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The 12th century Magdeburg bronze doors in Novgorod: an overview of Russian research

Introduction

The bronze doors of the cathedral St. Sophia in Novgorod, Russia, dated to 1152–1154 and known also as the *Plock* or *Magdeburg doors* (and, erroneously, also as *Sigtuna* or *Korsun*, i.e. Greek, doors), are remarkable works of Romanesque art. The doors are characterised by a rich iconography, depicted on 48 single bronze plates. They are installed in the cathedral's western portal, where the original main entrance is located (today, the northern entrance is used). The doors are known as the *Magdeburg doors* in current Russian literature, while German literature refers to the doors as the *Novgorod doors*, and Polish literature to the *Plock doors*, none of them calling into question their German origin. In the following, we will use the term *Magdeburg doors* to describe the bronze doors, referring to the place of their manufacture, and to avoid confusion with the other medieval bronze doors present in the cathedral in Novgorod: the *Byzantine* and the *Vasiliiy doors*.

The Magdeburg doors underwent several restorations, of which the one carried out in the middle of the 15th century is particularly important. It was probably done under the guidance of the Russian master Avram, who also depicted himself on the door. They were restored again during the 16th century, when several components were repaired or replaced. Restoration work was also carried out in the 1890s, when during their removal the doors fell and some bronze components were damaged. The last restoration of the doors took place in the last quarter of the 20th century.¹

The Magdeburg door consists of two rectangular wings (3.60 x 2.40 m) made of oak onto which were nailed decorated cast bronze plates. The wooden part as it is today derives from the restoration of the door at the end of the 19th century, as do parts of the outer framework, and the screws used to fix plates and frames onto the wooden support. The surface consists of 48 bronze plates of varying sizes arranged in seven rows (Figure 1), with between two and five different scenes in each. Decorated bronze frames were placed symmetrically around the plates, making them into fields of equal size: the top row consists of one large field on each wing, while each of rows 2–7 contains two fields. In the top row on both wings, and the bottom row on the left, a single frame surrounds three plates; in the remaining rows, the frames were placed along the sides and down the centre of each wing, surrounding one or two plates. Frames and plates were fixed on the wooden base with nails and, more recently, screws instead of some of the nails with *flower-shaped* heads.

The plates are of different widths depending on the scene depicted; some are the same width as the wing (C/D1; right wing, top row; circa 78 x 37 cm), some half of the width of one wing (A4, A6, B2, B6, D7; circa 37 x 37 cm), and others roughly a half or a third of one field (circa 24 x 37 cm and 12.5 x 37 cm). The thickness of the plates varies from 2.5 to 4.5 mm. The plates are decorated with relief images, a few of which are drawn from the Old Testament (Ai-Aii6; Aii7; Bi7; Bii3), but the majority from the New Testament. There are also representations of historical persons accompanied by

	Ai	Aii	AB	Bi	Bii	Ci	Cii	CD	Di	Dii
1	Virgin Mary and 6 apostles		Enthroned Christ between Petrus & Paulus	6 apostles		Maiestas Domini				
2	Baptism of Christ	Annunciation		Nativity		Man with coat	Entry to Jerusalem	Warrior with lion	Male figure with a scroll	Christ at the Gates of Jerusalem
3	Male figure holding a book	The Three Magi		Adoration of the Three Magi	Rachel	Young man with animal	Betrayal of Christ	Two fighters	Man with snake	Christ or St. Peter in Chains
4	Presentation at the Temple			Deacon with a censer	Lion head (door handle)	Lion head (door handle)	King	Warrior with animal	Herod	Flagellation of Christ
5	Visitation	Flight to Egypt		Deacon with a book	Alexander, archbishop of Plock	Crucifixion	Nikodemus		Male figure	Women at the sepulcher
6	Ascension of Elijah			Victory of the virtues over the vices		Christ's descent to Hell	Wichmann, archbishop of Magdeburg		Ascension of Christ	Young man with sword
7	Master Riquin	Temptation	master Avram	Creation of Eve	master Weissmuth	Three Kings/St. Mauritius	Massacre of the Innocents		Centaur	

 representations of artists and clerics	 profane	 liturgical personnel
 Old Testament	 New Testament	

Figure 1 Scheme of the different plates of the Magdeburg door in the cathedral of St. Sophia, Novgorod, Russia, as it is today.

Latin and Slavic inscriptions (Ai7; AB7; Bii5; Bii7; Cii6) (Figure 1). There are 54 inscriptions in all, of which 29 are in Russian, 17 in Latin, and eight combine Russian and Latin words (Plates 1–4).

These inscriptions helped to identify Wichmann von Seeburg-Querfurt, deputy (1152–1154) and then archbishop of the German city of Magdeburg from 1154 to 1192 (Cii6), Aleksander of Malonne, archbishop of the Polish city of Plock from 1129 to 1156, (Bii5) as well as the bronze casters Riquin, Weissmuth and Avram (Ai7; AB7; Bii7). The images on the doors also include symbolic and allegorical compositions (e.g. *Victory of the Virtues over the Vices*; male figure with a scroll, etc.).

The three dimensional frames (height up to 6 cm) surrounding the plates are decorated with different floral ornaments – wavy bands running towards each other with small rosettes at the meeting points and tendrils with leaves branching off, or rows of climbing cup-shaped flowers with palmettes spread out in both directions. Three vertical elements of the frames going down the middle of the right wing are among those replaced in the past at an unknown time; they feature figures of people and animals (Figure 2). The ends of the framing elements are decorated with floral ornaments and human figures. The door handles are in the shape of lion’s heads with double-headed snakes attached to their jaws; one to three sinners can be seen inside the lions’ mouths.

The current arrangement of plates is probably not the original one. The doors were dismantled and reassembled several times during their history; it is highly likely that they were rearranged when they arrived in Novgorod in the 15th century, but even after that there were further rearrangements. The doors were removed and hidden during the Russian-Swedish wars at the end of the 18th century, probably also during the Napoleonic period, and lastly in 1941 during World War II, when they were taken to Siberia. In order to facilitate their transport, the panels were removed from the wooden base. They were buried and reassembled several times.² This led to changes in the arrangement of the panels, as evidenced by the numerous cracks and breaks, as well as traces of repairs and additions such as slats and



Figure 2 St. Sophia cathedral, Novgorod. The Magdeburg doors. (after Солнцев 1853, plate 21)

wood screws. There are several marks indicating a numbering of the different plates (points, lines, ...) present on some of the panels but it remains unclear how they were intended to be arranged.³

Today, five copies of the Magdeburg door are known: two made of papier-mâché are located in Moscow and Nuremberg; two made of synthetic material in Warsaw and Gniezno; the only bronze copy was made during the 1970s and installed in the cathedral of Płock.

Research history

The first and for a long time only major study of the Magdeburg doors was written by Friedrich v. Adelung and published in 1823. He was a state councillor and director of the Institute of Oriental Languages, Saint Petersburg, established under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. His research focused on Russian archaeology but he was also very interested in reviewing foreign narratives about Russia and in linguistic studies. He had already commented on the doors in 1818, when discussing Baron Sigismund von Herberstein's *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii*.⁴ He published his monograph, *Die Korssunschen Thüren in der Kathedrale zur Heil. Sophia in Nowgorod* a few years later. The German publication of 1823 was translated into Russian and published in 1834.⁵ This translation laid a solid base for further Russian research on the doors.

Among the undoubted merits of Adelung's book is that it contained reports of local and foreign travellers who visited Novgorod and left comments on the doors in question (see e.g. chapter V, *Erwähnung der Korssunschen Thüren bey in- und ausländischen Schriftstellern*). The oldest report noted by Adelung was the one written by Herberstein in the middle of the 16th century, which described "ain kupferne Kirchthur, die aus Krieckenland solt gebracht sein". He also quoted from the Siberian travels 1733–1743 of Johann Georg Gmelin, who noted doors of yellow metal, originally from Korsun.⁶ Among the especially valuable texts are those written by G. F. Müller (1782) and William Coxe (1784), who had indicated the erroneous identification of the Magdeburg doors with the *Korsunian* antiquities by pointing out the images of Catholic priests and Latin inscriptions.⁷

Adelung was the first to describe the bronze doors in detail, and, moreover, provided a scientific assessment of its historical and artistic significance. He discussed in detail the different possible origins of the doors, variously posited as Sigtuna in Sweden, Korsun, a Byzantine possession in the Crimea, and somewhere in Russia, but coming, however, to the conclusion that the doors were made in Magdeburg, Germany.⁸ In support of his hypothesis, he provided a number of arguments, mainly iconographic and stylistic observations including the representation of Wichmann von Seeburg, archbishop of Magdeburg.⁹ Adelung was aware of exchanges between Germany, Byzantium and Italy in the production of the bronze doors, which is manifest, for example, in the representations of Christ and St. Peter.¹⁰ He also drew attention to some images that differed from the iconographical traditions of the suggested places of origin (e.g. the *Creation of Eve*; *Christ's Descent into Hell*) and noted different styles which could point to different craftsmen. Here he distinguished between more and less detailed and artistically executed figures.¹¹

During the following decades, research in Russia focussed mainly on the origin and history of the Magdeburg doors (see in particular the following chapter). Little attention was paid to iconographic interpretation, or comparison with other bronze doors of the same period. The only Russian comparison of the bronze doors with others in Germany and Italy, made by Ivan Tolstoy and Nikodim Kondakov at the end of the 19th century¹², was not further discussed in later Russian literature.

A long journey: from Magdeburg to Novgorod

Until the late 20th century, the place of production and original destination of the bronze doors was still unclear or at least the subject of strong disagreement. Several potential places of origin, suggested on the basis of legends and misapprehension, were the focus of fierce debate among Russian researchers. As mentioned above, they included Byzantine-ruled Crimea (Korsun) and Sweden (Sigtuna), and also Estonia (Dorpat), Byzantium and Russia. Furthermore, it was also unclear how the doors came to Novgorod. Adelung discussed some of the origin theories being put forward by Russian research at the time, such as that the doors were received as a gift from the Hanseatic League, purchased for Novgorod in Germany or captured during a campaign in Livonia.¹³ Given the trade relations between the Hanse and Novgorod, many later authors assumed that the bronze doors were brought to Novgorod no earlier than the second half of the 13th century.¹⁴

Adelung was not alone in positing a German origin for the doors: Nikolay Karamzin and Pavel Svinin did so also¹⁵. Adelung's book received a positive response from the Russian academic and public communities, including the church, leading many Russian authors who had previously written of the *Korsunian* door in Novgorod to reconsider their opinion and to recognize its German origin¹⁶. Additional arguments in favour of this hypothesis were given by Arthur Winkler in 1886. In his book *Die deutsche Hanse in Russland* he connected the appearance in Novgorod of doors from Magdeburg with the mention in Vasily Tatishchev's *History of Russia* of the purchase of metal doors from Germans by Archbishop Vasilii in 1336.¹⁷ Nevertheless, much confusion remained in Russian research about the origin of the doors until the 20th century.

According to Anna Trifonova, the Magdeburg doors were already known as *Korsunian* doors by the middle of the 15th century, and had the status of an ancient Byzantine relic. One version of their Greek origin probably came from the entourage of Archbishop Evfimy II (archbishop of Novgorod the Great and Pskov 1429–1458) and was in line with the archbishop's policy to approve local shrines connected with the names of Prince Vladimir, the baptizer of Russia. The legend that the doors were allegedly brought by Prince Vladimir as a trophy from Korsun in 989 was strongly supported by the clergy primarily for ideological reasons¹⁸ and was not officially disputed for a long time, despite the presence of Latin inscriptions on the metal plates of the doors. The case of the bronze doors in Moscow and Suzdal is similar: they were equally associated with Korsun, although their time period is different and they are not in the same region as Novgorod.¹⁹

However, the term *Korsunian* was used not only for the bronze doors of Novgorod, but as Adelung noted, was widely used in Russia to designate various metal works of art, such as icons, bells, vessels, crosses, as well as bronze doors in general.²⁰ Consequently, Adelung proposed applying the word *Korsunian* to the earliest artistic period in Russia. This was widely adopted by later Russian authors, although they often did not reference Adelung.²¹

At the end of the 19th century, Nikolay Sobko, in his *Dictionary of Russian Artists* (1893), noted that despite the [to him] clear evidence of the German origin of the western doors of the Novgorod cathedral, they were called *Korsunian*, i.e. Greek, although this name would be more justifiably applied to the internal doors of the same cathedral. These doors are at the entrance to the chapel of the Nativity of the Virgin (Figures 3 and 4) and are called *Sartunian* or *Sigtunian*, despite their distinctly Byzantine character.²² It is very likely, he added, that it was precisely these inner doors which the Austrian diplomat Herberstein had in mind when he wrote about the doors of the cathedral in Novgorod in 1517, allegedly taken from Byzantine-ruled Korsun.²³ Otherwise, it would be simply incomprehensible how



Figure 3 Other medieval bronze doors in the St. Sophia cathedral, Novgorod. Left: The Vasily doors (after Солнцев 1853, plate 33). These doors were ordered in 1336 by Vasily Kalika, archbishop of Novgorod from 1330–1352, and transferred in 1570 by Tsar Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible) to the Trinity (Pokrov) cathedral in Alexandrov, Vladimir Oblast. Right: The Byzantine doors (also referred to as Korsun or Sigtuna doors) (after Солнцев 1853, plate 20).

such a subtle observer did not remark on the Latin inscriptions on the outer doors and the 12th century images of Catholic priests there.

Writing shortly after Sobko, Tolstoy and Kondakov also noted that there could have been various reasons for describing the Magdeburg doors as *Korsunian*, including “by misunderstanding”, when they were confused with the *Sigtunian* doors.²⁴ Those, in their opinion, belong to the 11th–12th century and could be associated with the Byzantine doors in Italy due to their ornamentation and technical details.

Another proposed origin of the Magdeburg doors was Sigtuna, Sweden. Sigtuna was a commercial, political and religious centre of Sweden in the 12th century. It is known from contemporary documents that it was raided in 1187, probably by pagans from the Eastern Baltic, even though no archaeological

confirmation of this event has yet been found. Nor is there any proof that it was Karelians or other raiders with connections to Novgorod.²⁵

The Sigtuna legend emerged rather late, at the beginning of the 17th century, and claimed only that the doors were taken away by the invaders and their keys thrown into a lake near Sigtuna.²⁶ This legend was probably invented to explain the supposed images of “key-like” figures on the stones on the shore of the lake, and was conveniently attached to the true story of the destruction of Sigtuna. In Novgorod itself, the association of the doors with Sigtuna appears no earlier than the 18th century.²⁷ The legend was included in Olaf Dahlin’s history of Sweden, written in Swedish in the middle of that century, and published in Russian in 1805²⁸. Since the outer doors of the cathedral had already been called *Korsunian* for quite a long time, the Swedish legend was associated with the inner doors. However, Andrzej Poppe (1976, 192) noted that the legend about the Sigtuna doors began to be associated with the bronze doors of St. Sophia cathedral during the period of the “Time of Troubles” (1598–1613) and the Swedish intervention (1610–1617), which was reflected in his book about the history of Sigtuna, written in 1612 by the Swedish scholar, Martin Aschaneus, with corrections made after his stay in Novgorod in 1614.²⁹ Aschaneus wrote about the Sigtuna doors being taken to Moscow, but later he identified them with the doors of the St. Sophia cathedral in Novgorod.

Igor Shaskolky was another who considered the origin of the bronze doors in Sigtuna as quite possible. To support the authenticity of the *Sigtuna* legend, he relied on the publication by the Finnish researcher Johan Jacob Ahrenberg (1907) about the supposed depiction of scenes from the life of St. Siegfried at Sigtuna on the Magdeburg doors, which, however, were criticized by Oscar Almgren and others.³⁰

A potential origin of the bronze doors in Dorpat (today’s Tartu, Estonia) was suggested by Vladimir Bogusevich in 1939. He suggested that the Magdeburg doors were brought to Novgorod as a result of the capture of Dorpat in 1262 by Prince Dmitriy Aleksandrovich, and that the doors were then placed in the St. Sophia cathedral in memory of his victories. But Shaskolky, citing the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, noted that those who fled to the castle were saved from the Russian attack on Dorpat.³¹ It is noteworthy that both the residence of the bishop and the cathedral were located in the castle. Such valuable items as bronze doors would probably have been in the cathedral, but as the castle of Dorpat was not seized by the Novgorodians in 1262, it is unlikely that they took with them from Dorpat any bronze doors that may have been there, Shaskolky believed.

The attempts by different researchers, such as Tolstoy and Kondakov, to find evidence for the origin of the *Korsunian* and *Sigtunian* doors, as well as distinguishing them into actual and not being *Korsunian* doors (without offering a new name for the latter case), or associate the bronze doors to

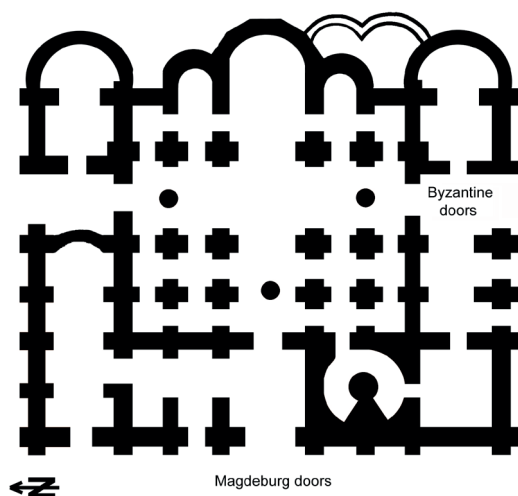


Figure 4 Current floor plan of St. Sophia cathedral, Novgorod (after Комеч 2007, 505), indicating the location of the different doors.

another origin, led to confusion in the nomenclature of the different bronze doors in the cathedral of Novgorod throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th.

In 1911, Petr Belavenets, engaged by the “Trophy Commission” to collect material evidence of Russia’s military glory, turned to the participants of the XV Archaeological congress, which was held in Novgorod that year, with a request to clarify the confusion in the nomenclature of the bronze doors in the cathedral of Novgorod. In particular, he was interested to know if the doors of the St. Sophia cathedral in Novgorod could be considered as a trophy of the campaign against Sigtuna in 1187.³² The scholarly uncertainty about the so-called Sigtuna legend encouraged one participant of the Novgorod congress, the Swedish professor Oscar Almgren, to publish *On the legend of the Sigtuna doors of St. Sophia in Novgorod*. He was highly critical, declaring the Sigtuna legend to be completely unreliable. According to him, neither the inner doors, which he believed to be of Byzantine provenance, nor the outer doors, which he said were of German provenance, were ever in Sigtuna.³³

Almgren reasserted that the bronze doors were made in Magdeburg, one of the largest centres of artistic craftsmanship in Germany. He cited Adolph Goldschmidt (1900), who pointed out that the doors on which Archbishop Wichmann von Seeburg (died 1192) is depicted come from the same workshop in Magdeburg where the bronze tomb effigy of his predecessor, Archbishop Frederick I of Wettin (died 1152), was cast.³⁴ As Aleksander of Malonne, archbishop of Płock, who died in 1156, was also depicted on the Magdeburg doors, Almgren suggested that the doors were made for one of the Płock churches in 1152–1156, which would coincide with the period of office of both priests, and that the doors got to Novgorod through international trade or as war booty.³⁵

Adelung, Shaskolky and others presumed that the Magdeburg doors had been reassembled in Novgorod.³⁶ According to Shaskolky, the current doors were made out of plates taken from two older ones, one made in Magdeburg during the 12th century, and another one of unknown origin. For the latter, he suggested a door made for the cathedral of Płock, as indicated by the plate representing Archbishop Aleksander of Malonne. Furthermore, he maintained that the assemblage of plates from different doors indicates that the different plates arrived in Novgorod as war booty. Had the doors been purchased, he claimed, the buyers would have transported them in their entirety so that on arrival they would have been installed in their original form. He argues that only if they were war booty might they have arrived in Novgorod in pieces and possibly even incomplete; the missing parts then had to be replaced with plates from another door. However, the authors would like to point out here that all the Byzantine doors shipped to Italy were ordered by Italians in Byzantium and delivered unmounted; the doors were mounted on the wooden base once they arrived at their final destination.

Poppe dated the manufacture of the Magdeburg doors on the basis of the life of Wichmann von Seeburg, who was named Archbishop of Magdeburg by Frederick Barbarossa shortly after May 18, 1152. However, due to the resistance of the majority of the cathedral chapter, supported by Pope Eugene III, Wichmann did not take up his office immediately.³⁷ He continued to be responsible for the Naumburg diocese and counted on eventually obtaining the Pope’s approval. He did not aggravate the situation and spoke at the imperial congress in Bamberg in April 1153, appearing in his previous “legitimate” rank. The situation changed after June 7, 1153, when Barbarossa, having learnt that Rome continued to oppose this investiture, demonstratively emphasized the inflexibility of his decision. Apparently it was only then that Wichmann assumed his new duties although he still did not use the title of archbishop. As a result of his personal stay in Rome around April/May 1154, Wichmann succeeded in being officially granted the status of archbishop. Taking all of this into account, Poppe claimed that the manufacture of the Romanesque doors of St. Sophia in Novgorod should be dated to the second

half of 1153 with the possibility that the work continued into the beginning of 1154. They were probably commissioned by Aleksander of Malonne, Archbishop of Płock, but it is possible that Wichmann, guided by considerations of church politics, intended the bronze doors as a gift for the newly erected cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Płock.

Poppe also considered the hypothesis of Polish scholars, originally formulated by Joachim Lelewel (1851), that the Magdeburg doors were presented to Novgorod around 1390 by Prince Lugven Simeon Olgerdovich, brother of the wife of Prince Zimovit IV of Płock. However, it seemed unlikely to Poppe that the Prince of Płock would be free to give away the doors of the cathedral, even if it was in his capital city. However, in later publications he did not exclude the possibility that the doors could have been removed from the portal of the Płock cathedral for sale, donation or to be melted down around 1440, when the cathedral was rebuilt in Gothic style.³⁸

As Aleksander of Malonne, the Archbishop of Płock, is also represented on the bronze doors, this suggests that they were originally most probably intended for the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Płock, which was built 1129–1144. There is no mention of the doors in the surviving documents of the Italian builder's lodge responsible for the Renaissance reconstruction under Bishop Andrzej Krzycki (1530); they were probably already gone at this point.³⁹

It is possible that the doors disappeared from Płock in 1262; during the absence of Prince Ziemovit I of Mazovia (1248–1262), Płock was attacked by the Lithuanians together with the Old Prussians, who possibly took the bronze doors with them. It might also be possible that the doors were taken by the Tartars in 1241, as assumed by Hans-Joachim Mrusek.⁴⁰ Another possibility is that the doors were bought at the end of the 15th century by Novgorod's archbishop Evfimy II, as suggested by Teresa Mroczko⁴¹, or by Lengvenis (Simeon Lingwen, ca. 1360 to after 1431), the ruler of the Great Novgorod Republic, and brother of the Polish king Jogaila (Władysław II Jagiełło, ca. 1352/1362–1434).⁴² Nor can the possibility be ruled out that they were a gift from the archbishop of Płock or the dukes of Mazovia to Lengvenis or to Evfimy.⁴³ In the end, it remains unclear when and why the doors were brought from Płock to Novgorod.

Russian restorations during the 15th and 16th century

Even though it is not clear exactly when, and under what circumstances, the bronze doors arrived in Novgorod, there is nevertheless consensus that restoration was undertaken by Russian artists in the city in the middle of the 15th century – one of them, master Avram, even depicting himself next to the two German artists on the bottom row of the left wing. When reassembling the Magdeburg doors – possibly on their arrival in Novgorod, or during one of the subsequent restorations –, the Novgorodians probably changed the original order of the plates and may have replaced old ones, and/or added new ones.

Sobko dedicated a separate section in his book to the plate depicting master Avram (Figure 5). He noted that the figure of Avram in many respects repeats Romanesque models, including his garments and gestures. However, the inscription of his name in Russian, the cross on his neck, and a lack of Romanesque “naive naturalism” as Sobko defines it, prove the Russian origin of the figure and date the plate to the 12th-14th century, in Sobko's opinion.⁴⁴ Aleksander Anisimov also discussed in detail the bronze plate of master Avram, interpreting it as a “self-portrait” of the Russian craftsman in Novgorod who reassembled the parts of the German door and replaced any missing components, and dating it to the end of the pre-Mongol period.⁴⁵ He suggested that the image of Avram dates from the same time as the translation of Latin inscriptions into Russian and the installation of the doors themselves



Figure 5 The three bronzeworkers depicted on the bronze door. From left to right: master Riquin, master Weissmuth and master Avram (after: Трифонова 2015, 92 and Goldschmidt 1932, pl. II.30a; II.32; II.36a).

in the western portal of St. Sophia. According to Anisimov, the figure of Avram was undoubtedly an imitation of Romanesque sculptures, while its Russian origin is proven by the Slavic inscription on the plate, his facial type and the shape of the cross on his body. This was criticised by Boris Rybakov as a confusing argument, based only on stylistic considerations, and in clear contradiction with the palaeographic analysis of the 14th century inscription.⁴⁶ According to Genrikh Bocharov, master Avram does not differ in any stylistic or iconographic way from the other relief images on the Magdeburg doors.⁴⁷

The Russian inscriptions were always associated with the restoration of the door by master Avram. Adelung studied the inscriptions of the doors (Plates 1–4) in detail and reproduced them full size in his books.⁴⁸ From the shape of the letters, he dated the Russian inscriptions no earlier than the 14th century, possibly even to the early 15th century. At the same time, he drew attention to the fact that in the Russian inscriptions some letters occur in three or more variants (for example the letters A, B, D, E and L). He suggested that this was because different craftsmen had worked on the doors, each of them with their own handwriting.⁴⁹ As for the Latin inscriptions, most of the letters, in his opinion, belong to the 13th–14th century and were made by different artists at different times, but in any case before the Russian inscriptions.⁵⁰

In order to date the Slavic inscriptions on the Romanesque doors in Novgorod, Poppe analysed the graphic and orthographic norms as well as the shape of letters, assuming that more than six dozen words provide satisfactory material for such analysis.⁵¹ Using published Novgorod inscriptions of the 15th century, he attributed the Russian inscriptions on the bronze door to the same period, finding the highest amount of correspondence with inscriptions from north-eastern Russia from about 1430–1460. He narrowed this down to 1435 and 1456 for the appearance of Russian inscriptions on the bronze doors, and also the time of their arrival in Novgorod. On the basis of the dating of the Cyrillic inscriptions proposed by Poppe, Trifonova concludes that in the second third of the 15th century, the Russian master Avram restored the Magdeburg doors, added inscriptions and, in memory of



Figure 6 The Russian statue of Saint George by master Vasilii Yermolin, 1464 (after Wikipedia: public domain).

his work, placed a representation of himself as artist between the figures of the German bronze workers Riquin and Weissmuth.⁵² Earlier authors like Georgiy Vagner, who based his study on Poppe's chronological conclusions about Cyrillic inscriptions, dated the plate of master Avram and the plate with the centaur to the middle of the 15th century.⁵³

Among the more recent restorations after Avram's adaptations of the door is the plate depicting a male figure (probably *Nicodemus*; plate Cii5), and the ornamented frames of the lower registers of the wings.⁵⁴ These works could have been carried out during the reign of Makariy, the Metropolitan of Moscow, who cast a large bell for the belfry of St. Sophia in 1530 on the occasion of the birth of Tsar Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible).

Trifonova and Aleksey Chernetsov⁵⁵ both believe the plate with the centaur could have been made during the 1330s. Two other representations of centaurs – one on the Vasilii doors, the other on a seal of governor Feliks – date to the time of Vasilii Kalika, Archbishop of Novgorod 1330–1352, which made both authors assume that the centaur on the bronze door is probably contemporary.

Unfortunately, the original location of the Vasilii doors in the Novgorod cathedral is unknown; in the most recent publication about the doors, the author, Aleksey Gulmanov, says that “the most likely location of Vasilii doors was on the south side, but it is not clear whether the doors stood initially in the southern (outer) portal, leading to the cathedral itself, or whether they were the (inner) doors, located in the south-eastern sacrum (aisle) of the Nativity of the Mother of God”⁵⁶ that is, in the same place where the “Byzantine” doors are located now.

However, Trifonova considers it likely that the centaur from the Magdeburg doors was added in the middle of the 15th century, on the basis of its possible similarity to the Russian statue of Saint George (1464; master Vasilii Yermolin) (Figure 6),⁵⁷ mounted on the Frolovskaya (Spasskaya) tower of the Kremlin in Moscow. Today, only St George's torso remains. While many 20th century Russian researchers are convinced that the statue was sculpted by Vasilii Yermolin, it is also possible that Yermolin purchased the statue from an Italian master.⁵⁸ The centaur plate was stolen in 1952 and replaced in 1974⁵⁹ with a duplicate based on a copy of the original plate made in the 1880s, which is stored in the State Historical Museum in Moscow along with a copy of the complete door.⁶⁰

In Trifonova's opinion the appearance of Russian inscriptions only on some plates and not on all of them indicates that they were applied to a door which was not completely dismantled during restoration work (in other words, when master Avram worked on them), but that the order of plates was rearranged. Consequently, on the basis of the report for 1336 in Novgorod's first chronicle Trifonova did not exclude the possibility that the Magdeburg doors appeared in Novgorod long before 1450.⁶¹ It was in 1336 that Novgorod's archbishop Vasilii Kalika donated to the cathedral the gold-plated, so-called *Vasilii doors*, bought “for a large sum of money from Germans”⁶². Trifonova believes that the Magdeburg doors came to Novgorod at the same time.

She proposes a reconstruction of the events connected with the appearance of the western doors of the St. Sophia cathedral in the 14th–16th centuries and the repairs made to them. In this timeline the Magdeburg doors were installed in the western portal during the 14th century,⁶³ having been delivered to Novgorod during the restoration of St. Sophia cathedral and its furnishings after the fire of 1340. The Magdeburg doors were installed in the vacant western portal during the 14th century.

Questions of Iconography

It was Adelung who first identified Aleksander of Malonne, Archbishop of Płock, in one of the panels, which he then used for establishing the date of the bronze doors. Adelung considered the 13th century to be the probable date of their manufacture;⁶⁴ Aleksey Uvarov, on the other hand, believed that they were made during the 12th century. Archimandrite Makariy and Mikhail Tolstoy put it in the second half of the 12th century.⁶⁵ This interpretation lasted until the early 20th century, repeated in publications by Vasilij Laskovskiy, Nikolay Pokrovskiy, and others.⁶⁶

Ivan Tolstoy and Nikodim Kondakov also believed the bronze doors in Novgorod to be a product of North German artists of the Romanesque era as discussed above.⁶⁷ They gave stylistic reasons in particular, such as the thick-set human figures with massive heads and feet extended straight out. They described the faces as characterised by a youthful roundness, low foreheads with the hair cut straight round. The figures are dressed in German clothes rendered with the rough realism of brocade fabrics. As close parallels to the Novgorod reliefs, both Tolstoy and Kondakov point to the bronze doors in Augsburg, Germany, which, in their opinion, are distinguished by their Byzantine style, far removed from the “primitive crudeness” of the Hildesheim doors, cast around 1015 at the request of bishop Bernward. They noted furthermore that the Novgorod doors were later than the Augsburg doors, and added that they were “made with less Byzantine influence in a rougher western, and partly northern style”.⁶⁸ They also noted schematic similarities in the scenes to other European medieval bronze doors e.g. San Zeno in Verona and the doors created by Bonanno in Monreale in Sicily and in Pisa.⁶⁹

Tolstoy and Kondakov also assumed that the door was actually an assemblage of the surviving parts of several demolished and dismantled doors. They considered the images of the two clerics – from Magdeburg and Płock – as the main argument in favour of this hypothesis.⁷⁰

Nikolay Sychev examined several plates on the bronze doors and concluded on a stylistic basis that they were not made in a single workshop.⁷¹ He assumed, however, that the majority of the plates are connected with German workshops of the 11th–12th century. Sychev considered the plate with the *Enthroned Christ* to be among the oldest, as it was, in his opinion, similar to the images on the doors of the basilica of St. Zeno in Verona. In Sychev’s opinion, the bronze doors from Novgorod underwent extensive rearrangement as early as the 14th century, with the older parts rearranged and new ones added. He thought that probable traces of gilding were preserved on some reliefs, but this was not confirmed by later chemical analysis.⁷²

Vladislav Darkevich published a first detailed description of some of the scenes on the bronze plates and the narrative cycle. On the left wing are scenes from the life of Christ as a child, and on the right wing scenes from the *Passion of Christ* starting with the *Entry to Jerusalem*.⁷³ Some of the allegorical figures symbolize the victory of Christian virtues over the forces of evil. According to Darkevich, the style of relief is characteristic of Saxon sculptures of the mid-12th century and differs from the style of the work on the Hildesheim door (made around 1015), as the compositions of the Hildesheim door still have the “antique softness of modelling of vigorously moving figures”⁷⁴. Most of the figures on the Novgorod doors are shown facing outwards. They are inert and enclosed

in their contours. The characteristic rigidity of their relief form is combined with abundant linear engravings on the surface⁷⁵.

Trifonova suggested in her book that the main idea of the iconography on the Magdeburg doors is the glorification of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the sins of the world, the “Door of Salvation”.⁷⁶ Ryszard Knapiński, for his part, believes that the current arrangement of the plates on the Magdeburg doors does not correspond to the original iconographic program and that this program does not fit the definition of doors accepted in modern literature as a multi-component iconic image, representing the earthly life of Christ. In his opinion, the creators of the Magdeburg doors conceived them as a set of illustrations of the Apostles creed (*Credo Apostolorum*)⁷⁷ Trifonova considered the New Testament scenes of the Magdeburg doors in historical sequence.⁷⁸ She named the allegory of the *Victory of the Virtues over the Vices* as a connecting link between the Old and New Testament stories. It is interesting that on the altar from Oettingen made in the 1170s/1180s (now in the Diocesan Museum in Augsburg), as on the Magdeburg doors, the virtue *Fortitudo* is represented in the form of a victorious warrior. According to Trifonova, it is no coincidence that on the Magdeburg doors the *Victory of the Virtues over the Vices* was represented by military images and placed under the portrait of the prospective customer, Aleksander of Malonne, archbishop of Plock.⁷⁹ Historical sources testify that Aleksander was not only the head of the Plock clergy, but also a warrior distinguished by “bodily strength and courage against the enemies of his bishopric”.⁸⁰

Restorations and material analyses

The beginning of the 21st century saw the publication of a popular brochure about the Magdeburg doors by Tatyana Tsarevskaya⁸¹, as well as a paper by Nelli Timofeeva et al., presenting the results of the research and restoration conducted by the staff of the State Research Institute for Restoration, Moscow, in 1980.⁸² A review of the condition of the bronze plates and other metal parts revealed the presence of numerous restorations, such as inserts, plugs, and patches, made in different copper alloys at different times.

Timofeeva et al. also describe the restoration carried out in the 1890s, when the doors fell while being removed, and some parts were damaged.⁸³ During the reinstallation of the plates of the second row from the top of the right wing a plate with a separate figure was arbitrarily rearranged, breaking the unity of the composition of the *Entry to Jerusalem*. The bronze parts of the doors were transferred onto a new oak frame, but this turned out to be lower than the old one because of a decrease in the height of the western portal, so the plates were moved closer together. As a result, some of the inscriptions were covered by the edges of the decorative frames. When comparing the current state of the Magdeburg doors with illustrations in literary sources and the copy of the door stored in the State Historical Museum (Moscow), the rearrangements of the sections of decorative columns separating the plates of the second, third, and fourth rows of the right wing with figures of people and dogs are obvious. Most probably this change occurred during the restoration of the doors in the late 19th century, although it was not recorded in the literature describing the restoration.⁸⁴

An important part of the publication by Timofeeva et. al. is the chemical analyses carried out during the restoration in 1980 and published first in 1996 by Trifonova and subsequently, with further details, in 2003.⁸⁵ Samples were taken from the back of the plates, dissolved with hydrogen peroxide in hydrochloric acid and tested using emission spectral analysis at the laboratories of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Analysis was carried out with a polychromator JY-48. An inductive high-frequency discharge in argon was used as a light source. As standard solutions bronze BX-2 and #67-B

no.	plate	detail	Cu	Sn	Zn	Pb	Ag	Ni	As	Sb	Ca	Fe	Cr	Bi
1	A4	Presentation at the Temple	82,1	1,2	12,6	4,1						++		
2	A6	Ascension of Elijah	81,6	2,8	10,2	4,9		++				++	++	
3	AB7	Master Avram	77,6	7,1	10,6	4,7	+		+	+			+	+
4	AB7	Master Avram, back side I	80,5	6,3	9,2	4,1	+	+	+	+			+	+
5	AB7	Master Avram, back side II	79,3	6,6	8,7	4,7				+	+		+	+
6	Ai1	Virgin Mary and six Apostles	81,7	0,9	14,4	2,5	+	+	+	+			+	+
7	Ai2	Baptism of Christ	83,0	1,6	13,0	2,4	+		+	+			+	+
8	Ai7	Master Riquin	78,4	1,5	15,9	2,5		++					++	++
9	Ai7	Master Riquin, back side	82,2	1,4	13,9	2,5	+	+	+	+			+	+
10	Aii1–Bi1	Enthroned Christ between Peter and Paul	84,0	1,2	13,6	1,2		+	+	+			+	+
11	Aii7	Temptation	84,5	3,7	9,3	2,5		++					++	++
12	B6	Victory of the Virtues over the Vices	80,3	2,8	12,3	4,6		++					++	++
13	Bi7	Creation of Eve	78,9	1,6	15,8	3,7	+		+	+			+	+
14	Bi7	Creation of Eve (angel foot, repair)	76,3	3,6	13,0	6,5		++					++	++
15	Bii7	Master Weissmuth	81,4	2,0	15,5	1,2	+	+	+	+			+	+
16	Ci4	Lion head door handle	80,3	5,0	8,9	5,1	+	+	+	+			+	+
17	Ci6	Christ's descent to Hell	81,0	2,0	15,1	1,6		++					++	++
18	Ci7	Three kings	80,4	5,9	10,8	3,0		++					++	++
19	Cii3	Betrayal of Christ	81,8	0,9	14,5	2,1	+	+	+	+			+	+
20	Cii5	a man in a woman's dress, likely Nikodemus	70,9	19,2	1,3	8,6	+	+	+	+			+	+
21	Dii3	Christ or St. Peter in chains	83,1	1,2	13,4	2,2	+	+	+	+			+	+
22	Dii4	Flagellation of Christ	80,5	2,1	13,2	2,4		++					++	++
23	Dii5	Women at the sepulcher	82,1	0,6	15,4	1,9		++					++	++
24	E1	Six Apostles	82,2	1,6	12,2	1,5		++					++	++
25		petal of decorative half-column	78,7	2,1	16,7	2,6	+	+	+	+			+	+
26		petal of half-column (bottom of door)	74,9	18,3	1,4	5,0	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Table 1 Chemical analyses in wt.% carried out on different plates and decorative elements of the Magdeburg door, St. Sophia cathedral, Novgorod [normalised; the presence of trace elements is indicated by "+"; after Timofeeva et al. 2003].

(MERK, Germany) were used. Additionally, qualitative analyses were carried out on 15 samples, in order to detect the presence of impurities, such as silver, nickel, iron, chromium, bismuth, arsenic and antimony. These analyses were carried out using emission spectral analysis with an alternating current arc as the excitation source. The results of the chemical analyses are reported in Table 1.

The results obtained allowed the authors to conclude that most of the plates were cast from bronze with relatively high plasticity.⁸⁵ Depending on the main elements present (copper, zinc, lead and tin) in different quantities, different groups of alloys can be distinguished (Figure 7). While most of the plates were made of a similar alloy, some plates (amongst them the plate of master Avram and some of the restorations) have a different chemical composition.

Most of the plates are made of brass with low amounts of lead and tin: lead was added with up to 4 wt.%, tin with up to 2 wt.%, while the amount of zinc is between 11.5–15.5 wt.%. Other plates are of a different, more reddish colour. Indeed, they were made of a different composition of brass with less zinc (9.5–11.4 wt.%) and slightly more tin (up to 2.7 wt.%) and lead (up to 4.6 wt.%). Interestingly, the plate depicting master Avram is of a different chemical composition again, with up to 6.8 wt.% tin, 8.1–10.2 wt.% zinc and about 3.9–4.5 wt.% lead. Plates with a similar composition are the heads of the sinners in *Christ's Descent into Hell*, the head and feet of the angel in the *Creation of Eve*, the lion head door handle on the left wing, as well as numerous inserts added during restoration.⁸⁶

Due to its chemical composition and style, Trifonova assumes that the plate probably depicting Nicodemus (Cii5), and the ornamental half-ovals in the lower part of the doors in the form of flowers with horn-shaped petals are among the most recent components of the bronze door, and date

to the first half of the 16th century⁸⁷. Made of brittle, leaded tin bronze, their chemical composition differs significantly from the other metal parts: about 17.7–18.8 wt.% tin, 4.8–8.4 wt.% lead and less than 1.5 wt.% zinc. They were probably added during restoration work.

Conclusions

The Magdeburg doors are considered one of Europe's most important monumental bronzes not only of the 12th century, but of the medieval period in general. They are of great importance not only for Russian, but also for Romanesque art in general.

Different legends about the possible origin of the doors led to confusing terminology and attribution of the doors to different sites in Crimea, Sweden and Russia. The correct identification of the origin of the doors dominated Russian research during the 19th century up to the middle of the 20th century. After an early association of the doors with the Greek Korsun, the so-called Sigturnian hypothesis gained considerable popularity in the first half of the last century. In this hypothesis, the Magdeburg doors ended up in Novgorod after the Swedish capital Sigtuna was plundered by the Karelians in 1187. However, this version, as well as the view that the doors in question were brought to Novgorod as a military booty after the destruction of Dorpat in 1262, were later dismissed. A German origin for the doors was eventually accepted – mainly thanks to the work of Adelung, although the comparison of the bronze doors with others in Germany and Italy made by Tolstoy and Kondakov at the end of the 19th century was not further discussed in later Russian literature.

Today the origin of the bronze doors in Magdeburg and the date of their production (1152–1154) are well accepted. However, it still remains unclear how they came from Plock, for which they were probably originally produced, to Novgorod. Between their almost certain manufacture in Magdeburg and their arrival in Novgorod, the bronze doors had already undergone changes in the arrangement and composition of their plates, as evidenced by their different sizes and the different types of ornamental frames, indicating the work of different workshops at different times. Further dismantling and reassembly, including in the 18th to 20th centuries, led to a further rearrangement of the plates.

In the 20th century considerable efforts were also devoted to the artistic and iconographical analysis of certain plates presumed to be connected with the activities of Novgorod artisans during the 13th–16th century. It was mainly Poppe who identified the date of the restoration of the doors during the first half of the 15th century, when, for instance, the plate of master Avram was added.

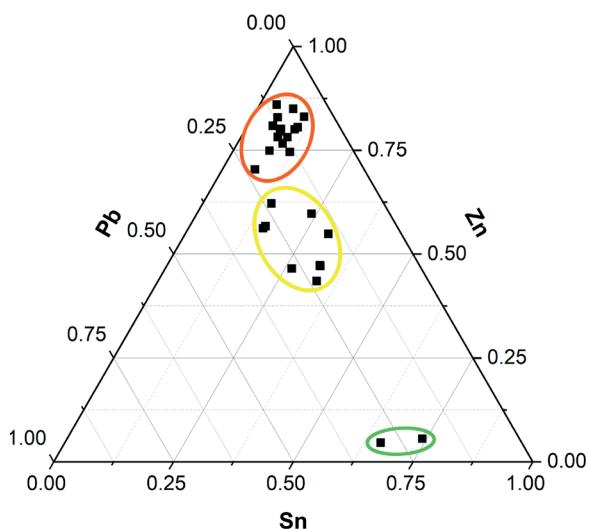


Figure 7 Three groups of different chemical composition of selected plates and frames, visualised by the relation of their tin, zinc and lead amount in the copper alloy. Data after Timofeeva et al. 2003 (see also Table 1 in this publication). Green: tin-rich plates (Ci5, petal of half-column, bottom of door); yellow: plates with max. 13 wt.% zinc and at least 2.8 wt.% tin (A6; Aii7; B6; Bi7; Ci4; Ci7). red: all other plates.

An important part of the studies carried out on the door was the chemical analyses of the bronze parts at the end of the 20th century. While most of the plates were shown to be of more or less uniform composition, some parts, which had already been attributed to the restoration carried out during the 15th century, have a different composition. In yet others the proportions of the different metals in the bronze are probably related to further restoration work during the 16th century.

Finally, the most recent publication on the bronze doors, published in 2015 by Trifonova, provides for the first time a holistic insight into the door's making, history and restoration. Many photographs of the different plates permit a detailed study of the doors, which is particularly valuable now, when in current political circumstances the doors are unfortunately not accessible for researchers outside Russia.

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Following pages: Plates 1–4 Inscriptions of the Magdeburg doors, Novgorod (after Adelung 1823). The numbers in brackets indicate Adelung's inscription number.

ΑΛΛΙ

Ai 1 (4)

Α Ω

AB 1 (2)

+ (H̄CBA
B̄GIZA
TVÆ

Ai 2 (6)

+ A U E M A I L C R S T
I A P L E N A D N S
T E C V O T O A B R I
E L

Aii 2 (7)

BOJENITETISTINDUKXRUZDAPRY

Aii 3 (8)

CBHTYXCBHTM

Ai-Aii 4 (13)

IC XC

Ai-Aii 4 (1)

CP̄TENIEΓ̄NE

Ai-Aii 4 (10)

PCYTAH

Ai-Aii 4 (11)

IC XC

Ai-Aii 4 (12)

MAPICHTHC̄OBACNIDE EBEGVPECOIΩC H ΦH
+ M P R I O M L T E R I H N V D E S C N D I T I E B

Ai 5 (16)

B T V̄ C Ū I O S E M

MAPICHELHCBVAΦB

Ai 5 (16)

MARIA·7 ELISA
YEL·OBCTA·C·H·BET

BZTHENLHPPK
BZEHLMBPIM

Ai 6 (21)

RIOVINMEFC!

Ai 7 (25)

+ IDLOZ

Ai 7 (26)

4A9H7

EBΓA

Aii 7 (28)

CH̄DOCTA
ΩΠΛOΔA
APEBY

MAPCTEPZHKBH7
MEPEH

Ai 7 (26)

MAPCTEP7ABP4M7

AB 7 (30)

Aii 7 (29)

+DŮDECIOTPLI

Bi-Bii 1 (5)

ПЧТА

Bi 3 (3)

RLCNEZ
PFXHΛ

Bii 3 (9)

ΔΙΑΚΟΝЪ

Bi 4 (14)

ЧДЪПОЖИРЧЕТРЪШНЫХ

Bii 4 (15)

ΔΙΑΚΟΝΗ

Bii 5 (18)

†ALEXAN
DEREPÇDE
BLVCICH

Bii 5 (19)

ЧЛЕКСЧНДРЪ
ЄЛКПЪ

Bii 5 (20)

ЪПОСТЪ

Bi-Bii 6 (22)

~~PORTI TVDO~~

Bi-Bii 6 (23)

AS
PMPERT
XBOЖЕСТВО

Bi-Bii 6 (24)

СОТВОРЕНІЕ АДАМ
ЛЕНЕВГННО

Bi 7 (31)

ISMVTH
VVA

Bii 7 (32)

ВАНЗМЪТЪ

Bii 7 (33)

DOMINVS

Ci-Dii 1 (34)

VIRTVTVO

IPSE·ESTREXGTE

Ci-Dii 1 (35)

ION
bN|NE
S

Ci-Dii 1 (36)

S MARC

Ci-Dii 1 (37)

S̄CS|E
SA|VS'
Thi

Ci-Dii 1 (38)

S LVCAS

Ci-Dii 1 (39)

I N H S I N O X P C V E M

Cii 2 (40)

IGERE

Ci 3 (42)

SPETRVS·†IVDASTRADIDITXPM

Cii 3 (43)

КОРОЛЬ

Cii 4 (46)

RNE

Ci 5 (48)

†DESCEDIT
ADIFEROS

Ci 6 (49)

WICMANVSMEGIDEVVRGESISEPC

Cii 6 (50)



Dii 2 (41)

ΒΑΘΕΝΗ ΕΙΣ ΧΒΟΥΣΤΟΛΠ Δ

Dii 3 (44)

†ΙΗ̄Σ

Dii 4 (45)

Η
ΕΓΡΟΔΕΣΙΜΡ

Di 4 (47)

Π

Di 6 (51)

Χ

Di 6 (52)

ΑΡΧΗΓΛΒ

Di 6 (53)

ΑΡΧΗΓΛΒ

Di 6 (54)

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