

The Canopy over the Holy Sepulchre.
On the Origin of Onion-Shaped Domes

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Onion domes are the most characteristic feature of Russian churches. Their unusual aspect proves an immediate attraction for all those making a first acquaintance with Russian architecture. The question of the origin of the onion dome was already occupying the minds of scholars in the nineteenth century. Alexandr P. Novitsy systematized the numerous opinions in his fundamental work, *The Onion Shape of Russian Church Domes. Its Origin and Development* [*Lukovichnaya forma russkikh tserkovnykh glav. Yeva proiskhozhdeniye i razvitiye*], published in 1909 and still today the only paper specifically on this question. (1) The author distinguished two basic theories around which practically all opinions may be grouped.

The first theory, dominant in the writings of foreign historians of architecture, linked the appearance of onion domes to Eastern influence. The actual sources proposed were highly varied. The most popularly held ideas were that the onion domes were of Indian or Tatar origin. This theory was expressed in extremely strong terms in J. Fergusson's widely known *History of Architecture* in which he considered the onion dome as a symbol and reminder of the Tatar invasion. (2) The second theory, suggesting native roots, emerged as a reaction to such opinions and was upheld by Russian scholars in their works. According to this theory the Byzantine dome gradually became transformed into the Russian onion under the influence of climatic conditions and the traditions of Russian wooden architecture. Novitsky aligns himself with this second school of thought, arguing in detail for the idea that the onion shape formed in wooden architecture, though he admittedly expresses at the same time a well-founded doubt about the possibility of this evolutionary path. He writes: "The oriental dome, like the Persian one, and also the Indian, although it is different in shape from the Byzantine dome, nevertheless also gets its form directly from the very way in which its stones are laid, and this alone is sufficient grounds for concluding that

they could never achieve the shape of an onion, since a vault cannot take the shape of an onion. All these domes invariably have such a form as to produce complete stability in the vault. This very requirement is expressly contradicted, however, by the onion dome which cannot have any stability. It can be nothing but a decorative shape and can be built either in the form of a blind cupola, or with the help of trusses above the vault." (3)

Scholarship in our own century has added practically nothing to Novitsky's reasoning. The question has remained open, yet at the same time somehow nonexistent. Today one can state with a large degree of certainty that onion domes appeared in early Russian architecture at the turn of the seventeenth century, since no single church is known where the onion dome could be precisely dated to a time earlier than the late sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century onion domes became a practically obligatory feature of every Orthodox church, a phenomenon usually connected with that century's general tendency towards greater decorativeness in art. The onion shape is as a rule seen as the product of evolution, with a variety of possible influences.

Without entering into a polemic over this highly generalized theory, I should like to present a new hypothesis regarding the origin of onion domes. In my opinion the onion dome is not a formally decorative motif, but an iconographical one with a precise symbolic content. A number of arguments can be put forward in favour of such a hypothesis. First, the onion dome represents a highly bizarre and, in a certain sense, even unnatural architectural form, requiring the creation of a special construction above the vault. It is difficult to attribute such a substantial complication of the builders' task merely to a taste for the decorative, still less to the gradual evolution of a form. Besides, it should not be forgotten that we are talking here about the dome of a church--from a symbolic point of view one of the most important parts of the building, where purely decorative experiments would seem quite improbable and contradict the medieval religious way of thinking. All these peculiarities are quite easily explained if we suppose that the introduction of the onion dome was some kind of ideological programme while the shape of the dome itself reproduced a symbolically significant prototype.

I may be possible to discover this particular prototype. To do so we shall analyze the iconographical motif of the onion dome in Eastern Christian art prior to the seventeenth century. We find the form of the onion dome already established in a liturgical vessel called a *zion* (*siony*) from the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin (4) which was created in 1486, that is, at least a century before

the onion dome became established in early Russian architecture. This vessel in the form of a church, which was kept in the country's main cathedral, may have served as the immediate source for the new architectural device. Zions were used in Byzantium and in early Russia as vessels for the holy gifts during especially solemn liturgies. (5) Variety of opinion exists among scholars regarding the function of zions, (6) but all are agreed on one thing—in their shape the zions reproduce the rotunda of the Anastasis (Resurrection) constructed over the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This interpretation is convincingly confirmed by the testimony of Paul of Aleppo, who while attending a service at St Sophia's Cathedral in Novgorod in 1655 observed that "during the liturgy the deacons carried a silver representation of the Zion Church and the Church of the Anastasis." (7) Through the use of zions--also known by the second, no less significant name of 'jeruselems'--a symbolic link was established with the proto-church established over the first sanctuary--the place of the burial and resurrection of Christ. (8).

An direct connection with the rotunda of the Anastasis was formed by the ciborium—the canopy or edicula constructed directly over the Holy Sepulchre. (9) Set in the center it was the symbolic heart of the church, a sort of proto-shrine around which the stepped rotunda of the Anastasis rose up like some gigantic casing. (10) It is worthy of note that for a long period the rotunda did not have a domed roof. Yet when representing the Church of the Anastasis medieval artists always depicted a dome, having in mind the domed top of the canopy. (11)

In my opinion, it was the image of this very dome, on the top of the canopy, that the creators of the Moscow zion were seeking to convey when they depicted an onion dome which did not then exist in the architecture of the real world. Sadly the ancient canopy has not survived down to the present day. The small chapel which now stands above the Holy Sepulchre is the result of very late alterations and radical reconstruction. On the basis of texts and depictions it is possible, however, to attempt to reconstruct the appearance of the ancient edicula. It should be noted that the canopy and its top always had an unusual, even eccentric, form which caught the attention of numerous pilgrims who came to worship at this the greatest of all Christian shrines. From the time the church was constructed by Constantine the Great (325-335), the canopy was considerably changed by Byzantine emperors in 1012-1040, who reconstructed the Church of the Anastasis after the total destruction of the Holy Sepulchre complex in 1009.

An idea of the shape of the canopy in the fourth to the (?) centuries can be gleaned not only from descriptions, but also from fairly precise representations on

ampullae of the Holy Land which pilgrims acquired in Jerusalem itself. (12) Kondakov, who compared the representations with the texts gives the following description of the first ciborium: “A light tent-like structure, a sort of canopy, which was gathered at the top in a round dome divided by six ribs into six conical sections and covered by small columns or decorated with them on its façade.” (13) In the seventh to the tenth centuries, as far as can be judged from descriptions (14) and the design of the Aachen reliquary which dates from the second half of the tenth century (15), the Jerusalem canopy retained its unusual top made up of several lobes, while at the same time it became more reminiscent of a traditional dome with a bulging lower part and a round top.

In the middle of the eleventh century after the Byzantine reconstruction, the dome acquired an onion shape. Clear evidence of this is provided by the miniatures in the psalter of Queen Melisende which were created in 1131-43 in the scriptorium attached to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. (16) The depictions of churches are crowned by onion domes, reproducing the unusual architectural form that the creators of the miniatures could see daily during services at the Church of the Anastasis. It is noteworthy that the drawing of the onion includes several vertical lines representing the ribs between the convex sections which the Byzantine canopy, it would seem, retained from its predecessors. One further significant motif may be noted: the onion domes in the miniatures are crosshatched with fine lines, creating the impression of plates covering the domes. We find an explanation of this strange motif in the text of the *Pilgrimage* of the Russian Abbot (Hegumens) Daniil who left the most thorough description of the Jerusalem canopy. In the words of this Russian pilgrim, in the early twelfth century this structure took form described as follows: “And above the cave is a beautiful chamber on pillars, round at the top and covered with gilded silver plates” (*teremets krasen na stolpekh, verkhu krugol i serebrenymi cheshuyami pozlashchennymi pokovan*). (17) With all the precision of which medieval art was capable the miniaturists reproduced these little silver plates. This significant detail removes the final doubts that the onion domes in the miniatures imitate anything older than the dome of the canopy over the Holy Sepulchre. (18)

From the second half of the eleventh century depictions of onion domes became quite common in the art of the Orthodox world. It is probable that this is directly linked to the enormous socio-political and religious significance which was attributed in Byzantium to the renewal of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

(19) The onion dome became an established iconographic motif which retained the status of a symbolic image.

Moreover, the onion dome can be found not only in concrete physical depictions of the Jerusalem shrine, but also in any representation of a Christian church, giving it the character of a universal symbol. From the outset the onion dome was perceived not simply as an actual architectural detail in Jerusalem, but as an ideal form of church dome symbolically pointing to the inner union between each Christian church and the proto-church of the Holy Sepulchre. To understand the meaning of the iconographic motif it is of essential significance that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which appeared on the site of Christ's redeeming sacrifice and resurrection, was interpreted by theologians as the New Jerusalem, the visible embodiment of the Heavenly Kingdom. (20) In other words, the introduction of an onion dome evoked thoughts of the ideal church as a precise image of the New Jerusalem.

The symbolically capacious motif of the onion dome was also extensively employed in early Russian art. It is significant that we find the onion-shaped dome in representations of the Jerusalem canopy on Russian stone icons of the Holy Sepulchre dating from the thirteenth century. (21) No less remarkable is the fact that in a relatively small and fairly schematic composition the carver strove to convey the plated covering of the dome. Among the earliest instances we also note a miniature in the Novgorodian Evangelic Gospels of Dobrici (1164), which depicts, above one of the Evangelists, an onion-shaped church dome with the characteristic imitation of a scaly covering. (22) Treatment of the drum (wide, low-based, pierced by arched windows) is also very typical of the representation of the Jerusalem Rotunda. In the art of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries we can find onion domes regularly. In the miniatures of the Illuminated Chronicles (*Litsevoi letopisnyi svod*) of the sixteenth century practically all the depictions of churches have onion-shaped tops. The motif was well known and thus its use in architectural forms even prior to the late sixteenth century cannot be ruled out. However, the rapid manner in which onion domes became established in masonry construction of the seventeenth century, the striving to replace old domes with new onion-shaped ones, and the fact that such domes appeared exclusively on Russian churches leads one to suppose that the process of translating a stylized symbolical motif into an actual architectural form was stimulated by an initiative from central authorities.

In our opinion this initiative occurred at the time of Boris Godunov, 1598-1606, (23) in whose government the idea of “Moscow as the second Jerusalem” acquired an absolutely unique ring. According to the sources, Tsar Boris regarded as the chief goal of his life the creation within the Moscow Kremlin of a Holy of Holies precisely reproducing the Jerusalem Shrine. (24) In the Chronicle of Ivan Timofeyev we read: “[Tsar Boris] did his utmost to create a church of the Holy of Holies which he wanted to build in his kingdom, as in Jerusalem, in all imitating Solomon” [*yezhe o zdanii svyataya svyatykh khrama sego ves’ podvig be; yako zhe vo Ierusalime, vo tsarstvii si khotyashe ustroiti, podrazhaya mnyasya po vsemu Solomonu*], and further: “as to Christ the Lord’s Sepulchre, the divine receptacle of His flesh, he tried to recreate it in gold, preserving its size and form” [*Khrista Boga grob, bozhestvennaya ego ploti vmestilishche, s sushchego ot ikh vo Ierusalime meroyu i podobiyem, zlatosliyaniyem ves’ voobrazite podshchasya*]. (25) The golden reproduction of the canopy of the Holy Sepulchre which Boris Godunov conceived and almost made a reality was evidently meant to become the chief relic of the Russian state. It seems to us entirely probable that the ‘golden sepulchre’ (*zolotoy grob*) destroyed by the first False Dmitry may have had an onion dome. Supporting evidence for this is also provided by the onion domes of St Basil’s on Red Square in Moscow (the Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat) which in the opinion of a number of scholars first appeared on the church during its reconstruction after a fire of 1595, in the reign of Fedor Ioannovich when Boris Godunov was already effectively ruler of the country. (26) The onion domes were intended to stress the original symbolic scheme behind the many domes and chapels of St Basil’s, conceived of as a temple-city, an image of the New Jerusalem, the visible embodiment of which was for every Christian the Holy Sepulchre complex. (27)

The architecture of St Basil’s provokes thoughts about other aspects—not just the symbolic ones—of the question of onion domes. The form expressed itself in real-life architecture under the influence of many factors. An examination of those factors, however, did not fall within the ambit of this purely iconographic investigation, which was intended to substantiate a new hypothesis, whose essence amounts to the following: 1) the onion dome was originally an iconographic motif, reproducing the dome of the Jerusalem canopy over the Holy Sepulchre in the form which it acquired in the eleventh century; 2) At the end of the sixteenth century this sign of the unity of all Christian Churches was introduced in actual Russian architecture as part of a special project of Tsar Boris Godunov.

Notes:

1. A. P. Novitsky, “Lukovichnaya forma russkikh tserkovnykh glav. Yeya proiskhozhdeniye i razvitiye,” in *Drevnosti. Trudy komissii po sokhraneniyu drevnikh pamyatnikov*, Moscow, 1909, Vol. III, pp. 349-362.
2. J. Fergusson, *A History of Architecture*, Vol. II, London, 1867, p. 50.
3. Novitsky, *op. cit.*, p. 356.
4. See T. V. Tolstaya, *Uspenskiy sobor Moskovskogo Kremlya*, Moscow, 1977, figs. 119f.
5. See N. V. Pokrovsky, “Ierusalimy ili siony,” in *Trudy XV arkheologicheskogo s'yezda v Novgorode*, Vol. I, Moscow, 1914, pp. 1-41; A. Grabar, “Le reliquaire byzantin de la cathédrale d’Aix-la-Chapelle”, in A. Grabar, *L’art de la fin de l’antiquité et du Moyen Age*, Vol. I, Paris, 1968, pp. 427-433; I. A. Sterligova, “Maly Sion iz Sofiyskogo sobora v Novgorode,” in *Drevnerusskoye iskusstvo. Khudozhestvennaya kul'tura X—pervoy poliviny XIII veka*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 272-286; see also I. A. Sterligova’s paper in this collection.
6. The main opinions and a contemporary view of the issue are presented in Sterligova’s work which gives a detailed interpretation of the previously unconsidered fact that liturgical patens were placed in the bases of the Novgorod zions (Sterligova, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-286).
7. “Puteshestviye Antiokhiyskogo patriarkha Makariya v Rossiyu v polovine XVII veka, opisannoye ego synom, arkhidiakonom Pavlom Aleppskim,” in *Chteniya v Obshchestve istorii i drevnostey Rossiyskikh pri Moskovskom Imperatorskom Universitete*. Moscow, Issue 4, 1898, p. 84.
8. The understanding of the Holy Sepulchre as a prototype of all church sanctuaries is traditional for Christian theologians. In one of the oldest commentaries on the liturgy we read: “The holy altar is the place where they laid Christ in His grave” (N. F. Krasnoseltsev, *O drevnikh liturgicheskikh tolkovaniyakh*, Odessa, 1894, p. 63). In this connection the most ancient mention of zions in a description of a sixth-century liturgical service acquires particular significance. There the tower-like shape of the receptacle brought to the sanctuary is explained by the fact that “the sepulchre of the Lord was cut into a cliff in the form of the receptacle and there the body of the Lord was laid and rested.” See A. P. Golubtsov, *Sobornye chinovniki i osobennosti sluzhby po nim*, Moscow, 1907, p. 218.
9. Historical evidence about the Holy Sepulchre complex was brought together in the book by H. Vincent and F. –M. Abel: *Jerusalem. Recherches de topographie, d’archeologie et d’histoire*, Vol. 2, Paris, 1922, pp. 89-300. See also N. P. Kondakov, *Arkheologicheskoye puteshestviye po Sirii i Palestine*, St Petersburg, 1904, pp. 148-196; V. Corbo, *Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme*, Jerusalem, 1982.
10. It is significant that the earliest zions more closely resemble the canopy than a rotunda. This is true, first and foremost, of the two Novgorodian “jerusalems” and the Aachen reliquary.

11. The Church of the Anastasis was often reproduced in scenes of the *Entry into Jerusalem* and also in compositions of the *Holy Sepulchre*. See M. A. Il'in, "Izobrazheniye Ierusalimskogo khrama na ikone 'Vkhod v Ierusalim' Blagoveshchenskogo sobora," in *Vizantiyskiy vremennik*, 1959, Vol. XVII, pp. 105-118; A. V. Ryndina, "Osobennosti slozheniya ikonografii v drevnerusskoy melkoy plastike. 'Grob Gospoden'," in *Drevnerusskoye iskusstvo. Khudozhestvennaya kul'tura Novgoroda*, Moscow, 1968, pp. 228-286.
12. K. J. Conant, "The Original Buildings at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem," in *Speculum*, 1956, XXI, No. 1, pp. 3-5; A. Grabar, *Les ampoules de la Terre Sainte (Monza, Bobbio)*, Paris, 1958; D. Barag & J. Wilkinson, "Monza Bobbio Flasks and the Holy Sepulchre," in *Levant*, 6, 1974, 179-187.
13. N. P. Kondakov, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
14. For one of the most detailed descriptions, see "Fotiy, archiepiskop Konstantinopol'skiy: O grobe Gospoda nashego Iususa Khrista i drugiye malye ego tvoreniye mezhdru 867 i 878 godami," in *Pravoslavnyy palestinskiy sbornik*, Vol. XI, Issue 1 (31), St Petersburg, 1892, pp. 5-7.
15. Grabar, "Le reliquaire byzantin. . . ," pp. 427-433; W. B. R. Saunders, "The Aachen Reliquary of Eustathius Maleinus, 969-970," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 36, 1982, pp. 211-219.
16. H. Buchtal, *Miniature Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, Oxford, 1957, pp. 139f, pls. 3, 4a, 5b.
17. "Zhitiye I khozhdeniye Daniila, russkiya zemli igumena, 1106-1107," in *Pravoslavnyy palestinskiy sbornik*, Issue 8, St Peterburg, 1885, p. 18, in *Jeru. Pilgrimage*, J. Wilkinson, (ed.).
18. Imitation of the scales and ribs became traditional in the representation of onion domes. It is noteworthy that in the fifteenth-century Muscovite zions too the onion domes are engraved so as to have the appearance of being covered with little plates..
19. R. Ousterhout, "The Byzantine Holy Sepulchre," in *Ninth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference. Abstracts of Papers*, Durdam, 1983, pp. 61f.
20. This idea is first expressed in the work of Eusebius of Caesarea, in his description of the life of Emperor Constantine who on several occasions compared the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with "the New Jerusalem foretold by the prophets". See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, ed. F. W. Winkelmann, Berlin, 1975, III, 25.
21. T. V. Nikolayeva, *Drevnerusskaya melkaya plastika iz kamnya XI-XV vekov*, 1989, pl. 18, 3-4, No 86-87, p. 68.
22. O. Popova, *Les miniatures russes du XIe au XVe siecle*, Leningrad, 1975, p. 27, pl. 8.

One's attention is caught by the placement beneath the onion dome of a wide, low base pierced by arched windows. Such a treatment of the drum is characteristic of depictions of the Jerusalem rotunda of the Anastasis.

23. Unfortunately the search for direct evidence of this in the written sources has so far been unsuccessful. This can be explained by the fact that for a long time after the death of Boris Godunov initiatives connected with his name were deliberately disregarded.
24. A. L. Batalov & I. N. Vyatchanina, "Ob ideinom znachenii interpretatsii Ierusalimskogo obraztsa v russkoy arkhitekture XVI-XVII vekov," in *Arkhitekturnoye nasledstvo*, Moscow, Issue 36, 1968, pp. 24-29.
25. *Vremennik Ivana Timofeyeva*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1951, pp. 64f.
26. V. L. Snegirev associated a particular chronicle account "In the time of the pious tsar and grand prince Fedor Ivanovich of all the Russias tops were constructed on the Trinity and on the Intercession on the Moat of a like kind and sheathed with foreign (*nemetskim*) iron; and from the fire there had not been tops on those churches" (*Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisey*, St Petersburg-Moscow, Vol. XXXIV, p. 200) with the fire of 1595—V. L. Snegirev, *Pamyatnik arkhitektury khram Vasiliya Blazhennogo*, Moscow, 1958, p. 80. He did not, however, indicate whether these domes first appeared after 1595. N. N. Sobolev put things more definitely. He linked the chronicle account to the fire of 1583: "When reconstructed in 1586 the domes evidently already acquired the form which has come down to the present day"—N. N. Sobolev, "Proyekt rekonstruktsii pamyatnika istorii—khrama Vasiliya Blazhennogo v Moskve," in *Arkhitektura SSSR*, 1977, no 2, p. 48. In a reconstruction of the cathedral in 1561 Sobolev shows domes without an expressly onion shape.
27. One can find such an interpretation of the architectural conception of St Basil's in the following works: M. A. Il'in, *Russkoe shatrovye zodchestvo. Pamyatniki serediny XVI veka*, Moscow, 1980, p. 68; A. L. Batalov & T. N. Vyatchanina, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-36.

In my opinion, one of the sources of the multiple-pier composition of St Basil's could have been the purely Russian iconography of the Holy Sepulchre. On fourteenth- and fifteenth-century stone icons, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is depicted in the form of a multi-pier, frequently seven-domed architectural construction which had practically nothing in common with the actual forms of the complex in Jerusalem. See T. V. Nikolayeva, *op. cit.*, pls. 27, 1-2, p. 84.