit., pp. 24–44.

[77] The Historical Museum in Sanok. See Dąb-Kalinowska, *Ikony*, op. cit., p. 111.

Representations of his relics are among the rarest references to the death of John the Baptist. A nineteenth-century icon shows nothing but the saint's head lying on a platter (**fig. 10**). John's eyes are closed, and his hair and beard flow over the sides of the platter. In the upper left corner is the Lord of Hosts, turning towards John's head with a gesture of blessing. In the background is written глава ⸌стаго прр. іѡанна предѣ. It fits into conventional popular nineteenth-century painting, "realistically" showing the saint's head in clear contrast to the background, which is ornamental and decorative. The icon draws on Apocryphal sources, which recall that one of John's disciples, Akholios, begged Herod for John's head, "and when he received it, he placed this precious head in a new urn, in which nothing had been placed yet." Six disciples took it to Emesa, and there "having found a certain cave, hid the urn in it [...]. And those six disciples lived in it until the days of their deaths."[78]

The source for the iconography of the head of John the Baptist are icons of him holding it as a peculiar attribute,[79] which can be linked to representations referring to John's death, in which his body and head are separated; for instance, in the kleyma (marginal scene) of the sixteenth-century icon in the National Museum of Peremyshl Region we see the executioner as he holds a sword with its tip up. Next to him stands John with his own severed head in his hands. Blood squirts from his body, and his eyes are closed.[80] In a seventeenth-century icon from Veremen, the executioner holds the head by the hair, also with its eyes closed.[81] In all the paintings of this type, the head has John's characteristic facial features, but his eyes are closed, an allusion to the fact that he is dead, and therefore the viewer–the faithful cannot make eye contact with the head.

Legends repeatedly remember the head of the Forerunner as a peculiar, separate, self-contained being. According to *John's Life*, Herodias threatened John: "You will certainly die by my hand, and I will fill my pillow with the hair off your head, on which I will place my head with Herod, and I will bury your head there, where I perform my ablutions after I relish pleasures with the king," and John responded: "The Lord will allow you to kill me, but you will not see my head. I will leave it behind and it will announce your depravity and your shame to the whole world."[82] The same source tells us that when John's body had been buried in Sebaste near the tomb of Prophet Elisha, his head continued to "float over [...] Jerusalem and for three years to call out," announcing Herod's baseness, "and then departed to call out over the whole world and to herald Herod's horrific crime," and only after fifteen years "stopped proclaiming" and was buried in the city of Homs.[83]

Legends about the translation of the head recall the many difficulties of bringing this relic to Constantinople. In the fourth century, it was carried near Chalcedon, where mules pulling the cart stopped and "neither the application of the lash, nor any of the other means that were devised, could induce them to advance further." This was thought to be so unusual and so significant that the head was left in the village of Cosilaos. It was only from there, despite the protest of the guardian of the relic, the holy virgin who belonged to the Macedonian sect, that Emperor Theodosius "placed it, with the box in which it was encased, in his purple robe,

78 *Świadectwo...*, op. cit., p. 587.

79 Weyl Carr, op. cit., p. 161.

80 Romuald Biskupski, *Ikony w zbiorach polskich* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1991), p. 36, fig. 42.

81 Ibid., p. 39, fig. 94; see also Dąb-Kalinowska, *Ikony*, op. cit., p. 111.

82 *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, op. cit., p. 603.

83 Ibid., pp. 606–7.

and conveyed it to a place called Hebdoma, in the suburbs of Constantinople, where he erected a spacious and magnificent church."[84] It is remarkable that the ruler himself actively took part in transporting the relic, as the driving force and participant in the ceremony. The question of confession is a second important motif: legend recalls the relic's guardian, a holy virgin, and a certain Vincenty. He was her fellow believer, who "also took charge of the remains of the prophet, and performed the sacerdotal functions over it [...]." This man abandoned his faith, "[...] but he afterwards openly declared, that if the Baptist would follow the emperor, he also would enter into communion with him."[85] The saint is thus treated as a guide here, as one whom the faithful should follow, not only while he is alive but also after he dies. All sources stress that, despite his dismemberment, the power of his relics remains unchanged.[86]

Parousia's Prophesy

John's death can be understood as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of the Lamb.[87] The saint foretells it while he is still alive, linking himself to the Saviour's sacrifice: "My head will be cut off and displayed on a platter, but Christ will be hanged on a cross so that he can cleanse everyone."[88] The circumstances of the Forerunner's death are made all the more interesting by the fact that he was killed because of his protest against Herod's physical impurity. Stories and icons present Herod more as a victim of a ruse plotted by the two women, mother and daughter, who cause his downfall, something that the Orthodox tradition treated as the norm of female conduct.[89] Yet in this case both Herod and John, who warns the ruler, fall prey to women.

If Byzantine literature treats John's fate as a sequence of predictions leading to the revelation about the Resurrection, the funeral of his head is compared to the voyage to Hades, where the arrival of the Saviour and the universal saving of humanity can be announced.[90] In a certain way, John's image predicts the end of history. The words on his scroll ("Confess repentantly [...]," **figs 1–3, 5**) correspond to the lesson he was to have spoken in prison as he awaited death: "Let not human fear detach you from Christ. Accept death and do not repudiate Christ. Leave your cities and protect your faith. Rid yourselves of your riches and only adore Him. Let others strike you because of Him, and strike not others."[91]

These sentences resemble the ideology of Old Believers, with its trust in the need to abandon this world and flee from it and, most importantly, to adopt the eternal perspective. To the

[84] *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen Comprising a History of the Church, from a.d. 323 to a.d. 425*, trans. from the Greek, revised by Chester D. Hartranft, Hartford Theological Seminary, under the editorial supervision of Philip Schaff, D.D., LL.D., and Henry Wace, D.D., Professor of Church History in the Union Theological Seminary, New York, Edinburgh (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855), pp. 346–7.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Sergei A. Ivanov, "Blagochestivoe raschlenenie. Paradoks pochitaniya moshhey v vizantiiskoy agiografii," in *Vostochnohristianskie relikvii*, op. cit., p. 123.

[87] Weyl Carr, op. cit., pp. 161–2.

[88] *Żywot św. Jana Chrzciciela...*, op. cit., p. 605.

[89] Valerie A. Kivelson, "Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Russian Orthodoxy. Sin and Virtue in Cultural Context," in *Letters from Heaven. Popular Religion in Russia and Ukraine*, John-Paul Himka, Andriy Zayarnyuk, eds (Toronto–Buffalo–London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 101–2.

[90] Weyl Carr, op. cit., pp. 162–4.

[91] *Świadectwo...*, op. cit., p. 584.

Old Believers, it is also significant that John the Baptist is a saint, a prophet "on the border between times," and at the same time an ascetic and a "divine madman" who abandons everything that is earthly and sensual.[92] For this reason, the image of John the Baptist as an angel appears in the context of the animals and plants of the Garden of Eden, as can be seen in the nineteenth-century icon from Palekh in Pavel Korin's collection.[93] "Divine grace" plays a key role in all events involving John and with his earthly remains; the best example of it is the heavenly intervention that led to the finding of his head in the fourth century. According to Salminius Hermias Sozomen, it happened "by an impulse from God or from the prophet."[94] The presence of relics makes the place in which they are kept holy. The body, earthly remains are in a sense outside time, and their existence is a particular sign from Heaven. Even though they are accessible to humans, they belong to the sphere of the dead, and at the same time are a vision of the body in the future, the untouched body preserved in this form awaiting Parousia.

The icons associated with John the Baptist in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw are representative of the artistic tendencies of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries, showing the thinking in that era about this saint, and about saints in general. The pictures of the dead saint, as well as the images of his relics, belong in a particular iconographic category. It appeared in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries on the margins of hagiographic interpretations, and then the saint's corporality became a central theme of increasingly elaborate narratives. By the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries they had developed their own discrete meaning in art. Despite that era's changes in Russian religiosity, the cult of John the Baptist remained very traditional, operating with old religious categories. New elements in it were largely eschatological and stemmed from waiting for the approaching end of the world and from the belief in the role that saints' relics, and their intercession, would play in the time of Parousia. John's relics, especially his head, much like he himself had preceded Jesus before his public appearance in Palestine, were to serve as the "voice calling out" to announce the Messiah at the end of time.

92 Kazmierski, op. cit., p. 9.

93 Antonova, op. cit., pp. 137–8, cat. no. 116, fig. 136.

94 *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, op. cit., p. 346.