# Eschatological elements in the schemes of paintings of high iconostases

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The primary division of a Christian church into two parts, alluding in form to an antique Roman basilica, and in ideas to Salomon's temple, had already been interpreted symbolically in *Mistagogia* by Maximus the Confessor. This saint theologian who derived neo-platonic ideas from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and who referred to the Jewish tradition, understood a church as a depiction of cosmos, divided into a visible and invisible world, earthly and heavenly, bodily and spiritual.[1] No wonder, therefore, that the barrier on the border of these two spheres also acquired a symbolic meaning.

In the times of Maximus the Confessor it was open-work, and the fabrics hung between its columns were drawn open for the liturgy.[2] Thus, during the service, the faithful, even though they were standing in the nave and, in line with Canon 69 of the Fifth and Sixth Council in *Trullo*, not allowed entry to the sanctuary[3] – had a chance to participate fully in the mystery of the Eucharist, by observing all its phases. Already in the first chapters of *Mistagogia* by Maximus it is easy to find a similar idea of the dichotomy of unity, referring both to the sacral space, unified though divided into the presbytery and the nave, and to the universe – one *universum,* consisting of the earthly and heavenly spheres. This symbolic analogy was also extended to the man, consisting of a body and a soul, and to the soul destined for lower and higher aims.[4]

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[1] *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 91, chapter 2–4, pp. 667–672.

[2] A. Różycka Bryzek, 'Symbolika bizantyńskiej architektury sakralnej', in: *Losy w cerkwi w Polsce po 1944 roku. Materiały z sesji naukowej Stowarzyszenia Historyków Sztuki pt. „Tragedia polskich cerkwi" w Rzeszowie*, Rzeszów 1997, pp. 75–76.

[3] A. Znosko, *Kanony Kościoła Prawosławnego*, vol. I, Hajnówka 2000, p. 96.

[4] *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 91, chapter 2–4, pp. 667–672.

Changes in the liturgy at the end of the first millennium, caused by the iconoclastic shock, aimed to increase the mystery of the rituals and, at the same time, deepen a sense of God's unattainability and non-cognisance. It was then that the templon, a purely architectural structure, began to be adorned with figural representations carved in the architrave beam and flagstones placed on the stylobate, or with painted or mosaic pictures hung on and between columns.[5] They they primarily became the main medium for conveying deeper nuances. But even earlier the very structure of a templon, as well as the fact that it was placed at the boundary of two complementary spaces, filled it with theological meanings. Among them, those with eschatological meaning appear to be of prime importance. And though over the centuries, as the area of partitions increased and was filled with paintings, and the liturgy and its interpretation changed, new meanings were added onto it, those expressing fear of the end of the world and bringing the promise of eternal life last for centuries and even become stronger.

It has been noted in the writings on this subject that the surviving templons have a similar structure and consist of four supports delineating three passages. Almost every attempt to find a formal and ideological source of this construction leads to eschatological ideas. For example, similarity has been noticed between a three-axis composition and antique triumphal arches. The symbolism of a passage and victory encompassed by these buildings is similar to a templon leading to a space which depicts the heavenly world, attainable after victory over sin and death. An analogous similarity in form and contents, derived from the function, can be seen in an extended entrance to an imperial palace, for example the one depicted in the mosaics in the new St Apollinaris Basilica in Ravenna. This is the entrance to the sovereign's house, just like a templon that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven. But the strongest connection, fullest of eschatological ideas, is the one between the construction of the templon in a Christian church and the barrier separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place in the Tent of Meeting (Exod 26:31–33) and the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as the composition of the entrance to the Temple and the gates leading to the Holy City which simultaneously become a picture of the New Jerusalem (Apoc 21:10–13).[6] The Jews awaiting the Messiah, symbolised by the tri-partite passage, separated by four supports, leading to the holy places aforementioned, becomes an ideological source for the construction of a templon, which expresses the Christians' waiting for the second coming of Christ.[7]

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[5] S. Kalopissi-Veri, 'The Proskynetaria of the Templon and Narthex: Form, Imagery, Spatial Connection, and Reception', in: *Thresholds of the Sacred. Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives of Religions Screens, East and West*, ed. S. E. J. Gerstel, Washington 2006, pp. 107–132.

[6] И. А. Шалина, 'Вход "святая святых" и византийскя алтарная преграда', in: *Иконостас. Происхождение – развитие – символика*, ed. А. М. Лидов, Москва 2000, pp. 52–84; Eadem, 'Боковые врата иконостаса;символический замисел и иконогрфия', in: *Иконостас. Происхождение ...*, pp. 559–598.

[7] И. А. Шалина, 'Вход ...', pp. 65–66.

These most important ideas were not forgotten when pictures placed on the stone structure started to highlight further meanings: Christological, soteriological and Eucharistic. Eschatological messages were conveyed (including the motives of arcades and palm trees mean the victory, cypresses and ivy as the symbol of immortality[8], the eagle as a symbol of resurrection and salvation[9]) by the depiction of *Deesis*, one of the oldest depictions placed on the altar screen. It is not known exactly when it appeared here[10], for centuries it constituted an ideological and compositional centre of iconostases, and underlined the intercession of the Mother of God and John the Baptist for the human race with God at the time of the Last Judgement, and their vital role in the act of salvation.[11] Primarily, this depiction had a visionary character, and Mary and John were presented as the first and most important witnesses of Christ's divinity. In this sense, Deesis co-created church decorations until the 13th century. Yet simultaneously, at least from the 10th century onwards, this group of three people was included in the templon and the scenes of the *Last Judgement*, where the idea of intercession is unequivocal and clear. It is passed on to other people who are added to the central group as iconostasis becomes larger, with rows of a dozen or so figures frozen in identical praying positions. These are firstly archangels, Michael and Gabriel, apostles, Peter and Paul, evangelists, Church Fathers and other saints. Their selection was not strictly prescribed and it usually depended on local custom.

The idea of an intercessory prayer at the Last Judgement is dominant in the schemes of high iconostases, popular in late and post-Byzantine art. They emerged at the end of the 14th century in northern Russia, and the one believed to be the oldest was created by Teophanes the Greek in 1399 for the Archangel Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin, of which only the icons from the *Deesis* row remain today. After 1547 they were combined with other icons painted by Moscow masters at the beginning of the 15th century, i.e. Andrei Rublev and Daniel Cherniy, making up an iconostasis of impressive proportions in the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin, admired to this day.[12] The surviving iconostases in the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Vladimir and in the The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius are solely the works of Andrei Rublev and Daniil Cherny's workshop. They are an unusual phenomenon in the world of art, culture and religion, and their creation required

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[8] Compare for excample motives on the templon of St. Sophia in Kijv; Е. Архипова, *Резаной камень в архтектуре древнего Киева*, Киев 2005, p. 235, fig. 38.

[9] E. D. Maguire and H. Maguire, *Others Icons. Art. And Power In Byzantine Secular Culture*, Princeton 2007, pp. 58–96.

[10] L. Nees, 'Program of Decorated Chancel Barriers in the Pre-Iconoclastic Period', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 46 (1983), pp. 15–26.

[11] About *Deesis* compare: Th. v. Bogyay, 'Deesis', in.: *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, ed. K. Wessel, M. Restle, vol. 1, Stuttgart 1966, pp. 1176–1186; A. Kazdan, 'Deesis', in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 1, New York 1991, p. 599–600; Ch. Walter, 'Two Notes on the Deesis', *Revue des Études Byzantines*, 26 (1968), pp. 311–336; H. Madej, 'Deesis', in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 3, Lublin 1995, pp. 1086–1088.

[12] Л. А. Щенникова, 'Древнерусский высокий иконостас XIV – начала XV в.: итоги и перспективы изучения,' in: *Иконостас. Происхождение* ..., pp. 392–410.

Fig. 1. Iconostasis, Dmytrovice, Ukraine, Saint Nicholas Church, XVII c., photo by Piotr Krawiec

not only an artistic talent, deep faith and awareness of the mood of the era, but primarily deep philosophical and theological knowledge. No wonder research is still under way to determine the authors of the project and the circumstances and reasons for its execution.[13] Today, the prevalent view in Russian studies allows us to consider Theophanes the Greek and Cyprian the Metropolitan of Moscow the originators of the high iconostasis.[14] Andrei Rublev took over the idea, developed it artistically and brought it into general use.

The essence of the new altar screen was its size and scheme of paintings. Divided into several rows filled with icons, it created a structure which, like a wall, fully covered the passage to the sanctuary. This space, completely hidden now from the eyes of the faithful, and liturgical rituals taking place in it, became even more mysterious and inaccessible. Thus the division of the Orthodox church into two spheres was strengthened, and the difference between the faithful in the nave and the priests who had ac-

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[13] Some Russian researchers can't agree with thesis, that the oldest high iconostasis was created by Theophanes and consider that idea of creating ones was purely Russian not Greek, compare В. Н. Лазарев, *Теофан Грек и его школа*, Москва 1961, p. 94; Idem, 'Живопись и скульптура Новогрода', in: *История русского искусства*, Москва 1954, vol. 2.1, p. 164; В. Г. Брюсова, *Андрей Рублев и московская школа живописи*, Москва 1998, p. 21.

[14] Л. А. Щенникова, *Древнерусский высокий* ..., p. 399–444; Л. М. Евсеева, 'Эсхатология 7000 года и возникновение высокого иконостаса', in: *Иконостас. Происхождение* ..., p. 411–430.

Fig. 2. Iconostasis, Curtae de Arges, Romania, Saint Nicholas Royal Church, XVII c., photo by Piotr Krawiec

cess to the sanctuary was deepened. This definite separation of the sanctuary from the rest of the Orthodox church could be conducive to ideas learnt from the writings of Maximus the Confessor, who saw in it the depiction of the heavenly world. The reflection of these moods, in an already mature and cogent form, combined with the symbolism of liturgy, can be found in the writings of Symeon of Thessalonica who often explained the division of an Orthodox church into two parts: *Being divided into the Holy of Holiest and the external parts, it represents Christ himself, and his two natures: that of God and that of man. One is visible and the other invisible; it also [represents] Man, consisting of the soul and body. But it also perfectly [represents] the mystery of the Trinity, which is inaccessible in [its] essence, cognizable in providence and might. And in particular it reflects the visible and invisible world, but also the visible one alone: heaven through the altar and the earthly matters through the rest of the church.*[15] Further, as the idea of a sanctuary whose depiction of heaven appealed more and more fully to the imagination of the faithful, so was the a high iconostasis wall more and more clearly interpreted in eschatological terms. It became an important and tangible

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[15] *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 155, pp. 703–704; pol. trans.: Symeon z Tessaloniki, *O świątyni Bożej*, trans. A. Maciejewska, Kraków 2007, pp. 38–39.
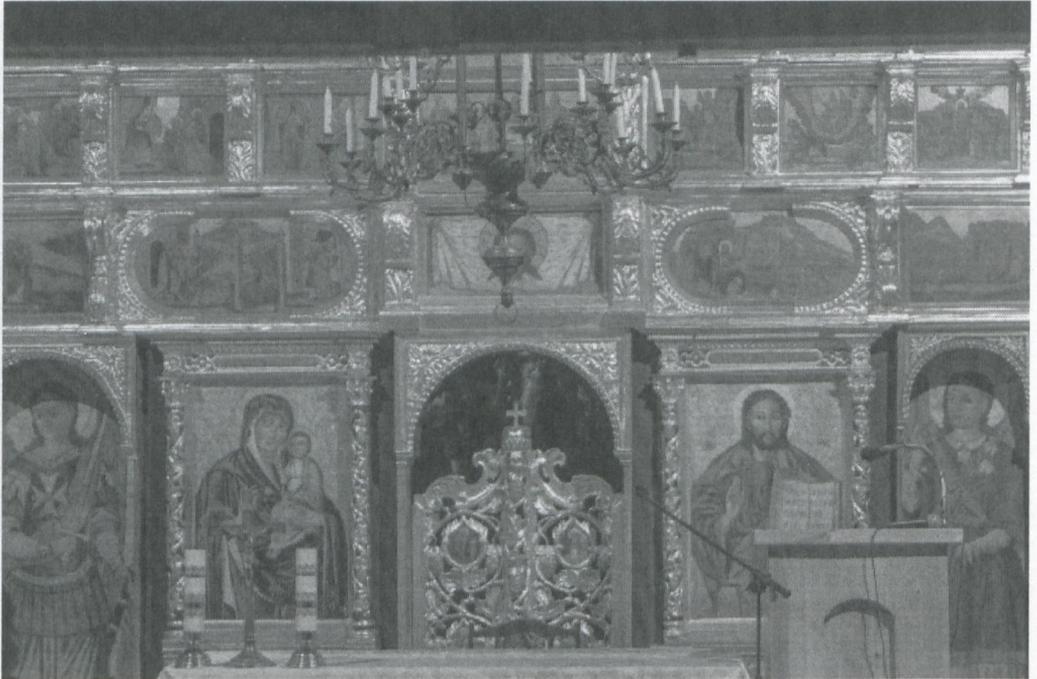
Fig. 3. Central part of Iconostasis, Poland, Gorajec, Nativity of Mary Church, XVIII c., photo by Piotr Krawiec

screen covering, like a horizon, the divine world[16], and at the same time giving the only chance to go over to the other side. No wonder then, that here, in the very middle of the sacred paintings the depiction of *Deesis* dominated, expressing the idea of intercession for the human race at the time of the Last Judgement. The Deesis created by Theophanes the Greek was over two metres high. Enormous and monumental, depicted against the gold backdrop, it must have attracted people's eyes and be the focus of prayerful requests. And, in particular, a gigantic Christ placed in the middle of the row in snow-white robes, with a benign face, raising his hand discretely in a gesture of benediction and showing in an open book a quotation from the Holy Gospel according to John: *I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life* (8:12). Rublev's Christ from the Cathedral in Vladimir is even larger, over three metres high, overwhelming in his enormousness and awe-inspiring. He is the judge at the Last Judgement, as the verse from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew, written in the pages of the Bible, clearly states: When the Son of man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory... (Matt 25:31). In Rublev's iconostases Saints Advocates placed in an extended row of the *Great Deesis* are

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[16] About iconostasis such the veil compare N. P. Constas, 'Symeon of Thessalonike and the Theology of the Icon Screen', in: *Thresholds of the sacred* ..., pp. 163–183.
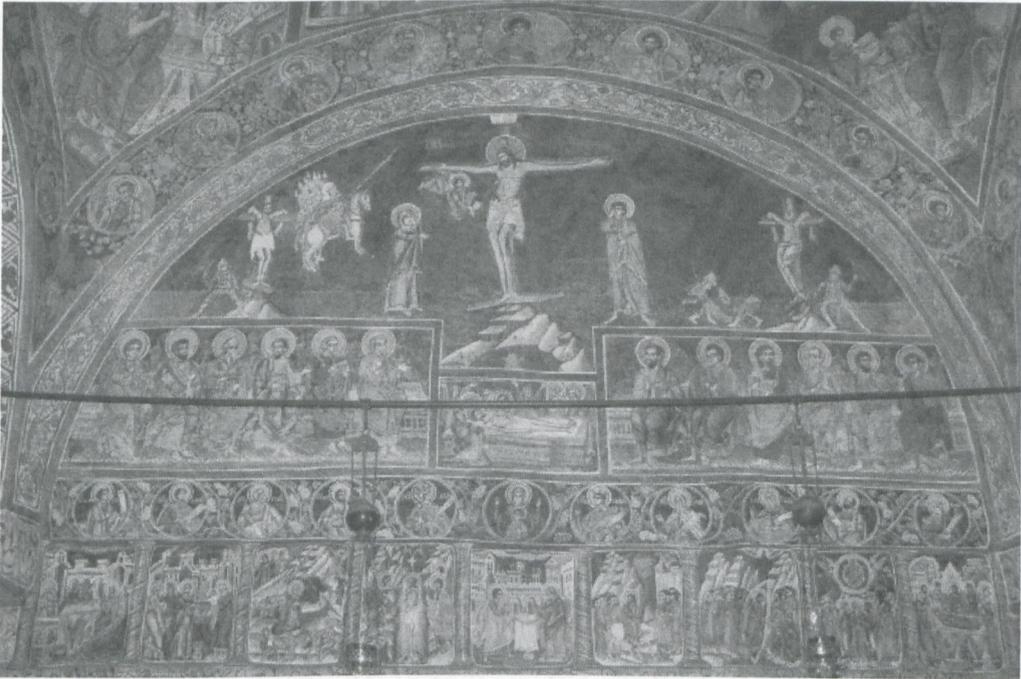
Fig. 4. Iconostasis, Polovragi, Romania, Saint Nicholas Church, XVIII c., photo by Piotr Krawiec

accompanied by Old Testament prophets, whose full-length figures create an additional, new row. This type of iconostasis becomes most popular in northern Russia.[17] In the 16th century, at the very latest, another row appears; of Old Testament patriarchs; which changes the upper part of the screen into an extended numerous intercessory group, raising prayers to Christ the Judge.

Researchers indicate several reasons for the emergence and then popularisation of the high iconostasis in the northern areas in this sort of form and with this sort of structure of the ideological schedule. Apart from the expanding hesychastic beliefs and practices and changes in the liturgy introduced by Cyprian the Metropolitan of Moscow, fear of the end of the world appears to be the most convincing. Waiting for the Second Coming of Christ *[parousia]* became more pronounced with the approach of the year 7000 from the creation of the world, i.e. 1492 from the birth of Christ. The belief in the end of the world happening then, known in the entire Byzantine world, drew a particularly strong response in the Muscovite Russia.[18] The apocalyptic texts of the Hippolytus of Rome,

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[17] А. Мельник, 'Основные типы русских высоких иконостасов XV – середины XVII века', in: *Иконостас. Происхождение* ..., p. 433.

[18] Н. А. Казакова Я. С. Лурье, *Антифеодальные еретические движения на Руси XIV-начала XVI века*, Москва 1955, p. 391; И.М. Евсеева, 'Эсхатология 7000 года ...', p. 296–297.

Ephrem the Syrian, Pseudo-Methodist of Pantara or Palladius the Monk were known here.[19] The idea of the end of the world 7000 years from its creation had already arrived here from Byzantium in the early Middle Ages and it was known to the 12th century writers: Nestor, Abraham from Smolensk and Kiryk from Novogrod.[20] It was also reinforced in the 14th century by itinerant monks-hesychasts travelling from the Balkans to the north, and by Cyprian the Metropolitan of Moscow.[21] Nature itself also strengthened the conviction of the approach of the Judgement Day, displaying a series of dangerous phenomena to the alarmed people, which they would dutifully record and interpret in an eschatological vein, such as the eclipse of the sun or the moon, earthquakes, droughts, fires or epidemics[22]. Historic events were also perceived in a similar vein, especially of great importance, such as Ottoman invasions[23] and the fall of Constantinople, which deepened the gloom of 15th century apocalyptic visions.

It is worth noting that it was in the Great Entrance that Symeon of Thessalonica saw both the depiction of Christ's funeral and his second coming to the Last Judgement, so the moment of transfer of the Sanctified Gifts and offering them on the altar, was, in his opinion, filled with Passion and eschatological themes[24]. Therefore the dismissal of catechumens and then the faithful receiving the Eucharist was understood as a representation of Matthew's *separating sheep from goats* (Matt 25:32)[25]. And all this happened in front of the great wall of paintings, dominated by the representation of Christ the Judge and a procession of saints, the pillars of the Orthodox church, deep in an intercessory prayer for the human race. This ingenious programme of the iconostasis fully answered the faithful's fears of the approaching apocalypse and contributed to the mystery of the liturgy which offered the prize of eternal life. It is not surprising then that it became popular all over Russia, Ruthenia (fig. 1) and also reached the Balkans in the 16th century (fig. 2).

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[19] W.Hryniewicz, *Staroruska teologia paschalna w świetle pism św. Cyryla Turowskiego*, Warszawa 1993, p. 160; E. Przybył, 'Historia w cieniu czasów ostatecznych. Ewolucja idei eschatologicznych na Rusi w XI–XVII w.', *Nomos. Kwartalnik Religioznawczy*, 16 (1996), p. 87.

[20] E. Przybył, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–90.

[21] Ibidem, p. 93; compare also J. H. Billington, *Ikona i topór. Historia kultury rosyjskiej*, Kraków 2008, p. 51.

[22] In homilie of Serapiona from Volodimir, compare G. Podskalsky, *Chrześcijaństwo i literatura teologiczna na Rusi Kijowskiej (988–1237)*, Kraków 2000, p. 151; W. Hryniewicz, *op. cit*, p. 160; E. Przybył, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

[23] G. Podskalsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–121.

[24] *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 155, pp. 727–728; H. Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy. The Developmant of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*, New York 1996, p. 164; Й. Шульц *Візантійська літургія. Свідчення віри та значечння символів*, Львів 2002, p. 199; R. Taft *The Great Entrance. A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-anaphral Rites*, Roma 2004, pp. 210–213. Cf. Symeon z Tessaloniki, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[25] *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 155, pp. 293–294.
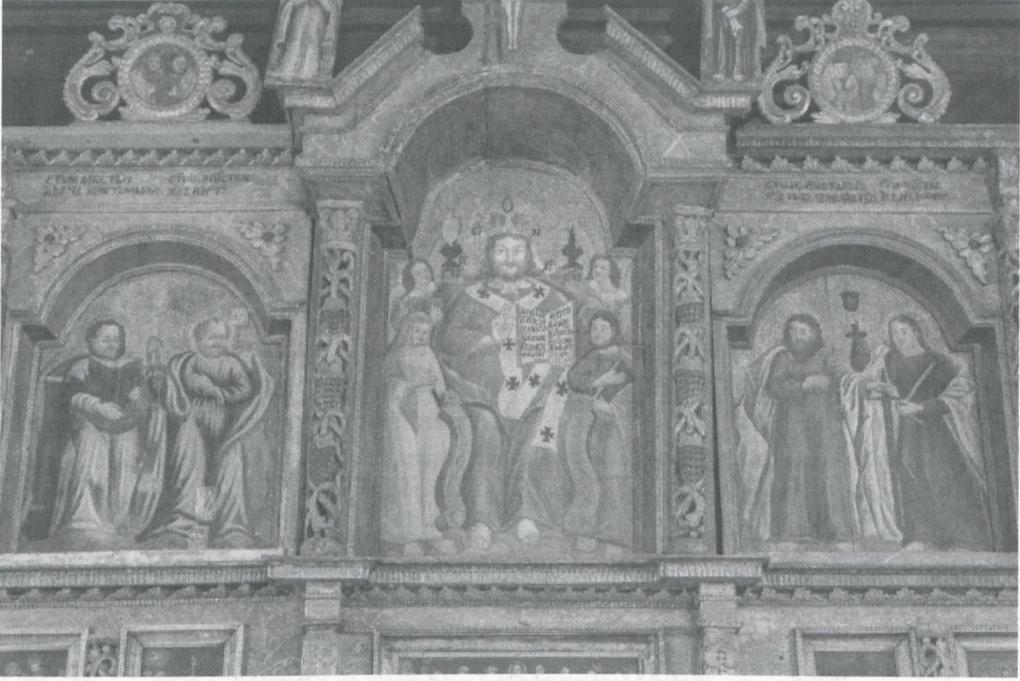
Fig. 5. *Deesis* Row in Iconostasis, Bartne, Poland, Cosmas and Damian Church, XVIII c., photo by Piotr Krawiec

The earliest evidence of the presence of high altar screens in the areas which are now part of Ukraine comes from the 16th century. We know of the last will and testament of Bazyli Zagorovsky from 1577 in which he obliged his beneficiaries to furnish the Orthodox Church of Ascension in Suchodoly in Volhynia with 'paintings, *Deesis* as well as sovereign, feasts and prophets icons, so that they are beautifully painted to meet the needs and the order of services of our Christian Orthodox church"[26]. But the *Deesis* group could also be found earlier in lower iconostases. *The Pechersk-Kiev Paterick* includes a story of 'another man, Christ-lover from the same town of Kiev, built an Orthodox church for himself and decided to decorate it with large icons: five *Deesis* and two sovereign ... [so] he gave silver to two monks in the Pechersk monastery to come to an agreement with Alimpi to pay him as much as he wanted for the icons'.[27] This note undoubtedly confirms an early formation of a two-tier iconostasis with the *Deesis* group and a row of sovereign icons. This is also confirmed by later, 15th-century icons of Christ, the Mother of God, very

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[26] *Архив Юго-Западной России*, Київ 1859, vol. 1, part. 1, p. 797; compare also: С. Таранушенко, 'Український іконостас', *Записки Наукового Товариства імені Т. Шевченка*, 217 (1994), p. 150.

[27] *Pateryk Kijowsko-Pieczerski czyli opowieść o świętych ojcach w pieczarach kijowskich położonych*, trans. L. Nodzyńska, Wrocław 1993, p. 249.

popular saints and extended *Deesis* groups[28]. Furtermore the analysis of later historic monuments and source documents confirms that the theme of *Deesis* was very important in the painting schemes of iconostases.

In the inspection documents from Greek Catholic Orthodox churches one of the main questions on the décor refers to *Deesis*[29], and though today it is not certain whether this term always refers to the iconographic theme, or rather, to the iconostasis itself, it is the fact of equating *Deesis* with the altar screen that indicates its importance and being established in the painting tradition and the faithful's awareness. In northern Russian Deeses Christ is depicted in an extended iconographic type known as *Maiestas Domini* (Rus. *Spas w sylakh*). This depiction came to the Ruthenia (Ukraine) in the 15th century, but rarely constituted the centre of *Deesis*, and was more frequently included in the *sovereign* row[30]. This departure from the original premises of the creators of high iconostasis, consciously or not, strengthened eschatological ideas and expanded them to the lower row as well. *Christ in Majesty* depicted here is holding the Bible, often open on the following quotation: *Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world* (Matt 25:34) describing the Last Judgement, so he is not a teacher here, but a judge. A similar effect is achieved by placing in the Sovereign row not icons but the depiction of *Christ Pantocrator,* extended to include smaller figures of the Mother of God and John the Baptist, which repeated the *Deesis* theme from the row above.

Perceiving the altar screen as a curtain to paradise is also confirmed by later, mostly 18th century, decoration of the Deacons' doors, on which Archangels Michael and Gabriel were placed, a direct reference to the words from the Book of Genesis: *He banished the man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the great winged creatures and the fiery flashing sword, to guard the way to the tree of life* (Gen. 3:24). Examples of such an approach can be found in iconostases in the Birth of Christ Orthodox Church in Zhovkva, in Bohorodchany, Cathedral of the Dormition in Pechersk Lavra, Gorajec (fig. 3) and Chotyniec.

In the Balkans there are however iconostases where the *Deesis* row is replaced with representations of Christ with the apostles, and thus the eschatological meaning of the screen has been lost (fig. 4). But not always, as sometimes the apostles are sitting with open books, for example in St Nicholas Orthodox Church in Hunedoara[31], in the orthodox

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[28] W. Jarema, 'Pierwotne ikonostasy w drewnianych cerkwiach na Podkarpaciu', *Materiały Muzeum Budownictwa Ludowego w Sanoku*, 16 (1972), pp. 22–32; С. Таранушенко, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

[29] Recently about this subject: M.P. Kruk, '„Deisus dawną zwyczajną robotą y malowaniem" – kilka uwag na marginesie inwentarzy cerkiewnych', in: *Ars Graeca Ars Latina. Studia dedykowane Profesor Annie Różyckej Bryzek*, Kraków 2001, pp. 207–230.

[30] М. Гелитович, *Українські ікони „Спасу у Славі*, Львів 2005, p. 5.

[31] M. Porumb, *Dicţionar de pictură veche Românească din Transilvania sec. XIII–XVIII*, Bucureşti 1998, pp. 162–167; A. Efremov, *Icoane romaneşti*, Bucureşti 2002, pp. 9, 56, 172.

church in Vânători-Nemeț or in the monastery museum in Văratec[32]; or with closed books in Filipesti de Padure. Usually the apostles sit in God's presence in the depictions of *the Last Judgement*. They are the only ones, as promised by God, to be awarded this honour (Matt 19:26, Luke 22:30). Their main attributes are scrolls and codices – symbols of wisdom, bequeathed by Christ. They should be closed, as the Church's mission has not been accomplished yet, and the full mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son will be revealed at the end of the world. Therefore the books will be open at the Last Judgement. Thereby, the sitting position of the apostles in Christ's presence and their open books may be interpreted in the eschatological context, and this depiction may still illustrate the Last Judgement, but without the reassuring presence of influential intercessors.

It is difficult to pinpoint a particular reason for these changes today. In Ukrainian iconostases, for example, from the end of the 18th century, Christ in priest's robes is sitting in the middle of the *Deesis* row (fig. 5). He is no longer a judge in white robes, as Theophanes the Greek envisaged, but the highest priest celebrating the Liturgy. Eschatological ideas have been dominated by Eucharistic and ecclesial ones. The Mother of God and John the Baptist are no longer depicted in an intercessory stance, typical of Orthodox art, but in one of adoration and worship. And the apostles, rather than praying with their hands outstretched, are holding the tools of passion and death in them. The fall of Constantinople, distance from the main centres of Orthodox culture, occidentalisation and Latinisation of orthodox church art, plus a low level of education of eastern priests – all these factors must have contributed to the departure from traditional models, presumably no longer intelligible. Perhaps changes in the civilisation made it possible to treat apocalyptic visions as one of the great myths of culture and religion, which is also characteristic of our times?

*Translated by Małgorzata Strona*

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[32] V. Drăguț, *Arta Românească*, Bucureşti 2000, p. 318.