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THE ESCHATOLOGICAL THEME OF THE SOGDIAN DISCOS FROM ANIKOV AND NILDIN

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Abstract

The study is devoted to the symbolic meaning of images on silver twin dishes made by Sogdian Christians in the early Middle Ages and their functional purpose. The eschatological plot of the dishes reveals apocalyptic events – the time of the great tribulation before the coming of Jesus Christ. Discos were used to celebrate the Eucharist.

Keywords: *diskos, eschatology, Eucharist, apocalypse, recent times, Christians of the East*

Part of the research was published in Russian in an article where the symbolism of the plot, its iconography, the meaning of the images of each character and the temple (Potorochina E. 2022) were argued, but the functional purpose of the silver dishes was not disclosed. Based on observation, comparing the plot with the historical context and the liturgical practice of the Church of the East, the purpose of the Eucharist was determined.

The twin dishes from Anikovo and Nildino were found at different times in the north of Western Siberia near the villages they are named after. They have differences that make it possible to consider the dish from Nildino older than Anikovo. They are made in workshops in Central Asia based on prototypes previously created in the Christian environment of Mesopotamia or Iran (Darkevich, Marshak, 1974; Baulo, 2009).

Description of the plot and composition

The dishes from Anikovo and Nildino (diameter 24 cm) are cast in silver and gilded. The multi-figure composition is located on the front side of the dishes. In the center is a building surrounded by ten horsemen. The entrance is framed by a portal and columns, above it is a window in which a woman in the pose of an oranta is visible. There are seven trumpeters on the roof of the first floor and among them a character holding a large object (scroll) in his raised hands. People's faces are visible in the four watchtowers. There are three armed people on the roof of the second floor and two dead people hanging upside down from the ledge. There is a celestial sphere at the top, where the sun and moon are.

There are various interpretations of the plot of these dishes: the occupation of the fortress by the Iranians and the introduction of the sacred fire; the presentation of the sultan to his army or the suppression of

a conspiracy against Sultan Sanjar in Merv; the procession and removal of the Zoroastrian funeral ossuary; the legends of Siyavush; the siege and defense of a two-story castle and others (Baulo, 2009).

There is also a biblical interpretation of the plot – Joshua’s siege of Jericho (Marshak, 1971). However, comparing the plot of the dish with the description of the siege of Jericho (Joshua. 6:10–15, 20), it is easy to notice inconsistencies, so we have proposed a new interpretation (Potorochina, 2022). All the characters in this story – trumpeters, a person with a scroll, two dead men, horsemen and other images determine that the theme of the image is eschatology – “seven years of Great Tribulation” before the second coming of Jesus Christ (Revelation, chapters 1–15).

The secret meaning of the images of Eastern Toreutics worries researchers and makes them turn to them again and again to understand their meaning. According to our interpretation, the two-storey building, which occupies a central place in the composition, symbolizes the temple in Heavenly Jerusalem “the temple of God in heaven” (Revelation 11, 19; 21). At the same time, this building is an image of Jerusalem in Israel, around which the events of the Apocalypse take place. The Jerusalem temple became the prototype of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. Perhaps the Christian churches of Central Asia, also richly decorated with crosses, looked similar. There is a similar “castle with crosses” in the wall paintings of Penjikent. A large number of ceramic tiles with a cross cut in the center are found on cultural monuments of Central Asia of the VII–VIII centuries: Suyab (Kyrgyz), Taraz, Kultobe (Yasi-Turkestan), Ak-tepe of Tashkent, and others. (Zheleznyakov, 2003). In the decoration of Sogdian hearths and ossuaries, there are also images of similar circles with crosses, similar to architectural decor.

The watchtowers, as we assume, house the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, whose Gospels affirm the truth and remind us of the need to observe the signs of God’s fulfillment of biblical prophecies about the last time and the return of Christ.

The character standing among the trumpeters holding a scroll above his head is a Lamb who is “worthy to open the book and take off its seals” (Revelations 5:1–8). Even

the lines are visible on the depicted scroll. After the seventh seal is removed, seven Angels with trumpets come into action. The seventh trumpet sounds at the end of the Great Tribulation period, proclaiming that the earthly history of mankind, begun by Adam, is coming to an end and the millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ begins (Revelation, chapters 8–15).

The two dead witnesses whose bodies are hanging from the ledge are faithful who are called to preach with power and authority, miracles and signs in the streets of Jerusalem, and then die and rise again three and a half days later. And after that, “they ascended into heaven on a cloud...” (Revelation 11:4–12). Three persons are depicted on the roof of the temple. This is an image of the Holy Trinity. In many books of the Bible, God is described as belligerent, as carrying out His judgment, retributing for iniquities, as a defender of those who cry out to Him for help. The sky, sun and moon depicted above the heads of the Trinity are signs of events (Revelation 6:12,14).

In the outer courtyard of the temple, armed horsemen are depicted, five on both sides. These are ten kings who will take power with the beast for one hour. They will fight with the Lamb, who will overcome them (Revelation, chapters 12–13). So, the theme of the plot of the silver twin dishes is Eschatology.

Stylistic features

When constructing the composition of the dish, the iconographic scheme “tree of life”, known since ancient times, was used. It reflected the cosmological concepts of ancient and medieval societies. The three-part composition vertically and horizontally showed the structure of the worlds – underground, terrestrial and celestial. The tree of life is the Lamb (Jesus Christ) in the middle symbolically designated by the temple. Horizontally, the underworld is symbolized by people lying down, scratched at the base of the temple – there is one person on the dishes from Anikovo and Nildino. Interestingly, the composition of a small dish accommodates the plot of a significant part of the heavenly and earthly upcoming events. This is a characteristic expression of compressed time for Sogdian art.: “Such features of the composition as the omission of the climax and the absence

of boundaries between partially overlapping multi-temporal episodes” (Marshak, 1971).

To convey the New Testament story, the artist used the realities of his time – architecture, costumes and ethnic features, such substitution is a characteristic feature of medieval art. The faces of the soldiers and their weapons depicted on the Sogdian toreutics have parallels among the Samarkand terracotta (Pugachenkova, 1981). Most likely, the reason for the embodiment of this plot was the real events of the Arab conquests (VII–IX centuries), which could be perceived by contemporaries as the last times. So, in order for the eschatological plot to be understandable for the perception of contemporaries, the ancient iconographic scheme “tree of life”, the principle of substitution and the compositional technique of compressed time were used.

Dishes – discos

Similar discos are used in the liturgical practice of the Orthodox, Catholic and other churches in the past and present. It is unequivocal that the purpose of silver dishes with biblical themes made in the Christian communities of Sogd, Ustrushany or Semirechye are discos for Holy Communion.

A pattern or diskos is a plate, used during the Mass. It is generally used during the liturgy itself, while the reserved sacrament are stored in the tabernacle in a ciborium. During the Divine Liturgy it is not only the Lamb that is placed on the diskos, but also particles to commemorate the Saints, the living and the departed (Paten).

The Apostle Paul explained that the meaning of the Eucharist is to remind of the death of the Lord until His coming (1 Corinthians 11:26), which is depicted on the dish from Anikovo.

When not in use, the chalice, diskos, and all the sacred vessels should remain on the

Table of Oblation (prothesis), wrapped in their cloth bags – either sitting on top and covered with a cloth, or stored securely in a cabinet built into the prothesis (Paten). This is how the vessels were found, stored wrapped in shawls or in a hat at the Mansi sanctuary. Silver oriental vessels were revered by the peoples of Siberia as shrines, and bread, sweets, and cookies were placed on them during cult ceremonies (Baulo, 2009). It was clear to the local population that these were dishes for sacrificial food to deities. The discos could have been brought to Siberia by Sogdian Christians, known for their missionary zeal (VII–X centuries) from Central Asia. The dishes served for Communion, and the images illustrating the Gospels served to enlighten the faithful. Due to the fact that the local population treated silver art products as shrines, passing them from generation to generation, the north of Western Siberia turned out to be a kind of store-room for toreutics made in Iran, Khorezm, Sogd, Semirechye (Baulo, 2009).

Conclusion

In Sogd, as in the whole of Central Asia, Christianity was established and spread from the first centuries to the XV century. It influenced the worldview of peoples and the development of art not only in Central Asia, but, as it turns out, in Siberia, where hoards of oriental silver are found. To characterize discos with eschatological plots, three aspects should be distinguished: first, the characters are depicted in the realities of their time, they are recognizable and close to contemporaries, so that they can perceive the message. Secondly, eschatology has prophetic significance for all times and peoples. Thirdly, Holy Communion is celebrated until the very coming of Jesus Christ, who is the meaning and cause of eschatology.

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