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The Consecration of Altars in 17th–21st Century Siberian Orthodox Churches: The Neurosymbolic Aspect

This study explores the ways the symbolic aspects of the consecration of altars are manifested in 17th–21st century Siberian Orthodox churches. I focus on altars of Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God, and the Holy Great Martyr Barbara of Heliopolis. Sources include diocese registers published in the early 1900s, 17th century documents, works of Old Russian literature, church indexes, and the “Temples of Russia” (temples.ru) database. On the basis of a neurosymbolic approach to completely record reference data, a conclusion is made that the consecrations of altars dedicated to Sophia Wisdom were elitist, whereas altars in the name Holy Great Martyr Barbara were rare, but were re-energized in the late 20th and early 21st century, after this saint had become the patroness of Russia’s strategic missile forces. Specific cults of saints have a chance to re-emerge when biographical or historical events of a local, regional, or state level come to be associated with episodes in the history of Christianity and hagiographic vitae. Everyday life is thereby linked to a religious context, and numerous repetitions account for the fact that consecrations of altars become traditional. Temples become material symbols, and memorial dates relating to saints turn into verbal symbols functioning as mental labels.

Keywords: *Symbols, Orthodoxy, churches, consecration of altar, Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God, St. Barbara, neurosymbolic approach.*

Introduction

One of the most significant types of symbols in Orthodoxy is the consecration of church altars. They can be viewed as psychological labels that form a multilevel mentality in society, from the individual to the state. In this case, the term “label” does not have a negative connotation, but denotes the inherent ability of a person to give names to elements of the surrounding world, which determine certain properties and characteristics. Labels make it easier to take decisions and communicate, and help you understand what’s going on. I have already dealt with the topic of consecration of altars (see, for example,

publications of recent years: (Mainicheva, 2019a, b)), and the one of neurosymbolic approach (Mainicheva, 2016, 2017). This study is a continuation of research in this direction.

This article analyzes the historical experience of realizing the symbolic aspects of consecration of altars in Siberian Orthodox churches on the basis of neurosymbolic approach. The boundaries of this research and its sources have been significantly expanded. The neurological aspects of human activities are considered in a historical retrospective, which required referring to specific historical examples from the 17th to 21st centuries.

Source base and research methodology

The sources consisted of diocese registers, published at the beginning of the 20th century (*Spravochная kniga Tobolskoy eparkhii...*, 1913; *Kratkoye opisaniye...*, 1916; *Spravochная kniga Omskoy eparkhii*, 1914; *Spravochная kniga po Tomskoy eparkhii*, 1914), a collection of documents of the XVII century (*Pervoye stoletie...*, 1996), “Church Indexes...” (1916), a collection of works of Old Russian literature (*Uspenskiy sbornik...*, 1971), as well as the electronic resource “Temples of Russia”. The relevance of the first types of source has been established and verified many times. The reliability of the information of the electronic resource in the form of a working database, which has existed since 2004 and contains information about more than 23,000 churches and chapels, is based on its source base, which accumulates published reference materials of the dioceses, data provided by the dioceses themselves, the clear authorship of the registration cards of the temples, the high qualification of the team of authors, including professional historians, art historians, programmers, as well as repeated verification of the information posted on the resource. Since it is impossible to cover all of the numerous examples of consecrations (there are more than 900), along with the peculiarities of their realization, in one article, the methodological techniques included a continuous review of reference data and a case-study approach with the allocation of the altars of Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God and the Holy Great Martyr Barbara of Heliopolis, which was due to the peculiarities of their distribution in Siberian settlements. In order to more fully identify the characteristic features of the naming of altars, it was necessary to attract a large amount of comparative material going beyond the Siberian territories, which is quite legitimate, since the religious life of Orthodox Siberians proceeded in the cultural and religious context of the entire state. This technique allows us to understand the patterns of the naming of altars in Russian Orthodox churches in Siberia.

Altars in the name of Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God

The identification of the names of altars in the Siberian dioceses showed that ever since the altar in honor of Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God, consecrated in the 17th century in Tobolsk (which then became the center of the Trans-Ural territories), no other church had altars consecrated in that name in Siberia until recently. This is surprising: it would have been more logical to widen this particular consecration to imitate the capital city. The wooden Sophia Church in Tobolsk has existed

since 1621 (consecrated on October 21, 1622); after a fire in 1677, it was rebuilt in stone in 1683–1686. The idea of dedicating this main altar to Sophia is connected with Metropolitan Cyprian, who was sent from Novgorod to head the Tobolsk diocese in 1620. Apparently thanks to him, in honor of the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod, the Tobolsk church acquired an altar of the same name, although a letter missive from Moscow ordered the consecration of the church in the name of the Ascension of the Lord (Mainicheva, 2000: 8–14). In the history of Siberian Orthodoxy, the former place of residence of the clergy often dictated a preference for the holy shrines’ objects and names. For example, much later, in the Omsk Church of Elijah the Prophet (1789), a copy of the Abalatskaya Icon of the Mother of God was placed, which became famous in the district thanks to the efforts of the priest Vladimir Speransky, who previously served in Tobolsk, at the Abalatsky Monastery, the home of the original Abalatskaya icon (*Spravochная kniga Omskoy eparkhii*, 1914: 21–22). Noteworthy is also the fact that the Church of the Ascension in the Moscow Kremlin (early 16th century), which can be considered the architectural prototype for the temple in Tobolsk, had five cupolas/domes. Perhaps, Archbishop Cyprian, following the principle of continuity of architectural images of churches, wanted to see the Tobolsk Sophia with five domes, like its prototype, the Sophia Cathedral in Veliky Novgorod, insisting, however, on the consecration of its altar to Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God. Another significant temple—the stone tent-roofed Church of the Ascension in Kolomenskoye, built in the first third of the 16th century—could also have been an analog to the temple in Tobolsk, but did not become it; the choice was made in favor of the five-dome architectural style. Nevertheless, somewhat later, in the mid-17th century, the forms of the Church in Kolomenskoye were embodied in the wooden tent-roofed Trinity Church in Tomsk (1654).

The stone Sophia Cathedral in Tobolsk has already traditionally been made in the five-dome architectural style. In a letter missive dated April 28, 1680, the Tobolsk governors were instructed to build a church “according to the pattern, which is in Moscow in the Kremlin, in a nunnery... The dimensions and blueprints of this Ascension church we are sending you...” (cited after (Kopylova, 1979: 20)). Again, we are talking about an example of a five-domed temple, because the monastery Church of the Ascension in the Moscow Kremlin had five domes.

Notably, the time of construction of the stone Sophia Cathedral in Tobolsk, already under another bishop, Metropolitan Pavel, occurs during the period of the actual reign of the regent Sophia (1682–1687), the sister of the future Emperor Peter I. In the history of Orthodoxy in Siberia, it is traditional to dedicate altars in honor of

saints or guardian angels of historical figures and people who donated money for the construction or renovation of a temple. One of the first documented pieces of evidence is a petition addressed to Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, Tsareviches Alexei Alexeevich and Fyodor Alexeevich, by the Ket service people for the relocation of the Trinity Church, dated 1663. It explains the name of one of the altars: "...and for his royal all-blessed angel of light and righteous Alexei, the man of God...", i.e. in honor of their heavenly patron (Pervoye stoletie..., 1996: 110). One of the many examples in which both of the traditions of consecration of altars were manifested is the Krasnoyarsk Cathedral of the Nativity of the Mother of God. They began to build it thanks to the gold miners who donated money for the construction in the provincial town of a church in memory of the birth of Tsarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich on September 8, 1843. As a result of poor-quality work, the domes of the almost completed building collapsed and the walls cracked. The temple was nevertheless erected thanks to funds donated by the merchant Isidor Shchegolev. Initially, they wanted to call it Nikolaevsky, but the main altar was consecrated as the Nativity of the Mother of God, while the lower one honored the holy martyrs Isidor and Tatiana; and the name of Saint Nicholas was assigned to the left side-altar (Kratkoye opisaniye..., 1916: 5–6).

Considering the above and many similar examples, it is not surprising that an attempt was made to connect the construction of a new, stone building of the Tobolsk Sophia temple with an appeal to the ruler through her name, because the permission for the construction of the church and the funding had to come from her. In the same period, several religious and philosophical works appeared, interpreting the philosopheme of Sophia Wisdom; for example, Ioannikii and Sofronii Likhud, or Archimandrite Ignatius, who already connects it with the name of Peter the Great (Gromov, Kozlov, 1990: 254–256). In these images, we clearly see the vicissitudes of political life during the reign of the regent Sophia, her displacement, and transfer of power to Peter the Great. The idea of consecrating the altar in honor of Sophia Wisdom appeared long before the regent Sophia entered the political arena, but during her reign it acquired special relevance. The Tobolsk cathedral, built in 1686, was consecrated in memory of the Dormition of the Mother of God, apparently as a response to the prevailing situation, so that there would be no associations with the displaced Sophia. However, worldview symbols and psychological labels are much broader in content and philosophically deeper than the transitory reality, and to this day the temple bears a double name—St. Sophia-Assumption Cathedral (Fig. 1).

Not only in Siberia, but in Russia in general, the consecration of altars to Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God was extremely rare. According to the

dioceses registers that are included in the "Temples of Russia" database, from the 11th to 21st centuries their total number was 21, which is noticeably small as compared, for example, to the altars in honor of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker (more than 5000) or the Intercession of the Theotokos, and the Life-Giving Trinity (ca 2000). Nevertheless, the dedication of altars to Sophia Wisdom was highly valued and had an elitist character, as evidenced by the fact that such altars were the main in the cathedrals of large centers of Orthodoxy: Constantinople, Sofia, Kiev, Polotsk, Novgorod, Vologda, and Tobolsk.

Altars in the name of Holy Great Martyr Barbara of Heliopolis

Another rare consecration of the altars in churches built at an early stage of the conquest of Siberia are those in honor of the Holy Great Martyr Barbara of Heliopolis (commemorated December 4 according to the Julian Calendar, December 17 according to the Gregorian Calendar). One appeared in the Tobolsk diocese in the middle of the 18th century during the construction of a stone church of the Epiphany in Tobolsk (Fig. 2); its wooden predecessors, erected in the 17th century, did not have such an altar (Mainicheva, 2005). Some Siberian churches, in the absence of altars in the name of St. Barbara, are nevertheless presented with the icons of the Great Martyr Barbara; for example, the Resurrection church in Yeniseysk, built in 1747, had the icon, which was brought there in the 1790s (Kratkoye opisaniye..., 1916: 201–202). Pskov icons of the 14th–15th centuries are also known. One of them was located in the Varvarinskaya church of Pskov (Fig. 3). Notably, in the 14th–15th centuries, the Pskovians had broad trade and professional contacts with western neighbors, and they often mastered construction skills abroad, and invited foreign specialists to build churches (Voronin, 1934: 9–14), which means that they also experienced cultural influence in the spiritual sphere, which led to the emergence of interest in the worship of St. Barbara.

The "Temples of Russia" database contains approximately 200 churches of the 17th–21st centuries with altars dedicated to Holy Great Martyr Barbara, including side-altars. In the 17th century, the main altars of St. Barbara were rare; for example, in Pskov (1618), Yaroslavl (1668), and the village of Yandomozero (1650). In the 18th century, they appeared in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Smolensk, Galich, Nerekhta, and in some villages (seven in total). In the 19th century, 64 churches were built with altars to St. Barbara (none in Siberia), at the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century there were 36, of which 11 in Siberia.



Fig. 1. St. Sophia-Assumption Cathedral in Tobolsk, 2009. Photo by E.I. Ermolaeva.

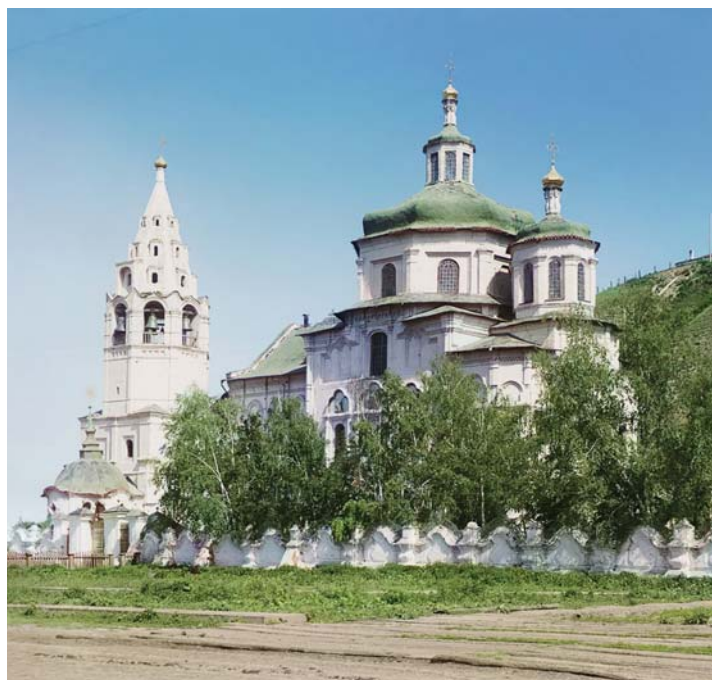


Fig. 2. Church of the Epiphany in Tobolsk, 1912. Photo by S.M. Prokudin-Gorsky.



Fig. 3. Saints Paraskeva Pyatnitsa, Varvara, and Ulyana. Last quarter of the 14th century. Pskov. From the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Inv. No. 28758 (https://www.icon-art.info/masterpiece.php?lng=ru&mst_id=515).

In Russia, the life of St. Barbara is known from registers of the 14th century (Tvorogov, 1990: 204), but as early as the 11th century the author of the “Tale of Boris and Gleb” compares the death of Boris (who was killed at his brother’s command) with the death of Barbara, executed by her father (Uspenskiy sbornik..., 1971: 11). The veneration of this Great Martyr was more widespread among the Catholics, who considered her one of the 14 holy helpers. It is known that in Raphael’s painting “The Sistine Madonna”, to the right of the figure of the Mother of God, St. Barbara is depicted. Perhaps, distancing it from Catholicism led to the later spread of her veneration in Orthodoxy.

Traditionally, the veneration of St. Barbara is associated with the acquisition and transfer of relics. According to Orthodox tradition, in 1108, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos, Princess Barbara, before her leaving for Russia, asked her father for the healing relics of St. Barbara. Her husband, Grand Duke Svyatopolk Izyaslavich (Mikhail), who founded the Mikhailovsky Golden-Domed Monastery, donated these relics there. The existence of the princess is not documented (Bugayevsky et al., 2003: 558–560); however, in the religious-mythological system of thinking, this does not really matter. In the 17th century, veneration of St. Barbara spread throughout Russia in connection with the glorification of her relics. At the beginning of the 18th century, Metropolitan Joasaph of Kiev compiled an akathist for the St. Barbara,

which is sung in churches today. According to legend, thanks to the miraculous properties of the relics of the Holy Great Martyr Barbara, the plague and cholera epidemics that raged in the 18th century bypassed the Kiev Mikhailovsky Monastery (Fig. 4). St. Barbara is considered to be the protector against sudden death or the threat of suffering from fire; she is also the patroness of miners and artillerymen (Ibid.: 563).

The chronicle of 1514 reported about one of the Moscow township temples erected under the direction of the Italian architect Alevis Fryazin: “Raising a brick church to Barbara” (cited after (Palamarchuk, 1994: 47)). The Varvarinskaya church has become one of the most revered in Moscow. She gave the name to the street and tower of Kitay-gorod—Varvarskaya. In 1796–1804, on the site of the demolished ancient church, a new one was erected, according to the project of the architect R. Kazakov. The construction of the church was funded by the artillery major I. Baryshnikov and Moscow merchant of the 1st guild N.A. Samgin, whose wives were healed by believing in the miraculous powers of the relics of the Great Martyr Barbara (Ibid.: 49). In 1555, in the church, there was an icon of St. Barbara, famous for miracles of healings, as well as part of her relics (Ukazatel tserkvey..., 1916: 10–11). In 1733, in his Fountain House in St. Petersburg, field marshal B.P. Sheremetev, an associate of Peter I, in memory of his late wife Varvara Alekseevna, built a house church, consecrated in honor of St. Barbara. Here, in a silver



Fig. 4. Shrine with the relics of St. Barbara in the Golden-Domed Mikhailovsky Monastery, 1872.

Photo by D.G. Birkin.

ark (the work of the famous jeweler F.A. Verkhovtsev), the relics of saints were kept, including those of Holy Martyr Barbara (Antonov, Kobak, 2010: 174–175). In 1838, a new refectory was built at the expense of Varvara Chelishcheva and Varvara Nerskaya in the Moscow church of the Nine Martyrs of Kyzikos near the Novinsky Val, where the chapel of St. Barbara was created (Palamarchuk, 1995: 149–150). All these examples reflect the reasons for the construction of temples and the realization of the Great Martyr veneration, connected with the names of women who had St. Barbara as their heavenly patroness, or who believed in the healing powers of her relics.

The modern realization of the veneration of Holy Great Martyr Barbara takes on an unexpected aspect. The official date of the formation of strategic missile forces of Russia is December 17, 1959 (*Raketnye voiska...*, (s.a.)). At the end of the 20th century, against the backdrop of a return of attention to religious values, this date coincided with the date of commemoration of Holy Great Martyr Barbara. This led to the fact that in 1995 St. Barbara was chosen as the heavenly patroness of these troops, and in 1999, with the blessing of Patriarch Alexy II, her icon was put aboard the “Mir” orbital space station (see Bugaevsky et al., 2003: 563)).

There were several reasons for the construction of the churches of St. Barbara at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, among which were private considerations, and the veneration of the saint as a deliverer from diseases, as well as the construction of temples of the same name to replace the old or the lost ones. For example, in the city of Klin, Moscow Region, the church is located at the Central District Hospital. In the village of Zolotets of the Republic of Karelia, a new temple was consecrated in memory of the destroyed one in the village of Vygodstov. In the city of Rzhev, by the initiative and at the expense of OAO “Elektromekhanika”, a wooden, single-altar church was built to replace the one destroyed at the All Saints Cemetery. The chapel at the Stavropol Building-Trade Secondary School was consecrated in memory of the Varvarinsky cemetery with a temple, which had been located here earlier. Noteworthy is also the intention to emphasize the special patronage of the saint to miners, artillerymen, and missile forces in general: such is the wooden one-domed single-altar church of Holy Great Martyr Barbara at the Kirov mine in the Murmansk Region, built at the expense of the PhosAgro Company and consecrated on December 17, 2017. Illustrative examples include churches of St. Barbara in the city of Gagarin, Smolensk Region, the birthplace of the first cosmonaut (1999–2002) and in the village of Kokovka, Plesetsky District, Arkhangelsk Region, not far from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome (2011). In Siberia, there are two such churches: in the village of Sibirsky (Altai Territory) and in the city of Novosibirsk.

All the data reviewed indicate that consecrations of altars to Holy Great Martyr Barbara are rare, but not elite. At the turn of the 20th–21st centuries, these became rather narrowly specialized.

Conclusions

The main principle for realizing the veneration of Sophia the Wisdom of the Word of God and the Holy Great Martyr Barbara can be attributed to the emergence of interest in them, when the events of modern life (including episodes of biographies, historical events of a local, regional or national scale) come to be associated with episodes from the history of Christianity, hagiographic vitae, and significant dates. Realization serves to fit real events into the context of religious life. Repetition and analogy create a tradition in the consecrations of altars. Temples become materialized symbols, dates of commemoration of saints and miraculous events, as well as their very names and titles, become verbal symbols that act as mental labels.

Symbolic motifs in architecture act as a kind of neuro-labels that help a person to think and operate with concepts and images, without going all the way from initial sensation to understanding the deep essence. At the same time, it is not at all necessary that all members of a community have all the knowledge about the meaning and importance of church images and symbols; understanding accompanies each individual case at its own level, which allows one to sensually and mentally master reality. Mental models based on symbols and signs provide us with the ability to structure experience and simplify reality, which satisfies the need to control the situation and predict the future. In the system of figurative-symbolic thinking, historical parallels play an essential role, since they direct the mentality of a person and a community from the singular to the meaningful common, as well as to what happened in the past. The idea of a cycle, repetition, and return to the past is clearly expressed by the proverbial Old Testament phrase: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes, 1: 9).

The historical example of the use of Orthodox symbols in the realization of the consecrations of altars allows us to raise the question of the psychological and mental aspects of the formation of traditions on the basis of specific neuro-labels, with the help of which mental activity is carried out.

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