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Petrov, Nikolai I.

St. Petersburg Theological Academy, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

Sacralization of the Portrait of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna in the Orenburg Gubernia in the 1760s

Abstract

An interesting example of the Russian phenomenon of monarch sacralization is reflected in the “lowest report” (1767) sent to the Most Holy Governing Synod by the retired secretary of the Bugulma voivodeship chancellery Ivan Nikiforovich Kurcheev (see appendix). In 1762 I. N.

Kurcheev was an eyewitness to a miraculous phenomenon connected with the portrait of the Russian Empress Elizabeth Petrovna: "... And from the aforesaid image of the Most Radiant Monarchess there emanated an effulgence which attained the image of the Savior stationed in my house ...". Later I. N. Kurcheev began to revere this portrait as an icon: "... I began to put candles before this image ...". This was known to the local clergy and I. N. Kurcheev himself was convinced of the permissibility of such veneration of the Empress Elizabeth's portrait, to whose intercession he ascribed the healing of his mother, children, and ward. I. N. Kurcheev formed a local cult of the deceased Empress, convinced of her holiness and of imperishability of her "relics" (when writing of Elizabeth's death he used the word "dormition"). This conviction was based on the connection between the icon of the Savior and the portrait of Empress Elizabeth, miraculously shown to I. N. Kurcheev. The mentioned service of supplication (moleben) to Empress Elizabeth, which was done "under the name" of her saint patroness-namesake, as she was not canonized by the Church, correlates with the image of St. Elisabeth bearing likeness of Empress Elizabeth in the original Russian worship service to Sts. Zachariah the Prophet and Elisabeth the Righteous (the 5th of September) in the late 19th century. The later archival caption of I. N. Kurcheev's report was supplemented by a laconic note that some "stucco image" of the Empress Elizabeth was attached to the document. Apparently, this refers to the said portrait, from which, according to I. N. Kurcheev, "emanated an effulgence" in 1762. There is no any additional information on this "stucco image." One can assume that it was a painted bas-relief plaster portrait of the Empress Elizabeth, probably similar to mid-18th century reproductions of the lead portrait of the Empress Elizabeth by B. C. Rastrelli (1743), which are now stored in the museum collections. The published document is a peculiar and striking source on the Russian tradition of monarch's portrait sacralization. This phenomenon of Russian folk piety developed in the 19th – 20th centuries.

Keywords

Sacralization of monarch, monarch's portrait as an icon, St. Elisabeth the Righteous, Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, St. Hilarion of Suzdal, Orenburg gubernia, Bugulma.

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About the authors

Petrov Nikolai Igorevich, PhD in History, assistant professor, St. Petersburg Theological Academy, the research department, chief researcher, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, +7-921-954-76-17, npetrovspb@yandex.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8523-572X>

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