THE ORIGIN OF SPECIAL VENERATION
OF THE MOTHER OF GOD AT THE
TRINITY-SERGIUS MONASTERY:
THE ICONOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

Exactly when and why the Mother of God came to be the object of special veneration at the Trinity-Sergius Monastery, a house dedicated to the Trinity, has always puzzled historians. It is important because two of the most ideologically "loaded" chapters in all full editions of the life of Sergius of Radonezh have to do with her worship. In one Sergius prays to the Mother of God to sustain his monastery at a moment of need. Thereupon the Mother of God, accompanied by apostles Peter and John the Prophet, appears to Sergius to extend her protection to his house. In the other Sergius assures Grand Prince Dmitrii of Moscow that he will be victorious over the Mongols in 1380 and makes an intercessory prayer to the Mother of God to bring it about. Pakhomii's rewriting of Epifanii the Wise's biography of Sergius is the earliest surviving text containing these episodes. Unlike later editions, it states only implicitly that Sergius prayed for the Mother of God's intercession that was to bring Dmitrii victory. Boris Mikhailovich Kloss dates Pakhomii's first edition of Sergius's life to the late 1430s. As is well known, we cannot be certain that these episodes were in Epifanii's original biography (or if they were, what was their substance). This is because the part containing them comes down to us only in the so-called Extended Edition prepared in the 1520s and contains passages "tainted" by emendations based on editions appearing after 1418-19 when Epifanii finished the biography. That Sergius's brother Stefan was the one to propose that the little church they had built be dedicated to the Trinity — albeit based on a triune omen of Sergius's saintly future that his mother experienced while pregnant with him — makes the question even more tantalizing.

What then can the iconographic evidence tell us about this curious problem? First of all, one must account for what is said to be one of the oldest icons in the Sergiev Posad Museum-Reserve at the Trinity-Sergius Monastery, that of the “Mother of God Hodegitria.” The catalogue dates it to the second half of the fourteenth century. The monastery’s inventory of 1641 called it “The Prayer of Sergius the Miracle-Worker” (moleniia chudotvortsa Sergiia) from which T. V. Nikolaeva concluded that “it is considered to have stood in the cell [kelleini ik-onoi] of Sergius of Radonezh.” The Hodegetria or “Indicator of the Way” style is well attested in Orthodox iconography. In it we have a frontal view of the Mother of God from the waist up, with the infant Christ perched on her left arm. There is nothing in the imagery itself that has direct reference to the two episodes I have noted. Of course, in the episode in which the Mother of God appeared to Sergius in his cell, Pakhomii tells us that, as was his habit, prior to her appearance he had been reciting the acathistos to her. This could be taken as evidence that Sergius venerated the Mother of God, but no more than that. Most Christians did. Nor does it suggest that Sergius established a special worship of the Mother of God at the Trinity Monastery during his lifetime. Finally, the passage in the inventory of 1641 about Sergius’s prayers cannot be taken as evidence that the icon was in the saint’s cell; it could just as easily reflect legends about Sergius and the Mother of God that came into being after his death in 1392. In fact a number of specialists have called into question the antiquity of the icon, suggesting that it was done sometime after 1450.

Of greater significance for this study is another icon which its restorer Igor’ Grabar’ and the art historian E. S. Ovchinnikova date to the second quarter of the fifteenth century and possibly as early as the mid-1420s. It is a large icon (160 x 112.3 cm) now in the State Historical Museum in Moscow (fig. 1). On the right in large scale is the Mother of God. She sits on a large throne with a curved back and holds the infant Christ on her left knee. She extends her right hand to, and Christ blesses with his right hand, a figure to their right who is depicted in much smaller scale. That figure is standing, facing the Mother and Child. He wears a monk’s cowl and beard, has a halo, and extends his right hand slightly toward them. In a circle above him is an angel, possibly one of the archangels. The provenance of the icon is well established as far back as 1641 for it is listed in the aforementioned inventory of the Trinity-Sergius Monastery as one of the icons in the “local row” of the iconostasis of the Stefan Makhrishchskii-Trinity Monastery. That house is located thirty-five kilometers northeast of Sergius’s