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## An Icon from the Orthodox Church in Tataurovo (Eastern Siberia)

### Abstract

In the Orthodox church in Tataurovo (Тараурово), a settlement in Eastern Siberia, consecrated in 2013, there is a noncanonical old icon with features of eastern and western painting.

**Keywords:** icon, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Siberia.

Tataurovo (Тараурово) is a small settlement, lying in Eastern Siberia beyond Lake Baikal. Administratively it belongs to the Pribaikalsky Region of the Autonomous Republic of Buryatia. The settlement lies on the 5603rd kilometer of the Trans Siberian Railway, near the Selenga River, forty kilometers from Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Republic. The population

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of Tataurovo<sup>1</sup> is fairly homogeneous, mostly Russian and with a small percentage of Buryats. The history of the place is connected with the building of the Trans-Siberian Railway at the turn of the twentieth century (Козин, 2011, pp. 20–30; Масливченко, 2012).

In February 2013 a church was opened for the Orthodox population, dedicated to the Mother of God Joy and Consolation. The temple is of modest size, built of light wood. The furnishings and nearly all of the paintings, like the church itself, are new.<sup>2</sup> Probably that is why our attention is immediately caught by a certain old icon lying on a pulpit on the right side of the church. The image, painted on a pinewood panel, which at present is cracked in its upper part, deviates from the traditional convention of “writing” icons established in the tradition of Eastern Orthodox Churches.

According to the principles of creating Orthodox images, it was not possible to present the mystery of the Resurrection of the Son of God. The reason was that in the Gospel texts this moment was not described (Radziukiewicz, 2000, pp. 8–21).<sup>3</sup>

In the work being analyzed here, the central motif is Christ’s empty grave, in which there is a large wooden coffin from which the Resurrected Jesus has emerged.

Next to the coffin the artist has placed two women. One is Mary Magdalene. She is depicted in the conventional manner, in a dark dress covered with a red robe reaching from head to foot. Just above the figure is a delicately delineated halo. Nearby, behind Mary Magdalene stands Mary, mother of Jesus, who also has a halo above her head. She also has a long dress that goes down to the ground and a blue maphorion (shawl). The part of the shawl around the head is of a much lighter, pale colour. Both figures appear to be amazed by the situation and remain in a state of prayerful contemplation. This state, apart from seeing the empty grave, was probably evoked by the figure to the right of the picture, an angel dressed in white robes. Right next to him lies a huge stone which does not allow the viewer to see the entire figure of God’s messenger, who, according to tradition, was the one to announce the wondrous event.

The perspective adopted in the work means that the worshipper looking at the painting finds himself in the centre of events.

The sacral picture in the Orthodox church in Tataurovo does not entirely belong to the Byzantine cultural tradition, although it was placed

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<sup>1</sup> I was in the Republic of Buryatia in the years 2011–2014 as cultural-educational worker, at the same time studying the material and spiritual culture of the local population; Масливченко (2012).

<sup>2</sup> I visited Tataurovo after the consecration of the church, Easter 2014

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Донец (2014).

in the central part of the temple, in a place that was of significance for the Easter period. Though the work shows the figures of saints, as well as scenes from their lives, the manner is not completely characteristic of Christian Eastern churches. The traditions of the Christian East and West clash here, though they do not destroy each other. This is evidenced by the way of showing an event that is not described in the Bible but is important for all Christians. Thus, it is also omitted in canonical iconography, which is a “visible gospel” (Evdokimov, 2003, p. 234).

Here the Resurrected Christ rises high above his grave-coffin. His body gives the impression of being weightless. The hands of the saviour are open. The whole figure seems to be static, only the folds on the robe may suggest movement. The figure of the Saviour and the space around him is illuminated and it is this, together with the coffin, that creates the central motif of the work. Light is one of the attributes of holiness and God’s glory, Here Christ is the light, who, according to the Gospel, scattered “the darkness of death.” Between the coffin and Christ there is a black space, inaccessible to man. It emphasizes the value of the event of the rising from the dead, which eludes human reason.

The history of the painting, like the vast majority of icons, is not known. Right after the consecration, one of the oldest women in the congregation brought it to the temple. Her parents had moved to Tataurovo from Popovka, located a few kilometers away and settled by exiles. They were not in the habit of talking about their past and their family. In the middle of the last century it was still too dangerous.

The work could have been painted by someone who came from the circle of Western Christianity. The exiles were mysterious figures who were not questioned about their genealogy, but the artist’s origin is reflected in the picture. The unknown painter wanted to perhaps combine the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches.

Another hypothesis would be to place the icon in the more distant past, in the 17th or 18th centuries. At that time, under the influence of western painting, non-canonical images appeared in Russian iconography (Janocha, 2008, pp. 28–34, 204; Nowosielski, 2000, pp. 24–30; Radziukiewicz, 2001, pp. 174–176), showing the Risen Christ, for instance emerging from an open grave. Catholics emphasize the mutual and internal relation between Jesus’ death and Resurrection. The Orthodox emphasize the importance of the Resurrection itself, but they reject the possibility of presenting this incomprehensible mystery. The Gospel texts pass over it in silence, for it is a great event, impossible to describe and depict. For the Orthodox faithful, knowing the mystery of the resurrection of God-Man from the dead belongs primarily to spiritual practice (Przybył, 2000, pp. 65–90). The work

betrays the style of non-canonical masters. In addition, it carries the marks of time, perhaps centuries. The thick panel on which the image was painted is cracked, battered and damaged by wood pests. Therefore the presented hypothesis seems probable.

Determining the origin of the icon for the time being remains a problematic issue. The fact remains that it is a so-called noncanonical work and its creator was undoubtedly a master with great theological knowledge. His work – in accordance with the theology of the East – exudes a certain asceticism. He leads the faithful to prayer and contemplation, perhaps also encouraging them to imitate the tormented God, by which he fulfills his catechetical role. However, because of the condition of the icon, it seems that what is most necessary here is conservation work, in order to at least prevent further destruction of the work, and at the same time to determine the approximate date of its creation.

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## Photo-materials



The Tataurovo station on the Trans-Siberian Railway, whose builders included Polish exiles.



The Orthodox church in Tataurovo (Joanna Panasiuk with icon's owner).



The icon; Orthodox church in Tataurovo.

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### Ikona z cerkwi prawosławnej z Tataurowa (wschodnia Syberia)

W miejscowości Tataurovo (Татаурово), znajdującej się we wschodniej Syberii, w prawosławnej cerkwi konsekrowanej w 2013 roku znajduje się niekanoniczna stara ikona nosząca cechy zarówno wschodniego, jak i zachodniego malarstwa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ikona, prawosławie, katolicyzm, Syberia.

#### Note

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