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Prisoners of Hell in Russian Iconography: Figures and Gestures

Chambers of Hell full of suffering sinners is an important component of the medieval Christian iconography. The number of such figures drastically increased during the Late Middle Ages when the visual themes of Death and Apocalypse spread in Europe (and later in Russia). The paper focuses on the Russian iconography and images of sinners that were not visually connected with any other characters, as punishing angels or tormenting demons. As the analysis shows, the visual narration about their afterlife could be rather intense due to the signs and gestures given to them by icon-painters and illuminators. In Muscovite Russia visual demonology reached maximum intensity in the 17th century both in ecclesiastical space in the book illumination. Icons, murals and miniatures demonstrated afterlife trials of a soul, different types of torments and all possible categories of sinners in the underworld. An ancient principle demanding that torture in afterlife must point at a certain sin thus serving as an intimidating example, was known in the Russian booklore thanks to the translated visionary stories. Nevertheless, in iconography only a few sins were visually linked to punishment – mostly verbal crimes and torments of sinners with large tongues. This signifies the difference between the Russian and the Western art, where the principle of symbolic correspondence of a sin and a torment was followed more consistently.

In the Russian iconography prisoners of the underworld actively demonstrate a number of gestures. The first one constitutes a hand pressed against cheek or forehead. This is the sign of grief and forlornness. A vivid mimic gesture is a teeth-baring grin illustrating the “gnashing of teeth” as one of the most frequent torments on the depictions of the Last Judgement and afterlife sufferings. Sometimes sinners’ arms are twisted as if cuffed, underlining their status as hell’s captives. Chains and ropes wrapped around arms and hands of the prisoners of Hades serve to amplify the same idea.

In other instances sinners’ arms are crossed on their chests. This is a multivalent gesture. First of all, it is a sign of a dead man: this was the typical way dying people and bodies in coffins were depicted. The pose is attributed to corpses, clothed or shrouded, and to skeletons lying on the ground or in a grave. Crossed hands gesture designated not only dead men, but also people at death’s door. Martyrs facing a ruler who sends them to persecution, victims in front of their murderers, saints delivering their last prayer were also pictured in such a position. Russian illuminators and iconographers of the 16th century started increasingly using this body

sign in new contexts, thus interpreting the idea of death in a wider manner. Crossed hands signified not only real but also metaphorical death. This gesture appears in people taking monk's vow therefore "dying" for worldly life. Fools-for-Christ, hermits, ascetics, who depart from the world even more radically, voluntarily mortifying their bodies and passions, are often depicted in the same position. Crossed hands of the prisoners of Hades are a good example of such metaphorical use: it signifies eternal torments as "everlasting death" – a wide spread Christian metaphor, and antithesis for "everlasting life" of the righteous in Heaven.

Hands drawn palms to elbows or fist touching fist at stomach level are both variations of the dead man's pose. More often figures that present such gestures are shrouded in their death robes. This pose was used to depict corpses in coffins as well as sinners in hell denoting their physical death or everlasting destruction. But in contrast with the crossed hands these variations were not used in other metaphorical contexts, more likely imitating certain burial practices of shrouding corpses.