

The Byzantine Doors of the St Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod, Russia

von

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0. Abstract

Like the well-known Magdeburg doors from the 12th century, the likely contemporary Byzantine doors in the St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod, Russia, have been well researched. The doors in question are not only among the most striking highlights of the St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod, but are also among the oldest surviving metal doors on the territory of ancient Rus'. Both the origin and dating of the doors are still a matter of discussion. Our paper presents for the first time an overview of previous and current research on the Byzantine doors.

Zusammenfassung

Wie die aus Magdeburg stammenden Bronzetüren aus dem 12. Jahrhundert sind auch die wahrscheinlich zeitgenössischen byzantinischen Türen in der Sophienkathedrale in Novgorod, Russland, gut erforscht. Die fraglichen Türen gehören nicht nur zu den wichtigsten Objekten der Sophienkathedrale in Nowgorod, sondern auch zu den ältesten erhaltenen Metalltüren auf dem Gebiet der alten Rus. Sowohl die Herkunft als auch die Datierung der byzantinischen Türen sind nach wie vor umstritten. Unser Beitrag gibt erstmals einen Überblick über die bisherige und aktuelle Forschung zu diesen Türen.

1. Introduction

The St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod is adorned with medieval metal doors of various provenance, techniques and style. In addition to the central Magdeburg doors, another pair of bronze doors, decorated with stylized foliate crosses, has survived since the Middle Ages. Based on their construction features and their iconographic similarities to Byzantine bronze doors in Italy, the date of creation of the doors is assumed to be between the second half of the 11th century and the first quarter of the 12th century. In the following, we will refer to these doors as the *Byzantine doors*.

The doors are located at the entrance to the side chapel of the Nativity of the Virgin (Fig. 1). The size of the doors does not match the dimensions of the doorway to the chapel, which was built only in the last quarter of the 17th century during the construction activities of metropolitan Cornelius (1674–1695),¹ which implies that they were probably made for an as yet unknown original location inside the cathedral. However, we cannot exclude a mistake in measurements, as also happened in Monreale, Italy, with the bronze door of Bonanus of Pisa. There, a door with a straight top was placed behind a pointed-arched portal, which suggests either changes in planning during the construction of the portal or communication problems with or within the workshop.



Figure 1: The Byzantine doors in the St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod, Russia (left: 19th century photography; centre: TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 8; right: Velikij Novgorod. Istorija i kultura IX–XVII vekov, in: Entsiklopedičeskij slovar. SPb.: Nestor Istorija, 2007, p. 251).

¹ BELIAEV 1978, p. 306.

The original plan might have been for the Byzantine doors in Novgorod to be located at the main (external) western entrance to the cathedral – indeed, they may even actually have been located there – ² or they could have occupied an internal passage leading to another aisle.³ One might also consider the possibility that the doors were moved to the northern or southern inner portals of the cathedral during the 14th–17th century.⁴

The name of the ‘doors with crosses’ in the St Sophia cathedral has changed over the centuries according to their supposed origin. They were mentioned for the first time in the 18th century inventory of the St Sophia cathedral as *Korsunian* doors.⁵ At the end of the 19th century the Byzantine doors were also called *Korsunian* in the research⁶ – and the same term was also sometimes used for the Magdeburg doors⁷. The doors were said to have been brought to Rus as war booty by prince Vladimir in 989 after the sacking of Korsun (Chersonesos) in the Crimea. However, there is so far no reliable evidence for this hypothesis. It should also be remembered that the term *Korsunian* was often applied to works that were either especially revered, or to those whose antiquity was strongly emphasized for some reason, most often political – whether or not they had any actual connection with ancient Korsun. Back in the 19th century Fedor Adelung mentioned the generous attribution of the word *Korsunian* to metal works of art, such as icons, bells, vessels, crosses, as well as bronze doors in general.⁸ He consequently proposed applying the word *Korsunian* to the earliest artistic period in Russia.⁹ In the cathedral inventory of 1803, the doors are instead given a German provenance (‘copper cast doors, with crosses of German work’).¹⁰

The first associations with Byzantine art were made on the basis of the doors’ ornamentation only during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century.¹¹ Ivan Tolstoj and Nikodim Kondakov called these doors *Italo-Byzantine* and dated them to the 11th–12th century on the basis of similarities to the Byzantine doors found in Italy.¹² The beginning of a more in-depth scientific study of the Novgorodian doors dates to the end of the 20th century, as we will discuss in detail further below.

² BELIAEV 1978, p. 301; TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 36.

³ BOCHAROV 1983.

⁴ TRIFONOVA 1995.

⁵ TRIFONOVA 1995.

⁶ SOBKO 1893; TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1899.

⁷ MAKHORTYKH et al. 2023.

⁸ ADELUNG 1834, p. 108f., 181f.; BOCHAROV 1983.

⁹ This was widely adopted by later Russian authors, although they often did not reference Adelung: MAKARIJ 1860, 274. – TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV, 1899, p. 112; BOGUSEVICH 1939, p. 22.

¹⁰ TRIFONOVA 1995; translation by S. M.

¹¹ POLENOV 1871, p. 69; SOBKO 1893, p. 23; MIASOEDOV 1910, p. 2.

¹² TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1897, p. 33; TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1899, fig. 132.

2. The doors

The first drawing of the Byzantine doors was published by Adelung in 1823¹³ and then reproduced by other authors (Fig. 2).¹⁴ There are several errors in this drawing and the ornament presented there has little in common with the original, not conveying its complexity. More detailed and exact drawings were published in the middle of the 19th century in Fedor Solntsev's album (Fig. 3).¹⁵ The first photographs of details of the Byzantine doors were reproduced in the publications of Ivan Tolstoj and Nikodim Kondakov as well as Aleksey Uvarov.¹⁶ It took over 100 years for the next detailed publication of the Byzantine doors to appear: in 2015 Anna Trifonova published a detailed monograph with high-quality photographs of the doors.¹⁷

The door has two wings, measuring in total 158 x 250 cm and with the late 19th century oak core to which the plates are attached, about 180 x 270 cm. The metal part consists of six rectangular panels measuring 39 x 55 cm each, which are surrounded by frames (width: 22.5 cm; thickness: about 5 mm).

The panels consist of brass plates onto each of which a separately cast brass cross has been mounted. Each cross has two vertical bars and its base curls upwards on either side to form a large 'S' shape; inside the curves of the 'S' is an openwork three-petaled flower. Today, the crosses are fixed onto the plates with screws – a relic of the restoration of the doors in the 19th century. Originally, the undecorated crosses were attached to the plates with rivets, most likely almost invisible from the front.¹⁸

¹³ ADELUNG 1823, tab. IX.

¹⁴ Such as TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1897, fig. 25.

¹⁵ SOLNTSEV 1853, pl. 20.

¹⁶ TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1899, fig. 132; UVAROV 1910, pl. 82.

¹⁷ TRIFONOVA 2015.

¹⁸ TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 25.

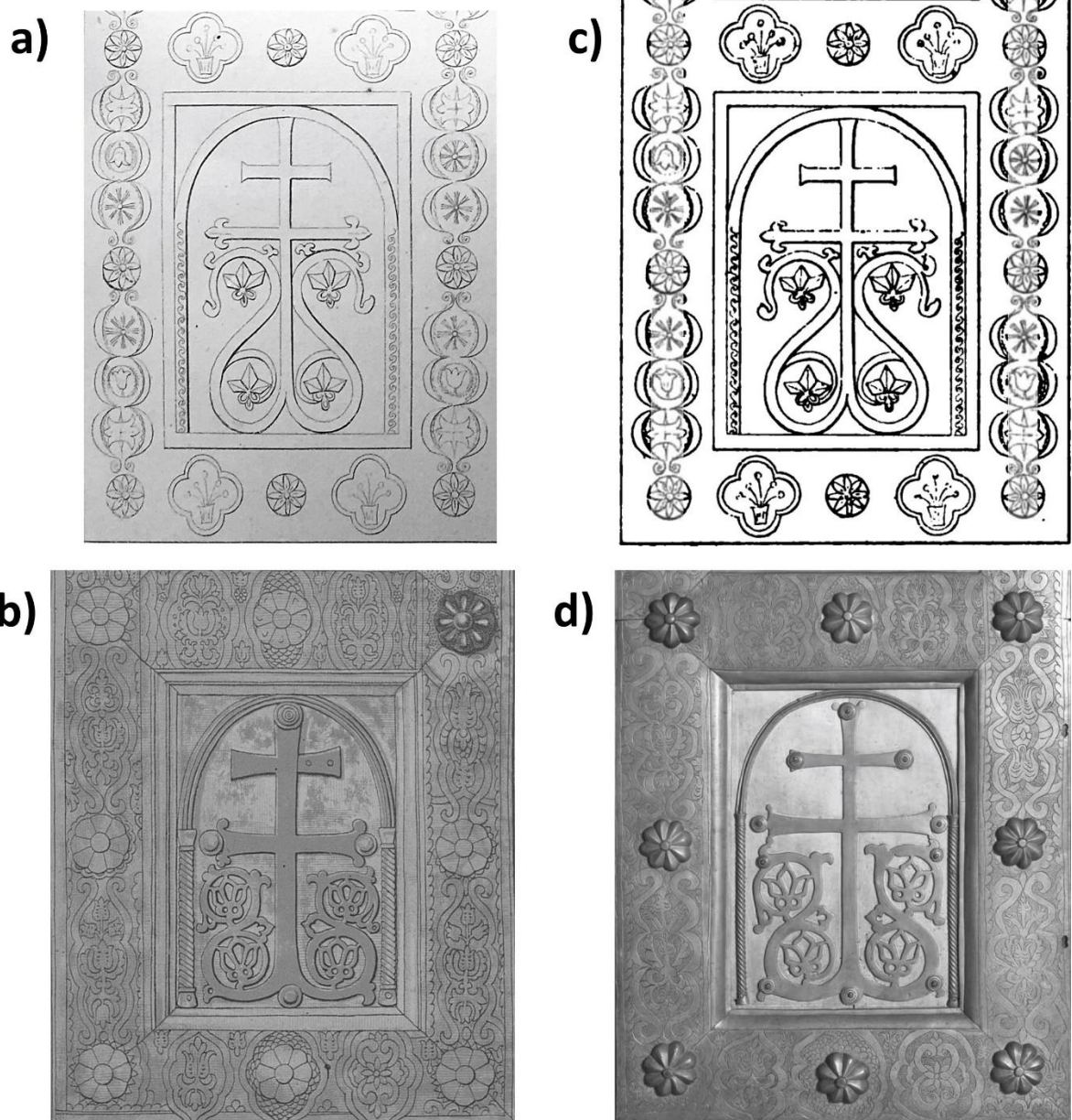


Figure 2: Different drawings and final photograph of one of the panels with its surrounding frame. A) ADELUNG 1823, tab. IX; B) SOLNTSEV 1853, pl. 20; C) TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1897, fig. 25; D) TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 31.



Figure 3: The Byzantine doors after SOLNTSEV 1853, pl. 20.

The frame surrounding the panels consists of 20 brass plates attached to the wooden core with solid, eight-petal rosette-headed nails. On each wing, 17 rosettes are arranged symmetrically and at an equal distance from each other. Instead of two further rosettes at the center of the door, there are two door handles in the shape of lion heads. In strong contrast to the plain plates and crosses, the frames are richly decorated with stylized carved floral motifs, consisting of two main repetitive patterns which fill the vertical and horizontal borders of the frame. They depict tulip-shaped flowers with various swirling leaves and stems in cartouches. The cartouches on the vertical borders are outlined by wide bands, as if from three intersecting ovals. The horizontal borders contain six-lobed cartouches with stylized tulips on stems. The vertical cartouches, terminated by thick S-shaped tendrils at the top and bottom, also include various tulip-shaped flowers. It is noteworthy that there are quite significant inconsistencies in the carved lines, especially at the 'transition' of the ornament from one 'zone' to another, most often in the patterns at the junction of the plates, suggesting that each element of the frame was decorated separately before being attached to the wooden core.

Most researchers attribute the design of the engravings on the frame to the 16th century. Anatoliy Yakobson finds analogies with 16th century wood carvings and the art of Moscow Rus'.¹⁹ Herman Bocharov, however, though agreeing with Yakobson more or less on the date (second half of the 16th century to the early 17th century), sees more similarities with Eastern ornamental fabrics and silverware, with features of Iranian, Byzantine, Italian and Ottoman art. He also considers the ornamentation of the frame as one of the few examples of the transfer of artistic processes of Turkish-Serbian art to Novgorod during the 16th century.²⁰ Anna Trifonova, on the other hand, relates the decoration of the frames either to the 16th century, i.e. emerging from Russian decorative art under the Novgorod archbishop Pimen (1552–1571), or to the last quarter of the 17th century and the activities of Novgorod metropolitan Cornelius (1674–1695).²¹ Differences in the design and quality of ornamentation, as well as examples of inconsistencies in the floral motifs on adjacent plates, are explained by the work of different masters. According to Sergey Belyaev, many elements of the carved floral ornament on the frame, both the motifs and the technique of execution, have direct analogies in metal work produced in the East.²² Such a similarity, in his opinion, does not mean that the Novgorod doors were the product of Central

¹⁹ IAKOBSON 1983.

²⁰ BOCHAROV 1983, p. 24–33.

²¹ TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 42.

²² BELIAEV 1978, p. 306.

Asian or Iranian masters; rather that it points to those areas from which the ornamental motifs were borrowed by Byzantine craftsmen.

In 1980, chemical analyses and studies of the manufacturing processes were carried out on the doors.²³ The analyses revealed significant differences in the composition, structure and mechanical properties of the alloys used for the frames, crosses and panels. Unfortunately, no information was provided about the analytical techniques used, nor how many analyses were actually carried out, nor from which part of the doors the samples were taken:

- Crosses (quaternary Cu-Sn-Zn-Pb alloy): 77 wt.% Cu, 7.5 wt.% Pb, 2.6 wt.% Sn and 7.8 wt.% Zn.
- Frames (leaded tin bronze): 64.3 wt.% Cu, 15 wt.% Pb, 13.2 wt.% Sn and 1.2 wt.% Zn.

The different chemical composition of the various elements of the doors lead to the conclusion that the door, as it is today, is no longer in its original form but that decorative elements from the original were transferred to a later version.²⁴ This might potentially explain the sharp contrast between the plain plates and crosses and the richly decorated frames.²⁵

3. Dating

The production period of the Byzantine doors in Novgorod is still unknown; so far the Russian literature on the subject suggests the 8th century to the mid-12th century. Most Russian authors date the Byzantine doors to the 11th–12th century,²⁶ with some focusing more on the 12th century²⁷ and others on the 11th²⁸ but none supporting their theory with detailed arguments.

Sergey Belyev argued that they were produced by Byzantine craftsmen in the second half of the 8th or first half of the 9th century and saw a similarity with the 6th century doors in the exonarthex of the Hagia Sophia at Constantinople (Fig. 4).²⁹ German Bocharov questioned this comparison. He pointed out that the design of the Hagia Sophia doors is very different. In his opinion, crosses similar

²³ TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 26, footnote 4.

²⁴ TRIFONOVA 2015.

²⁵ BOCHAROV 1983; IAKOBSON 1983.

²⁶ UVAROV 1910; TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1899.

²⁷ NIKOLAEVA 1976, p. 274.

²⁸ KONSTANTINOVA 1962, p. 17; SEMENOV 1962, p. 26; NIKITINA 1980, p. 22f.

²⁹ BELIAEV 1978, p. 306.

to those on the Byzantine door in Novgorod are found only in monuments from the turn of the 11th–12th century.³⁰ He refers to a lead seal of the middle/second half of the 12th century from Novgorod with the image of Saint Procopius on one side, and a foliate cross on the other, which leads him to believe that the doors must be the product of a 12th century workshop in Novgorod (Fig. 5).³¹ Alice Bank pointed out the flaws in Bocharov's arguments and noted that the type of foliate cross found on the door of the St Sophia cathedral is also known on older Byzantine lead seals; furthermore, she notes the strong similarity between the Novgorod doors and the Byzantine ones made for Italian churches during the 11th–12th century.³²

Irina Sterligova, for her part, argues that the doors were produced locally in the middle of the 11th century, contemporary with the construction of the St Sophia cathedral under prince Vladimir (1020–1052), or the renovation of the cathedral after it was plundered by the army of Polotsk in 1066.³³ Following the argumentation of Sterligova, Anna Trifonova puts the manufacture of the Byzantine doors between the 11th century and the first half of the 12th century.³⁴ However, she also points out (like others before her)³⁵ that the doors underwent several changes during their history: according to her, only the panels with the crosses survive from the original 11th/12th century door; she agrees with previous researchers that the richly decorated frames were made in the 16th/17th century.³⁶

³⁰ BOCHAROV 1983.

³¹ BOCHAROV 1983; IANIN 1970, p. 152, tab. 30, p. 337.

³² BANK 1973; BANK 1978.

³³ STERLIGOVA 1996, p. 32. See also TRIFONOVA 1995.

³⁴ TRIFONOVA 1995; TRIFONOVA 1996, p. 255.

³⁵ TRIFONOVA 1996; BOCHAROV 1983; IAKOBSON 1983; TRIFONOVA 2015.

³⁶ She furthermore speculates that the Byzantine doors might have also featured depictions of saints as the Italian Byzantine doors did; however, there is no evidence to back up this theory, TRIFONOVA 2015, p. 36.



Figure 4: Bronze door, 6th century, Constantinople, central door of the exonartex of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul © Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks fieldwork records and papers, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

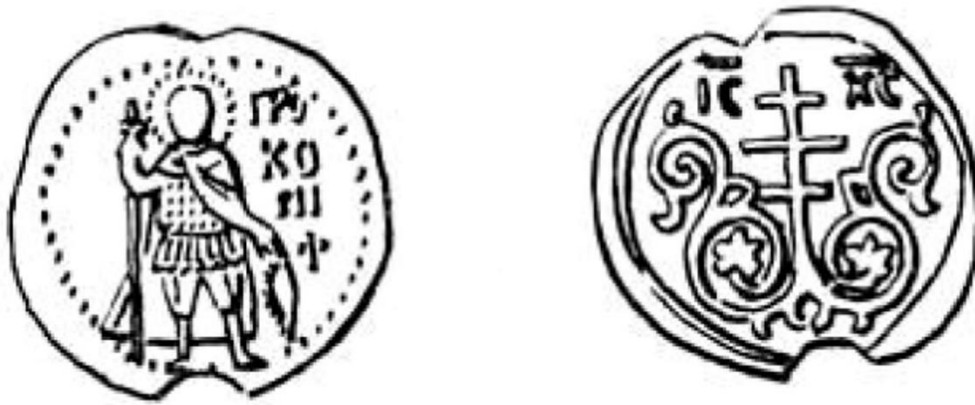


Figure 5: A seal with the image of Saint Propopius (after Ianin 1970, tab. 30, p. 337).

4. Construction, decoration and origin

Most Russian researchers attribute what we have here called the Byzantine doors of the Novgorod cathedral to Byzantine workshops and artists.³⁷ They bear some resemblance to the doors imported to Italy from Constantinople in the 11th and 12th centuries in Amalfi, Atrani, Montecassino, Monte Sant'Angelo, Rome (San Paolo fuori le Mura), Salerno and Venice. In all these cases, thin metal plates are attached by a frame system onto a wooden core. The fact that the doors were designed to be transported meant that the workshops produced many small elements which were then screwed together only when the door reached its destination.

The door in Novgorod is slightly different, p.e. it consists of only 6 panels and the crosses also differ.³⁸ In the case of the Italian doors, they are foliate crosses, but there are no double crosses on the panels.³⁹ The crosses on the Novgorod door appear finer, especially in the floral area. They are large and cut from quite thick plates using stencils. They fill all the free space of the panel, and schematized 'teardrops' can be seen on their slightly widening lower crossbars. They are also framed by an arch supported by pillars. This motif was already used on the

³⁷ POLENOV 1871; SOBKO 1893; TOLSTOJ, KONDAKOV 1899; MURAVEV 1927, p. 14; KONSTANTINOVA 1962, p. 17; SEMENOV 1962, p. 26; KARGER 1970, p. 85f.; BELIAEV 1978, p. 306; NIKITINA 1980, p. 22; IANIN 1991, p. 79; KAVELMAKHER 2002.

³⁸ Since the frames with their engraved ornamentation obviously date later, a comparison with the Italian doors is irrelevant.

³⁹ Only on the Byzantine door in San Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome there are two depictions of a double cross on the frames.

6th century doors of the Hagia Sophia and then the doors of the Basilica of St Mark in Venice (ca. 1080).⁴⁰

Despite some differences, there are clear parallels in the ornamentation between the door in Novgorod and the Italian ones that originated in Constantinople, which indicates that the time of creation of the Novgorod door is no earlier than the second half of the 11th century. In all cases the great semantic significance of the cross on the Byzantine doors is obvious. The foliate cross unites the images of the Cross of Christ and the Tree of Life, symbolizing the beginning and end of history and Christ's sacrifice and the consequent redemption of humanity. The motif appears from the 6th century onwards in Constantinople, and increasingly from the 9th century, mostly on seals. But it can also be found in Italy as early as the early Middle Ages, for example on the choir screen of Cimitile.⁴¹ In the context of doors the foliate cross can also be read as a reference to paradise, to which the doors gave access.

Big eight-petaled rosettes, which are decorative nail heads, are also part of the ornamentation of the doors in question. Flat and relief rosettes as an element of decoration are widely known in Byzantine art. In a simplified version, almost reduced to simple round shapes, such rosettes were occasionally crowned with forged nails which secured the bronze plates of Byzantine doors to the wooden core.⁴² However, the most advanced and complicated forms of rosette-headed nails are found on later Italian doors, still associated with Byzantium. Of these, the closest matches to the Novgorod nails are the relief rosettes decorating the doors of the cathedrals in Ravello (1179) and Monreale (1186).⁴³

Similar observations may be made regarding the lion's head door handles. The handles in the form of cast lion masks which adorn the Novgorod gates, serving an apotropaic function, can be traced back to the decorative elements present on most Byzantine doors in Italy (Amalfi, Monte Sant'Angelo, Salerno and Venice). In the case of Byzantine doors in Italy, such heads were applied in large numbers to the horizontal frame elements, many of them divorced from any function as a door pull (Fig. 6); in Novgorod, on the other hand, they fulfil this role, since there are only two of them and they are at the center of the double doors. The closest parallels to the Novgorod lion-head door handles are to be found on the

⁴⁰ FRAZER 1973, figs. 10, 16.

⁴¹ TALBOT-RICE 1950 with more examples. Fundamental for the motif of the Tree of Life see Bauerreiss 1938. On the significance of the cross, we refer here only to one of the most recent publications, with further literature therein, see KITZINGER 2019.

⁴² BOCHAROV 1983.

⁴³ UVAROV 1910, p. 65; BANK 1978, p. 80.



Figure 6: The doors from Amalfi, Italy (Photograph: Martin Fera).

11th century doors from the Great Lavra Monastery on Mount Athos and, not quite so close, the cathedral in Gniezno (12th century).⁴⁴

The whole complex of the similarities described above indicates that the Novgorod doors with their developed foliate crosses, massive relief rosette-headed nails and door handles in the form of lion heads could not have been created before the second half of the 11th century or the first half of the 12th.⁴⁵ It is possible that the Novgorod doors were also made in Constantinople, albeit in different workshops than the doors that were then exported to Italy.

It is unlikely that they were created on site in Novgorod. Despite many years of intensive archaeological research in Novgorod, no traces of local casting of large bronze or brass products in the 11–12th centuries have yet been found there.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that even the famous Novgorod archbishop Vasily Kalika, at whose behest metal doors were made for the St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod in 1336, did not have his own metal caster, and therefore no casting yard.⁴⁷ The nickname of the master founder sent from Moscow to Novgorod is quite eloquent in this respect: Boris *the Roman/Italian*.⁴⁸

As for the circumstances and time of the appearance of the Byzantine doors in Novgorod, this may have been in the second third of the 12th century, connected with the activity of one of the most important Novgorod hierarchs, Nifont (1130–1157). He was the first of the Novgorod clergyman who actively participated in the political life not only of Novgorod, but also of all Russia. Nifont was the first to receive the title of archbishop in ancient Rus' directly from Constantinople, bypassing the Kyiv metropolitan, which made him directly subordinate to the Patriarch of Constantinople. For his commitment to uphold the ideas of the Patriarchate, Nifont also received from Patriarch Nicholas IV of Constantinople a special document in which he was equated with the ancient Holy Fathers.

During Nifont's time important political and social changes occurred, associated with the emergence of the fundamental Novgorod republican institutions that were a distinctive feature of this city for over three centuries. At about precisely this time, a bishop rather than a prince became the head of the independent Novgorod republic. He was responsible for Novgorod's treasury and vast lands, he

⁴⁴ BOURAS 1975, fig. 3; TOMASZEWSKA-SZEWCZYK, KRAUSE 2000, fig. 9.

⁴⁵ Such a late date casts doubt on the very idea of bringing the doors in question from Korsun (Crimea) and demonstrates the incorrectness of their name *Korsunian*.

⁴⁶ We should also not forget the problems with the sources of metal that existed in Novgorod (Rus') during the period under review. Quite telling in this respect is the plundering of the Novgorod cathedral by Polotsk prince Vseslav in 1066, because of the need to equip the St Sophia cathedral in Polotsk with church utensils, STERLIGOVA 1996, p. 32.

⁴⁷ Polnoe sobranie..., 1841, p. 81.

⁴⁸ KAVELMAKHER 2002.

conducted foreign policy, protected the interests of foreign trade, etc.⁴⁹ Nifont was also zealous in building churches. Under him, extensive work was undertaken to renovate the cathedral of Novgorod, which had been a princely foundation, but now passed into the jurisdiction of the bishop and became the main place of worship in Novgorod. The roof of the cathedral was covered with lead, the narthexes were adorned with frescoes, the first ciborium was erected over the altar, and the Byzantine door was probably also installed.⁵⁰

5. Conclusions

The doors of the chapel of the Nativity of the Virgin of the St Sophia cathedral in Novgorod are probably the oldest surviving medieval examples of monumental bronze casting art on the territory of ancient Rus'. Their close connection with Byzantine artworks and, in particular, those from Constantinople, is confirmed not only by the features of their construction, but also by the metallurgical content (leaded brass). Their ornamentation is similar to that found in Byzantine doors, where foliate crosses under an arcade are a common motif on doors dating from the second half of the 11th century and the first half of the 12th century.

Given that Constantinople in this period was an artistic center whose output included monumental bronze doors, it seems most probable that the doors in Novgorod are of Constantinopolitan provenance. They merit attention as a skillfully executed work of art but are also remarkable from another perspective. Metal doors in the Middle Ages had a significant value, not only in terms of the sheer quantity of bronze involved but also of the prestige due to their association with an elite context.

The appearance of Byzantine doors in Novgorod probably in the second third of the 12th century could be associated with the vigorous activity of Archbishop Nifont. They could have reflected his significant contribution to the defense of the faith, and in particular, his active struggle against the grand ducal initiative of separating the Kyiv metropolis from the patriarchate of Constantinople. Under Nifont great efforts were also made to renovate the cathedral of St Sophia, which may have included the installation of the Byzantine doors.

⁴⁹ LIKHACHEV 1948, p. 248–250.

⁵⁰ KHOROSHEV 2007, p. 352.

As for the decoration of the frame of the Byzantine door, it presumably belongs to the 16th–17th centuries and can accordingly be assigned to a later remodeling of the door.

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