

## A monumental Calendar Icon in Recklinghausen and its contexts

Fotis Theophilou (University of Ioannina)



### Calendar Icon

late 16th century, Russia

two panels, egg tempera on wood, 157,9 x 90,5 cm (each)

Inventory number 440, 441

One of the most important exhibits of the Icon Museum in Recklinghausen is a monumental Calendar icon, that is a representation of the church calendar in which figures of Saints and feasts are depicted in chronological order. It consists of two panels, depicting roughly the first and the second half of the liturgical year. The calendar is that which defines the Church's feasts and holidays on an annual basis. These holidays are

basically distinguished by the commemoration of events related to the earthly presence of Christ (Birth, Baptism, Transfiguration, Divine Passion), to the life of the Virgin Mary (Annunciation, Dormition) but also to the lives of Saints. The feasts of the Eastern Orthodox Church can be distinguished into two types: fixed and mobile. The fixed ones are those that are celebrated every year on the same day while the movable one's change. Usually, the movable feasts are related to the corresponding date of the celebration of Easter. Easter Sunday is traditionally celebrated every year on the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs after the vernal equinox. So, for example, the feast of Saint George the Trophy Bearer (April 23) is moved to the second day of Easter, if it happens to fall within the fasting period of Lent.

It is unknown where and when exactly the tradition of such calendaric representations originated. Perhaps as a starting point we can define the illustrated manuscripts that were created in Constantinople from the 10th century onwards. The said manuscripts, (also known as Menologia) are organized by months and contained the lives – Synaxaria – of Saints. Their use was liturgical and there was usually a short text description and the depiction of a Saint or group of Saints. One of the most important and best-known Menologion of the time, richly illustrated, is the Menologion of Emperor Basil II (976 – 1025), which was a model for the art of later Menologia. The pages are full of images, arranged in the same way, divided in two: half page for text, half page for image. The book has a total of 430 pages. In the following two images, we see on the left the event of the Great Earthquake of 740 AD (left), an event of special importance for Constantinople as it destroyed the temple of Saint Eirene. On the right, the great feast of the Baptism of Christ is depicted, accompanied by Gospel descriptions.



Menologion of Basil II  
late 10th – early 11th century  
36 x 28 cm, fol. 142  
Biblioteca Vaticana, Rome



Menologion of Basil II  
late 10th – early 11th century  
36 x 28 cm, fol. 299  
Biblioteca Vaticana, Rome

Like the manuscripts, the later Menologian images follow a specific formal arrangement. September is defined as the first month of the year with the beginning of the *Indictus*, that is, the beginning of the new Church year. This tradition originates from the ancient Romans. According to ecclesiastical tradition, the principle of the *Indictus* was introduced by Augustus, when he ordered the general census of the inhabitants of the Roman state and the collection of taxes on the first of September. Since Constantine the Great (313), the *Indictus* was officially used as a date and since then the church of Constantinople until today celebrates September 1st as the beginning of the ecclesiastical year.

The two paintings that make up the large image of the Museum are of Russian origin. This can be seen from the traces of Russian inscriptions above the heads of the Saints, inscribing their names.

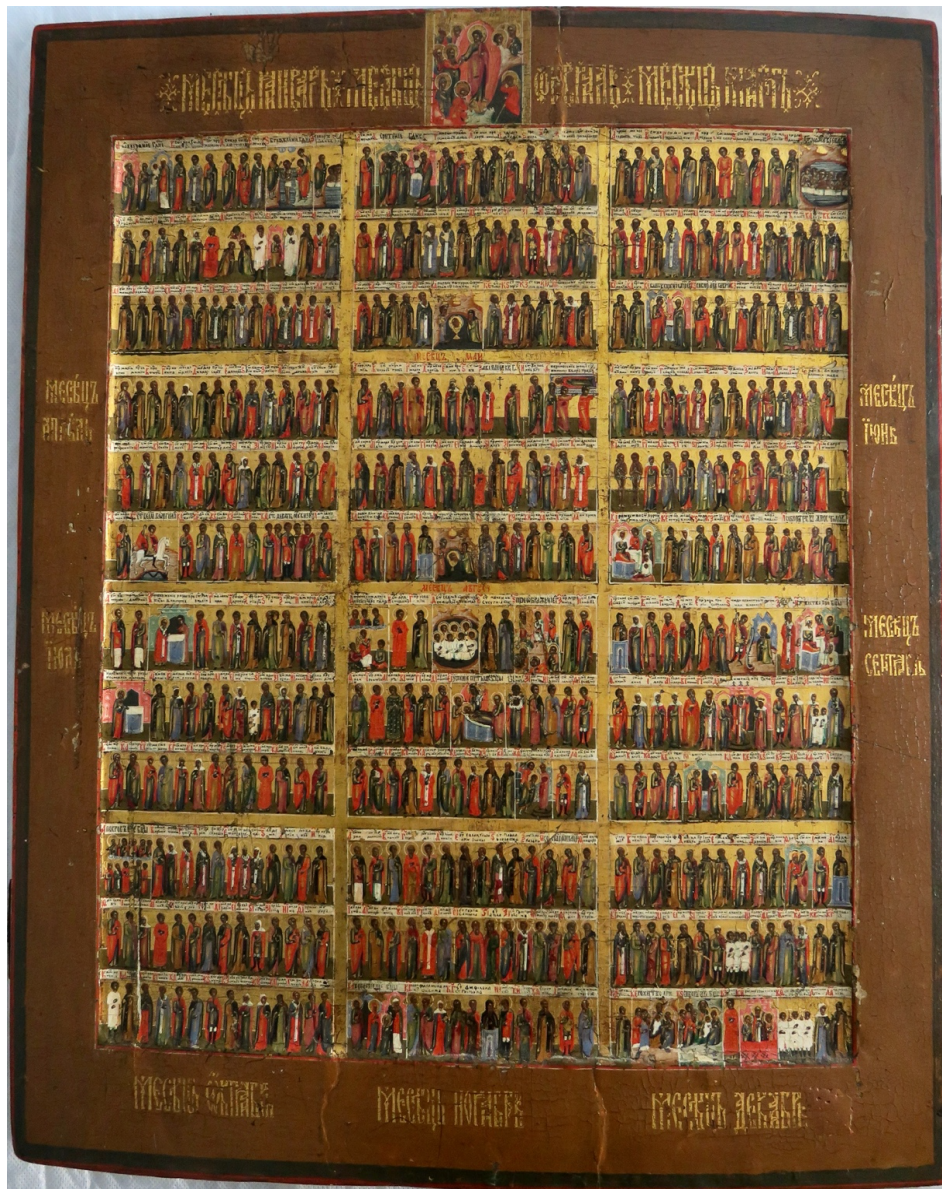


The forms of the Saints and the other feasts are developed in ten rows. The beginning of each month is marked with a small red dot which also represents the moon. The first month (from the left) is September, starting at the top of the left panel. The year ends at the bottom right of the right panel with August 30 as the last day of the ecclesiastical year. **September** begins with the feast of Saint Simeon in the column, while

other feasts of the month that are easily recognized are the miracle in Chonai (September 6), the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (September 8), the Elevation of the Holy Cross (September 14) and the Metastasis of Saint John the Theologian (September 26). **October** opens with the feast of the protecting veil of the Theotokos, while the most famous Saints of this month is Saint Demetrios (26 October). Among the most well-known feasts of **November** are the Synaxis of the Archangels (November 8), the Entrance of the Virgin Mary in the Temple (November 21), of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (November 25) and of Saint Andrew the Apostle (November 30). **December** starts with the feasts of Saints Barbara, Savva and Nikolaos (December 4, 5 and 6), continuing with those of Saints Spyridon of Corfu (December 12) and Eleutherios (December 15) and ending with the great holiday of Christmas (December 25) and of the Holy Protomartyr Stephen (December 27). **January** (and the secular new year) begins with the feasts of the Circumcision of Christ and of Basil the Great. Of utmost importance are the feasts of the Baptism of Christ and of Saint John the Baptist (January 6 and 7). In this month, the church also celebrates three important figures of Christianity and Orthodox monasticism: Saints Anthony the Great, Athanasios of Alexandria and Euthymios (January 17, 18 and 20), Saint Tryphon, the patron *par excellence* of farmers, is the first feast of **February**, while on the second day the Presentation of Christ at the Temple is celebrated. Also important is the commemoration of the finding of the Holy Head of John the Baptist or Prodomos (February 24). Both the months of **March** and **April** do not have many festive feasts, because of the fasting that begins in this period with the climax of the Divine Passion and the Resurrection. However, important holidays for the church are placed within these months such as the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary (March 25) and Saint George (April 23).

Because Easter week, also known as Holy Week, is a movable holiday and cannot be depicted on a fixed place, the painter captured it separately between the months of May and June. In it he presents the most important events of that week such as the Entry of Jesus in Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. However, the following period of Pentecost is also mobile, in which there are holidays and memories of events that happened 50 days after the Resurrection of Christ. Among them are the Doubting Thomas, the Ascension of Christ, Pentecost and the feast of the Holy Spirit.

In the month of **May**, the biggest feast is that of Saints Constantine and Helen (21 May). **June**, apart from the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist (24 June), also has the feasts of the Apostles Peter and Paul and the Synod (Synaxis) of the twelve Apostles (29 and 30 June). **July** is a month that has several Saints' feasts. Among them are the healer saints Saints Cosmas and Damianus on the first day of the month, of Saint Kyriaki (July 7), of Saints Kirikos and Julitta (July 14), and of the prophet Elias (July 20). The month closes with the feasts of Saints Paraskevi and Panteleimon (26 and 27 July). In **August**, which is as mentioned the last month of the ecclesiastical year, the Church celebrates two important Christian feasts: the Transfiguration of Christ (August 6) and the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (August 15). The month ends with the Beheading of John the Baptist, Saint Alexander and the Sacred Belt of the Virgin (29 and 30 August).



**Calendar icon**

Russia, around 1800, egg tempera on wood, 53,0 x 44,3 cm

(permanent loan from inheritance of Dr. Heinrich Schweikert, inventory number 9606)

As a permanent loan, the Recklinghausen collection houses also a portable calendar icon for the whole year. It is divided into twelve compartments (one for each month). They are arranged in four horizontal lines with three months each. As each month consists of three lines of Saints, all in all we have twelve lines from top to bottom – a very symmetric and elaborated composition. Above each line the denominations of the saints or feasts are written in black Cyrillic letters on a white background. At the margins the names of the months are given. It is particularly interesting that this portable icon differs from the rest of the museum's calendar icons because of its unusual chronological arrangement. We would expect September to be the first month of the year at the top left. But this icon starts with January and ends with December. This is easily understood if we notice that the first figures that are depicted show Saint Basil the Great and the Circumcision of Christ (January 1) and the last one is that of Saint Melane (December 31). At the same time, this temporal order is also indicated by the months written next to each panel.

This apparent deviation from the traditional calendar might be connected to the reforms of Tsar Peter I. the Great (1682 – 1725). Until his reign, Russia was continuing the Byzantine Era which counted the years after the creation, which by careful calculations was dated to 5509/5508 B.C., and in which each year began on the first of September, as we have seen. As part of his attempts to modernize Russia, Peter decreed that years were to be counted after the birth of Christ and that the beginning of a year would be the first of January, thereby bringing Russia closer to the states of Western Europe he was striving to imitate. Still, the liturgical year still began (and does so until today) in September, so that calendar icons usually continued to follow the traditional chronology. This icon is a rare exception.



**Calendar icon with depictions of the Mother of God**

Russia, late 19<sup>th</sup> century, egg tempera on wood, 44,7 x 37,7 cm  
Inventory number 948

An extremely interesting calendar icon of late 19th century Russia combines the church year with a separate cycle of feast days and depictions of the Mother of God. The center shows the Resurrection of Christ, which is framed by twelve individual scenes of unusual choice and arrangement (most taken from the Passion cycle). Around them, the twelve months of the ecclesiastical year are depicted in twelve squares, starting with September according to the traditional arrangement. The months are written in red Cyrillic letters, while the names of the depicted saints and themes are written in tiny black lettering.

These again are enclosed by no less than 84 miraculous icons of the Mother of God which are depicted in their different iconographic types and carefully lettered. Particularly emphasized are four large images, each placed in the middle of the four sides. In the upper part, the Western theme of the "Coronation of the Virgin Mother of God" is depicted, in the lower part the iconographic type of the Virgin "Unexpected Joy". On the left we see the pictorial type known as the "Joy of all who suffer" and on the right the "Unburnt Bush".

In addition to the calendar icons depicting the whole year, the museum has in its collection several icons of smaller dimensions that depict the Saints and their feasts of each month separately.



The month of December (*tabletki*). Russia, around 1600, egg tempera on strengthened canvas, 16, 8 x 13,2 cm (donation of Dr. Reiner Zerlin, inventory number 4290)

These icons are usually not painted on a wooden panel, but on strengthened canvas. For that reason they are light (but fragile) and can be transported easily. Churches used to possess a complete set of twelve calendar icons for every month of the year. In each month, the respective piece was put out for veneration by the congregation. They are painted on both sides, the frontside showing the first half, the backside the second half of the month. In Russian, they are called *tabletki*.