

ETHNOLOGY

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ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL MARKERS OF RUSSIAN IDENTITY IN THE 17TH–18TH-CENTURY SIBERIA: CHURCHES WITH BARREL ROOFING*

A comprehensive architectural, semiotic, and ethnographic analysis of 17th–18th-century Russian churches dedicated to the Mother of God and to the Holy Trinity in Siberia suggests that their architectural structure, specifically, their barrel roofing, became one of the ethno-confessional markers of Russian presence in the newly acquired territories, and a spiritual symbol of the Russian settlement in the region.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox churches, ethnic identity, Siberia, Russian North, Russians, ethno-confessional marker, barrel roofing.

Defining the typical aspects of self-identity of different ethnic groups is closely associated with ethnic and cultural markers represented by a variety of cultural phenomena with ethnic overtones. Of special interest are the phenomena, which rather belong to the realm of reflection, that is, to the interpretation of a particular cultural phenomenon as a symbolic sign. Self-identification is often based on interrelated ethnic and religious identities, and shows its specific character in each historical context. The notion of being “Russian” in the Russia of the 17th century implied a specific combination of ethnic origin (Russian by birth), religious affiliation (an Orthodox Christian), and allegiance (a subject of the Russian Tsar). According to these criteria, even the representatives of various ethnic groups who had taken Russian nationality, and had converted to Orthodox

Christianity, were recognized as Russians. The term “Russian” will be used in the article with this meaning.

Religious buildings, which constitute symbolic foci structuring human-made and natural spaces, play an important role in manifesting religious affiliation. One type of mandatory structure in the towns founded by the Russians on the newly acquired territories in the initial stage of settlement of Siberia was Orthodox chapels and churches, which became the status marker for the identity of Russians as subjects of the Russian State, united by the common confession of Orthodox Christianity. The type of church with the central part or the actual space of the church (katholikon) covered by a special architectural form of a “barrel”, known both from ecclesiastical and civic architecture, stands out from various types of churches built in the region in the 17th–18th centuries. This double-sided roof has smooth curved outlines converging at the ridge at a pointed angle. The “barrel” roofing received especially wide distribution as the top

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of the altar part in the wooden tented churches and in some of the cellular churches (churches consisting of one or several rectangular logworks), which indicates its essential importance from the symbolic and semantic point of view. This has triggered the study of a church buildings with barrel roofing, relatively few in number, but undoubtedly very important for the Russian culture. It should also be mentioned that cellular churches belong to the earliest type of Orthodox church in Russia.

It is known that wooden cellular churches were built in the late 17th century in the towns of the Middle Angara region (particularly in Ilimsk), including the Church of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God (1679) and the Church of the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple (1673, according to other sources—1693), both with barrel roofing (Kalinina, 2000: 257–258) (Fig. 1). According to the data of the Chorographic Drawing Book by S. Remezov from 1701 (Ibid.: 206), a wooden cellular Church of the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God, which is also likely to have had a barrel roofing if the illustration may be treated with confidence, was located in Bratsk. First, it is notable that all three churches were dedicated to the Mother of God. In order to understand how typical the emergence of such beautiful and original church buildings was, we need to address the symbolic meaning of both the dedications of the churches and their architectural forms.

Since olden times, in the Orthodox consciousness Rus / Russia has been the “home of the Most-Holy Mother of God” and the country marked by her patronage. According to the tradition, the Mother of God repeatedly came to the rescue in fateful moments of Russian history, and the visitations were marked by her miraculous appearances, and icons that work wonders. The Vladimir Icon several times saved Moscow from the Tatar invasions; the Donskaya Icon played a major role in the historic Battle of Kulikovo; the Kazan Icon was the protectress of the Russian army in 1612, when the Polish invaders were cast out. In the 12th century, Prince Andrei Bogolyubsky introduced the Feast of the Protection of the Most-Holy Mother of God into the Russian Church Calendar, officially marking the idea of patronage of the Mother of God over the Russian land (Agapkina, 2009). The crucial role of the veneration of the Virgin in the Moscow State was described by M.B. Plyukhanova in detail, with numerous references to literary sources and chronicles (Plyukhanova, 1995: 23–62).

The Eastern Christian tradition knows over 700 types of iconographic representations of the Mother of God (Uspensky, 2007: 67). Art historians who studied Old Russian icon painting noted that the image of the Mother of God was close to the image of the Savior in terms of its meaning and the place that it took in people’s consciousness and spiritual life (Barskaya, 1993: 30). The role of the Mother of God as a protectress and intercessor before God was recurrently emphasized in hagiography and liturgical poetry (hymnography) as well as in spiritual poetry, such



Fig. 1. The Church of the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple in Ilimsk. Photo from the early 20th century.

as the apocryphal “Descent of the Virgin into Hell”, which emerged in the Byzantine Empire and became widespread in Old Rus. In its Russian version, Maria is horrified by the view of the sinners being tormented in Hell; she mourns over them and asks God to relieve them from suffering (Mainicheva, 2000: 35–36). In one of the Marian Stichera of the Orthodox divine service, the Mother of God is called “Joy of all who sorrow, and intercessor for the offended, feeder of the hungry, consolation of travelers, harbor of the storm-tossed, visitation of the sick, protection and intercessor for the infirm, staff of the old age”. The “Jerusalem Scroll” of the 17th century says that every person has three mothers: “The first mother is the Most-Holy Mother of God, / the second mother is the moist earth / the third mother is the one who has the sorrow of childbirth. / If the Most-Holy Mother of God / does not give Her help, / Nothing can be born live on earth: / Neither animals nor birds / Nor it is possible for the humans to be. / And if the Most-Holy Mother of God / does give Her help, / Every creature can be born live on earth: / Animals and birds, and the humans can be...” (Fedotov, 1991: 32). The extensive notes of Archdeacon Paul of Aleppo, who traveled to Russia with his father, Patriarch Macarius, in the middle of the 17th century, provide good illustration of the attitude of the Russians towards the Mother of God. Paul repeatedly mentioned that the inhabitants of Russian towns, “when the endearing name of the Mother of God is pronounced... beat their heads against the ground, kneeling and making bows due to their love of the endearing name of the Virgin”, “they make kneeling and prostrations, especially when they hear ‘It Is Truly Meet’ or when the name of the Mother of God

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