

# THE OLD BELIEVERS OF GUSLICY

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the history and culture of a special ethnographical group of old believers (*edinovercy*), who live in Guslicy (Orexovo-Zuevo district, Moscow region). After the schism, or *raskol* in the 17th century, they kept their traditional customs and rites. The authors tried to show the peculiarities of old believers' life style in the past and present times. The close metropolis of Moscow (50–100 km away) affects Guslica's special identity. Its young population migrates to Moscow while the abandoned houses are bought as summer bungalows or *dačas*. This trend may lead to the full transformation of the former traditional old believing villages into typical modern settlements not inheriting local cultural and architectural traditions. The old-day Guslicy cannot be saved. However, some elements of its heritage still can be preserved in the museums.

**Keywords:** Russian old believers (*edinovercy*), traditional customs and rites, transformation of traditional culture, monastery and church in Guslica, contemporary life style

After the schism of the 17th century most of the Russian Old Believers moved to inaccessible areas of Siberia and the Russian Far East. Later the Russian Old Rite communities migrated as far as to Alaska, South America and Australia. But, surprisingly, one of these areas called *Guslica* or *Guslicy* has been preserved just 30–65 miles east of Moscow. The unfriendly social and harsh natural environment have formed a special ethnographical type of people here. The people of Guslicy or *Gusljaks* were forced to mask their faith. Being discriminated against or restricted in many areas (e.g., in military and civil service), they had to be very competitive in the market. The specific culture, deeply rooted traditions and nearly total literacy of the adult population have always marked the territory. Some of the specific ethnographical elements can still be found in many local villages.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME “GUSLICY”

The name Guslica (Guslicy appeared much later) was mentioned in the will of Ivan Kalita in the first half the 14th century. It was an administrative district (*volost'*) with its centre in the village of Guslica (now Il'inskij Pogost). The settlement is situated on the bank of the Guslica river and apparently had received its name from it. Guslica is the only river in Russia with a musical name (*gusly* is an old Russian string musical instrument). The local historians can recall a number of legends regarding how the river was used to soak timber to make *gusly*, *gusly* was thrown away to the river, etc.

We believe that *Guslica* is transformed old Finnish *goos* or *kuus* (*kuuse*) which means spruce, pine of a coniferous tree. S. Garkuša supposes that the word Guslica might originate from the old Slavonic *gusl*, meaning a sorcerer. It could be considered as only a legend, but there are numbers of sorcerers still practicing in the area.

The locals believe there are whole villages in the territory populated by the people of that kind (Slobodišč'i, Ljaxovo, etc). Thus “Guslica” might be “the river of sorcerers”. The Guslica river arises in the village of Xolmy near Egor'evsk, which all local folk consider as a settlement populated entirely by magicians and sorcerers.

## LOCATION AND HISTORY

Unfortunately, the Guslica *volost'* (district) of the 14th century cannot be shown on the map though its latest borders are known. Later, the *volost'* was abolished and its name has been preserved by the local Old Believers within their distinctive culture. It is thought that before the schism of the 17th century the territory was scarcely populated due to the unproductive marshy and sandy soils. People started to flow into the territory at the end of the 17th century. They were mostly noblemen and professional soldiers (*strelcy*) fleeing from Moscow in the hope of saving their Old Orthodox Rite and avoiding persecutions.

There is another point of view. J. Karjakin believes that the post-schism migration into Guslicy was not considerable, and the majority of the locals were forced to settle there in the late 15th century by the Grand Duke Ivan III. This ruler of Central Russia oppressed the city of Novgorod that had always been known for its liberal political tradition. Many people of Novgorod (or Novgorod the Great) were exiled to the virgin forests of Guslicy. Some Guslicy villages still recall their Novgorod ancestry. The villagers of Antcyferovo and Sobolevo, even in the beginning of the 20th century, were called *Novgorodcy*. That was why this very specific territory has appeared. Sometimes because of its peculiar culture it was even called “The Old Rite Palestine”. It was natural for the exiles to oppose Moscow. The schism (*raskol*) was just one more excuse to show their rebellious spirit.

Modern Guslicy's boundaries cannot be precisely determined. Many authors, not being familiar with the territory, include within it some of the Bogorodickij (Noginsk) district and even parts of the Vladimir and Rjazan provinces (regions) with Old Believer populations. However, the neighbouring part of Vladimir Region had a name *Patriaršina*

(which means *The Land of Patriarch*). Patriaršina was predominantly populated by the priestless Old Believers of the Pomorskaja convention (*Pomorskij soglas*). The Old Believers of Guslica were priestly Old Believers accepting the clergy of the Belokrinickajaja hierarchy since the 1840s.

There is a point of view (SMIRNOV 1999) that considers only the old-time Guslica volost' (district) to be true Guslicy. This does not take into account the numerous neighbouring territories, which are also populated with an ethnographically nearly identical, Old Believer population of the same Belokrynickaja Church. If we consider Guslicy the territory where the self-name *Gusljak* (a man from Guslicy) is in use, we still encounter some difficulties because many historical Guslicy villages (Čeloxovo, Pankratovskaja, Gorčkovo, etc.) do not refer to themselves in such a manner. They know who the *Gusljaks* are and even oppose them. This was confirmed during the field research in 2000. At the same time the self-name *Gusljak* was recorded in the villages of Molokovo and Smoljovo (Karpovo volost'), which are situated to the far West of the historical Guslica.

Guslicy itself was not homogenous. A number of sources unofficially specify the separate territory *Zaxod* or *Zaxot* within it. The people of this territory had been called *Gusljaks*. *Zaxod* included settlements of the Zaponorje and Selino parishes, i.e., Davydovo, Gora, Ljaxovo, Elizarovo, Kostino, Ancyferovo, Jakovlevskoe, Belivo, Zavolinje, Kurovskaja, Korotkovo, Radovanje, Glebovo, Zaprudinje, Novaja and Barskaja. These 17 villages had no more than 20 households where followers of official Orthodoxy (called here *Nikoniane*) lived. The whole Guslica had more than 20 percent of official Orthodox population (*Brackoe Slovo* 1888). The same orthodox mission magazine wrote about *Zaxod*: "The schismatic *Gusljaks* are smart, cunning but at the same time bold and rough people. They have no morals. Twenty years ago, it was certainly a true land of robbers."

The 13 villages of the Nikickaja-Rudnja parish in the East of Guslicy, i.e., Malkovo, Titovo, Bogorodskoe, Selivanixa, Stepanovka, Ponarino, Zapolicy, Miscevo, Avsju-nino, Abramovka, etc. are sometimes called *Ramenje*.

Thus we believe that Guslica is an historical area in the South-East of the Moscow Region with a native population of predominantly Old Believers (Belokrinickaja Church) and similar ethnographical features.

## CULTURAL TRADITIONS

The Old Believers have always observed old traditions. So did the people of Guslica. The villagers of Guslica cast brass crosses and icons. A. Antonjukov, an expert on the local traditional craft, says some 200 rural households were involved in this activity. The middlemen travelled through the villages buying brass castings measured in the dozens of kilograms to be sold in Moscow. The official records do not demonstrate it because the Old Believers of Guslica did not declare or advertise their business. E. Zotova, an expert of the Museum of Old Russia's History and Culture (named after A. Rublev, hereinafter the Rublev Museum), shares this viewpoint. The museum has rich collections of the local and roughly shaped peasant brass craft that specialists identify as originating in Guslica.

The brass icons are rather primitive technically but vary in their forms. Some stone patterns were very old and kept for many generations.

Some Guslica villages were known for their icon painting. The local icon painters often used their own methods of painting and materials processing. V. Sorokatij, an expert of the Rublev Museum, points out the peculiar line drawings, shadings and intense red and blue colours aged with a special home-made drying oil.

Guslicy of the 19th century differed from any other Russian countryside (even the Old Believer ones) in that its people (including women) were almost totally literate. Each village had its own self-organized schools run by many local scribes (*knižniki*) and nuns. The school programs were mostly designed to pass on the Old Rite religious culture. These schools had existed from the schism of the 17th century (PRUGAVIN 1904). Nearly total literacy resulted in numerous Old Believer clergymen originating from this area. The Old Rite priests from Guslicy served in many Old Believer parishes throughout Russia.

The biggest and most famous Old Believer monastery of Guslica existed in the village of Belivo until the 18th century when it disappeared. Besides, there were numerous village nuns and pilgrims. Somewhere in the hidden places the little monastic fraternities called *skits* had existed and were secretly supplied with food by the locals. One of them was located near the village graveyards of Šuvoe. The local old-timers still remember it.

Many villages (Miscevo, Šuvoe, etc.) were involved in the copying of religious books. The books' calligraphic pages (particularly the margins) were decorated with ornaments called *Guslickaja*. Working on these books, the masters used their own archives of patterns, which were black-and-white copies of the ornaments of books of the 17th century and earlier. Some researches see a similarity between Guslica book ornaments and elements of the local painting on pottery, called *Ghzel*. Some consider them to be unique. At the beginning of the 20th century this craftsmanship began to die out (*Cerkovnoe penie* 1910).

## LIFE STYLE DETAILS

Besides the cultural achievements the *Gusljaks* were known for other activities, which gave them a reputation as people with no morals and honour. Guslicy, a remote marshy place on the boundaries of three Russian provinces (*gubernia*, now *oblast'*), had always been a haven for criminals of all sorts. It was a good refuge for them, easy to leave for the neighbouring territory making the police operations difficult to coordinate. The Russian officials used to list the Old Believers side by side with robbers, etc. so all these people got along well with each other in the Guslica virgin forests. The famous robber, Vasily Čurkin who terrified all Moscow province in the second half of the 19th century came from the Zaxod village of Barskaja.

Guslicy was famous not just for robbers but also for counterfeiters. It was a very common criminal activity in Guslica and the neighbouring district of Voxna (town of Pavlovskij Posad). Mel'nikov-Pečerskij believes that the locals even managed to seize the money plates that Napoleon had brought to Russia to print false Russian notes (MEL'NIKOV-PEČERSKIJ 1898). The Guslica counterfeiters operated right up to 1917. In the 19th

century in Moscow, all false banknotes were called *Guslickie*. The Guslica counterfeiters were chased for years even by military units with little success (Central Historical Archive of Moscow).

Besides counterfeiting, the people of Guslica were professional beggars. This business survived until the 1950s. The “mendicants” even managed to organize bread trafficking from starving Moscow during WWII.

The famous nineteenth-century Moscow journalist, V. Giljarovskij, wrote about crooks from Guslicy making *viktorki*, the false documents stating “lost all possessions in a fire”. Besides this the swindlers of Guslicy used *malaški*, or false passports. A criminal from Guslicy took five or six *malaškas* and looked for a wealthy employer in a big city. When he found employment he did his job very well. The employer (normally a well-off merchant) promoted his new sober, witty, and literate manager. One day he entrusted him with quite a large sum of money asking for a passport as security. The *Gusljak* left a *malaška*, took the money and never returned. Soon the criminal had a new employment to repeat the trick. When all the false passports had been used, the crook returned home to rest and prepare some new *malaškas* (GILJAROVSKIJ 1990).

The villages of Guslica, in spite of their unfavourable location (marshy and infertile land, absence of big rivers and trading routes), were always wealthy. It is still surprising to see the villages one and a half kilometres long. The cabins were well maintained and the locals looked tidy (PRUGAVIN, 1904). The poor soils did not prevent the villagers from making money. Guslicy and the neighbouring territories were the origin of many Russian merchant families such as the Morozovs, Raxmanovs, Soldatenkovs. The Kuzne-covs, the kings of Russian porcelain, were also *Gusljaks*. The wealthy Old Believers did not break with their average co-religionists. The Old Believer congregations (*soglasija*) were being transformed into powerful religious-business corporations. The local merchants contracted many smaller weaving shops and backed them up with special loans. Home-based weaving tools (*karas'*) were found in almost all Old Believer houses. Former peasants and forestry workers became prosperous industrialists and millionaires (MEL'NIKOV-PEČERSKIJ 1898). Until 1917, a well-equipped textile factory was a very common attribute of any Old Believer village.

## GUSLICY TODAY

Currently, the main part of old-time Guslica is in the Orexovo-Zuevo district of the Moscow region. Some villages (Gridino, Šuvoe, Pankratovskaja, Čeloxovo, Gorškovo) belong to the Egor'evsk district. The last three settlements have always been a centre for the regional Old Believers' pilgrimage due to the holy well and the chapel of St. Nikita situated near Čeloxovo (Starobradčeskaja Mysl 1915, NN7, 11). Even in the Soviet times there were two Old Believer prayer houses in Čeloxovo and there were religious processions to the holy well until 1948. The Soviet officials tried repeatedly to destroy this Old Believer centre. Finally they closed these two prayer houses and transformed one into a club. Naturally, it had no visitors. The authorities sold it as a residential house. In 2003, the chapel of St. Nikita was rebuilt, and the locals still pray there.

Until the beginning of the 1960s most of Guslicy belonged to the Kurovskoe district (which no longer exists). Recently, the area was merged with the neighbouring Orexovo-Zuevskij district. The town of Korovskoe (pop. 20,000) is still the biggest settlement and the only town of Guslicy. It has expanded beyond the village of Kurovskaja due to the textile factory of the Balašov brothers, local Old Believers. Now about half of the town's population is of Old Believer descent. The neighbouring settlement of Davydovo (pop. 14,000) is similar. Old Believers make up about 80% of the population of the rural areas of Guslicy.

Generally the situation with the Old Believer heritage of Guslicy is not good. The Soviet years have damaged it a lot. After the closing of prayer houses in Guslicy villages and oppression of the clergy, the active parishioners still gathered together in their homes to serve and pray. But most of this generation died in the 1970s–1980s, and this tradition has been broken. The present old generation was born and brought up under the Soviet regime. Very few of them have home religious education. The rest know about the Old Believer's faith by hearsay. Thus after the disappearance of the old generation of the 1980s, the Old Believer tradition goes on mostly mechanically. Nowadays the old and middle-aged know they are Old Believers, they were baptized, they have to cross themselves with two fingers, but very little besides. The young know very little about their faith. All the Old Believer craftsmanship such as icon painting, brass casting, book calligraphy are lost. An exception is the Slepovs, an Old Believer family from the village of Gora. As their ancestors did, they make the incense and Old Believer rosary called *lestovki*. Earlier, this family cast brass. The locals say the last icon painters and brass casters still lived in the Gora area in the 1980s.

Hop growing had existed in Guslicy until the beginning of the 1960s when it was declared "unprofitable". Recently there were some attempts to revive it. They were unsuccessful due to the labour-intensive process. This is unfortunate because it could have revived the declining agriculture.

Now, there are Old Believer temples and prayer houses of Guslicy (Belokrinickoe denomination) in Slobodišči, Ustjanovo, Davydovo, Gubino, Belivo, Abramovka, Egor'evsk, Šuvoe and Aljošino. Some parishioners go to Orexovo-Zuevo, Pavlovskij Posad and Andronovo (Pavlovskij Posad district). Since 1994 there has been an *Edinoverčeskij* (under Moscow Patriarchate but following the Old Rite) temple in Kurovskoe with a prayer house in Miscevo. There is a Novozybkovskaja denomination Old Believer church in Novoxaritonovo, near Guslicy. Some Guslica villagers go there. Not all of the churches and prayer houses listed above have priests and regular parishes. Some of them (in Davydovo, Miscevo, Abramovka, Belivo, Alyošino, Šuvoe) are just branches of the larger neighbouring churches.

The Edinoverčeskij parish in Kurovskoe was formed of the ex-Belokrinickaja denomination Old Believers called *Neokružniki*\*. In the late 1970s the Neokružniki found themselves with no clergy. There are still true Neokružniki in the village of Xoteiči. They choose to pray at the house of their leader, an old lady called Anfisa.

\* Neokružniki – a part of the Belokrinickaja konvencija Old Believers which has not accepted the "Circular Letter" (Okružnoe Poslanie) issued in the 1860s.

Besides the above there are some other Old Rite people in Guslicy. They are a few of the last *Lužkane* and *Makeevcy*, which have no communities. There are also the priestless *Pomorcy* oriented to their parishes in Orexovo-Zuevo and Moscow.

The close metropolis of Moscow (50–100 km away) affects Guslica's special identity. Its young population migrates to Moscow while the abandoned houses are bought as summer bungalows or *dačas*. This trend may lead to the full transformation of the former traditional Old Believer villages into typical modern settlements not inheriting local cultural and architectural traditions.

The Guslicy of the past cannot be saved. However, some elements of its heritage can still be preserved. In order to do this some local communities have organized their own museums. One of them is situated in the village of Stepanovka, at the premises of the village primary school. The museum is founded by Ustinja Andrejanova. The museum's exhibition illustrates the past of the village. One of its rooms imitates the interior of a nineteenth-century Old Believer cabin. The 1923 school building may also be considered as one of the exhibits. There is a park around the school planted in 1985 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Victory in WWII. Each tree in the park has a plaque with the name of a fallen soldier. The traditional Soviet-style war monument stands side by side with the big wooden Old Believer octagonal cross. Thus the Old Rite services for the dead are held at the same place as the annual civil meetings. This memorial complex has no parallel in Russia.

One more museum exists in the village of Il'inskij Pogost, the historical centre of Guslica. Its director, Jurij Karjakin, is also the principal of the local secondary school. The pupils of the school often conduct field ethnographical research, take photos of the old wooden cabins and try to discover more about their history. The museum interiors are designed in Guslica art traditions. The exhibition covers a period from Ivan Kalita to the Soviet time with the emphasis on Old Believer history.

It is often said nowadays that Guslicy needs its own museum concentrating all exhibits in one premise with an open-air exhibition of wooden architecture. These plans arise because the main museum of the Orexovo district does not pay proper attention to historical Guslicy and concentrates on the northern part of the area. Meanwhile the neighbouring Egor'evsk, which was never a part of the historical Guslicy increasingly positions itself as Guslicy based upon the fact that some Guslica villages are now part of the Egor'evsk district and Egor'evsk itself is situated very close to the border of the historical Guslicy volost'. The new building of the Egor'evsk museum is decorated with Guslicy ornaments. There are some attempts to produce similar handcraft souvenirs here. Currently, the people of Egor'evsk often consider themselves as *Gusljaks* (something they did not do before). Generally, this new positioning of the town with a strong community of Old Believers is a positive factor for the region's cultural development.

During the Soviet decades the cultural originality of Guslica was severely damaged. The atheistic authorities tore people away from their indigenous culture because it was related to their religion. Collectivization destroyed the traditional rural economy and emphasized the peasants as a social class. The Soviet officials never used the word "Guslicy" in their documents even on cultural issues. The closeness to Moscow did not promote cultural conservation and was even disastrous due to the large number of criminals and profiteers foraging for icons, old books and religious brass castings.

The other reason for this cultural disintegration was the fact that the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church (The convention of Belaja Kritica) did not react properly in the late 1980s when many old local scribes, active parishioners and *ustavščiki* (a kind of Old Believer psalm-reader, counsellor and religious supervisor) were passing away. The Old Believer life of the Guslica villages was based upon these people and there was nobody to replace them. We refer to the opinion of one of the local priests of the official Russian Orthodox Church who said: “if the Old Believer Metropolitan Alimpij in the beginning of 1990s had appointed five active priests here any other confession would have nothing to do”.

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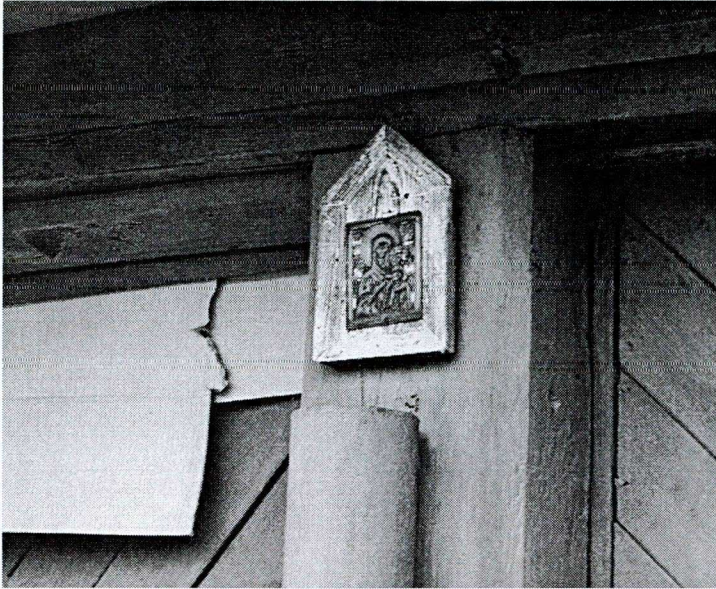


Fig. 1. A very rare exemplar of metal icon of Our Lady on wood. Traditional place on the gate of the old-believers' house. The house was built in 1925. Village Vnukovo, Orexovo-Zuevo district, Moscow province, April 2004. All photos were made by Sergej Mixajlov



Fig. 2. A blessing of an ancient chapel in village Čeloxovo, Egor'evsk district, Moscow province, 28 September 2003

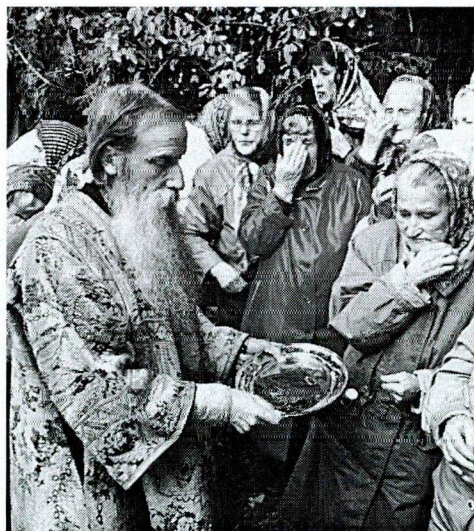


Fig. 3. Deacon Konstantin Titov suggests a metal plate with the holy water to the believers after the first blessing of the chapel in village Čeloxovo, Egor'evsk district, Moscow province, 28 September 2003. People touch water by fingers and put a cross on themselves





Fig. 4. A traditional form of scarf for women common for old-believers. Village Čeloxovo, Egor'evsk district, Moscow province, 28 September 2003

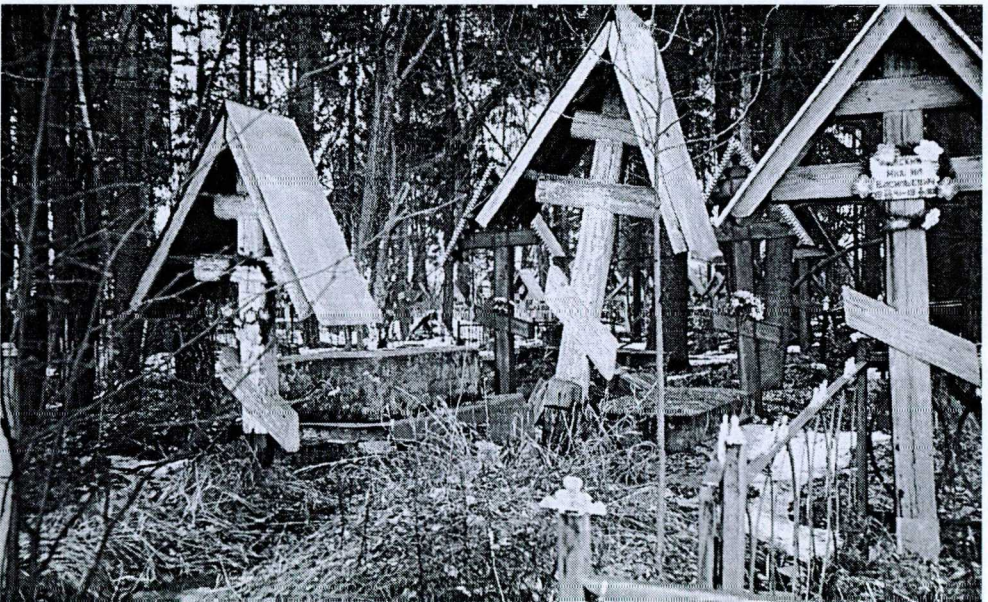


Fig. 5. A cemetery of the old-believers in Guslicy. Orexovo-Zuevo district, Moscow province, 2003



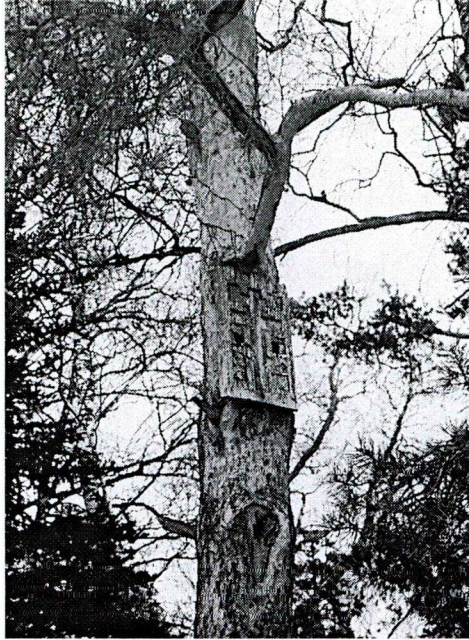


Fig. 6. Carved wooden icon with 8-ends cross and small icons. A cemetery of the old-believers. Village Šuvoe, Egor'evsk district, Moscow province, March 2004



Fig. 7. An icon on a tree on the place of ancient old-believers' sects. Village Belivo, Orexovo-Zuevo district, Moscow province, January 2004