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To Impale the Image: Damaged Figures in Russian Iconography

The paper focuses on different kinds of visual aggression and seeks to analyse all readers/beholders motivations that provoked damaging images.

In Medieval Russia, as well as in Europe attacks on regular images can be divided into two basic types. The first comprises attacks against sacred figures: the ones that prayers address (icons or statues of saints) or observe (illuminations and wall paintings). The second type includes attacks against negative characters, sinners and demons. It would seem the latter is more easily explained, but it still gives rise to a number of questions. We can distinguish several basic reasons for aggression against a sacred figure: annihilation of ‘wrong‘ elements or full images, censorship (erasing the obscene elements), magical acts (appropriation of paint for amulets etc.), provocation (forcing images to perform miracles), or revenge for non-helping.

Considering acts of vandalising the holy figures in Medieval Russia we have to rely mostly on a number of textual evidence and very few extant images. All damaged public images, icons or frescos tended to be restored and Russian miniatures contain few examples of that kind. The situation drastically changes as we turn to the images of negative characters. Erased eyes, crossed faces, overprinted figures of various antiheroes can be seen in Russian miniatures as often as in European ones. The number of spoilt miniatures is extensive; damaged figures exist both in unique manuscripts addressing a very limited readership (like the Illuminated Chronicle of Ivan the Terrible), and in mass-produced books.

It is difficult to name the people who attacked the miniatures and even to specify the time when the damage occurred. The most intriguing thing is the ambiguous strategy of damaging, i.e. is the peculiar selectiveness of the reader’s attacks. In almost all manuscripts that were damaged we find randomly (as it seems) harmed figures among many identical ones that were left intact. All of the demonic figures in a certain manuscript or even in a certain miniature were damaged very rarely. Harming an image was normally a singular occurrence that rarely led to the more meticulous process of erasing all of the relevant figures in a manuscript. This act of visual aggression demeans and victimises the enemy, allowing the reader to manifest his or her power over the opponent within the image. The aggression gives instantaneous pleasure, and does not have to be carried on.