

Svetlana V. Cheloukhina

The Arkhyz Savior

A Rock-Wall Icon in Nizhnii Arkhyz, Karachay-Cherkessia (Russia)

In the mountains of the North-West Caucasus, the Arkhyz Valley famous for its rich history is located. Many civilizations, including Khazar, Alan, Turkic, and Mongol, have left their landmarks along the Great Silk Road, which passed through here. This part of the country is the place where the first Christianity was brought from Byzantium in the 6th century A.D. Three remaining in Nizhnii Arkhyz churches are among the oldest five Christian churches in Russia. The recently discovered here rock-wall icon, the Face of Christ, a.k.a. the Arkhyz Savior, is, arguably, the oldest depiction of the Holy Face in Russia. The existence of the Arkhyz Savior is connected with the ancient capital of the Alan state, the city of Magas ("Blessed"), which was the center of the Diocese of Alania, located in the territory of Nizhnii Arkhyz between the 9th-13th centuries. Once a vibrant metropolis, Magas was destroyed by the Mongols in 1237, after one-and-a-half months of siege, and one year prior they burned the city of Kiev.

The Arkhyz Savior is a unique example of the rock-wall icon. It displays a strong resemblance with the icon of Christ Pantocrator from the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai - one of the first images of the early Christian Church. According to a popular belief, it was painted from the face of Jesus revealed on the famous Shroud of Turin. This paper discusses the current theories and some hypotheses concerning the time of this icon's creation, its authorship, and certain characteristics of isographic presentation. It argues that the icon's existence may be related to Onomatodoxy ("*imiaslavie*", 1907-1916), the major heresy in the 20th-century Russian Orthodoxy associated with the Hieromonk Hylarion's book, *In the Caucasus Mountains. A Conversation of Two Hermit Elders about the Inner Union of Our Hearts with the Lord through the Jesus Prayer, or the Spiritual Activity of Contemporary*, which first appeared in this area in 1907.