

Picturing Christ's childhood: some examples of a rare iconographic theme inspired by the Infancy Gospels*

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Abstract: This article examines Byzantine wall paintings dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth century depicting a rare iconographic theme of Jesus's childhood inspired by the Infancy Gospels. The iconography shows the Virgin Mary leading the child Jesus by the hand. The child is depicted holding different objects, such as a writing tablet, an unfurled scroll, or a wicker basket filled with flowers or fruits. Several of the scenes under examination have been hitherto misidentified or altogether unknown. In addition to this, the article interprets these representations in a broader iconographic context and addresses the possible origin of the theme.

Keywords: Child Christ, Virgin Mary, Infancy Gospels, Byzantine Art, Western Medieval Art, Schooling, St. John the Baptist, Crete, Greece, writing tablets, wicker basket, thirteenth and fourteenth century

Images of the Virgin Mary leading child Jesus by the hand, accompanied by different objects such as a writing tablet, book, staff, wicker basket filled with flowers or fruits were widespread in Western Medieval Art. Images

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of this kind start to appear at the beginning of the thirteenth century. They are found in a variety of media, from frescoes and stained glass windows to illuminated manuscripts, embroideries, and seals in Germany and Switzerland, with several examples also found in France, Italy, England and Scandinavia.¹ Scholars have relied on the objects carried by the child (and sometimes by the Virgin, too) to identify or name the scene in question (Schooling, Flight to Egypt, and so on). The best known examples are associated with the accounts of the Schooling of Christ from the apocryphal Infancy Gospels. In these images the child is represented carrying in one hand a writing tablet inscribed with the alphabet and occasionally a pen, while holding his mother with the other hand. The images where the child Jesus holds a wicker basket are named Flight to Egypt or Return to Nazareth.²

However, only a few representations of this kind are known in Byzantine Art. The most famous one is a stone slab (82 × 56 cm) from the monastery at Episcopi near Volos in Greece, today in the Byzantine Museum in Athens, on which the Virgin Mary holds the child Christ by his left hand while it appears that he has a tablet in his

¹ Most of the examples from these countries have been published by H. Wentzel: H. Wentzel, *Mariae mit dem Jesusknaben an der Hand. Ein Seltenes Deutsches Bildmotiv*, *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 9 (1942) 203–250; idem, *Ad Infantiam Christi Zu der Kindheit unseres Herren*, in: *Das Werk des Künstlers. Studien zur Ikonographie und Formgeschichte. Hubert Schrader zum 60. Geburtstag dargebracht von Kollegen und Schülern*, ed. H. Fegers, Stuttgart 1960, 134–160; idem, *Das Jesuskind an der Hand Mariae auf dem Siegel des Burkard von Winon 1277*, in: *Festschrift Hans R. Hahnloser zum 60. Geburtstag 1959*, ed. E. J. Beer, P. Hofer, L. Mojon, Basel 1961, 251–270. V. also: M. Clanchy, *An Icon of Literacy. The Depiction at Tuse of Jesus Going to School*, in: *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. P. Hermann, Odense 2005, 47–73, figs. 1–5; E. M. Vetter, *Maria mit dem Kind an der Hand*, *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 46–47/2 (1993–1994) 775–796, figs. 1–13; E. Landolt-Wegener, *Zum Motiv der „Infantia Christi“*, *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 21 (1961) 164–170, taf. 59–60. A collection of seals from Switzerland and Germany is also very interesting. However, the known motif of the Virgin holding the Child Christ in her arms, which is found on thousands of seals in both East and West, is replaced with the Virgin walking with the child Christ holding him by his hand. Cf. Wentzel, *Das Jesuskind an der Hand Mariae*, 251–270.

² Wentzel, *Mariae mit dem Jesusknaben*, passim; *ibid. Ad Infantiam Christi*, 141–145, abb. 7.



Fig. 1. Virgin Mary with the child Christ. Cripta Candelora a Masafra in Apulia (after Castelfranchi, Pittura)



Fig. 2. Virgin Mary with the child Christ. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, hs. 78. D I, fol. 9r, early fourteenth century. Photo: Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin

right hand.³ They are walking towards a male figure that is sitting in the right corner of the icon. Scholars have identified this representation in different ways but generally they named this scene as Jesus' schooling, on the basis of other known examples from the West.⁴ The image is dated to the end of the thirteenth century.

The second Byzantine example of the Virgin walking with the child Jesus is a mid-thirteenth century fresco from the Cripta della Candelora a Massafra in Apulia (Fig. 1).⁵ The Virgin Mary walking with the child Christ who in his right hand holds a wicker basket, probably with fruits or

eggs, is represented on the depiction located in the arcosolium. The fresco from Apulia has many parallels in Western art (Fig. 2) that are sometimes related to the theme of the Flight into Egypt or Return to Nazareth⁶ or to the Christ's schooling, where Christ the child, apart from a basket, holds a writing tablet, as well.⁷ As for its parallels in Byzantine art, the representation from the Cripta Candelora resembles the scene of Christ's schooling from the church St. Nicholas in Kyriakoselia in the prefecture of Chania, in west Crete. In this scene the Virgin Mary is leading Christ the child, who in his left hand has a wicker basket and in the right a fruiled scroll (Fig. 3).⁸ This motif is encountered in the scenes of

³ A. Χυγορούλος, *Το ανάγλυφον της Επισκοπής Βόλου*, Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών 2 (1925) 107–121; idem, *Συμπλήρωσις εἰς τὰ περί τοῦ ἀναγλύφου τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς Βόλου*, Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών 2 (1925) 1925, 320; G. Sotiriou, *Βυζαντιναὶ ἀνάγλυφοι εἰκόνες*, in: *Recueil d'études dédiées à la mémoire de N. P. Kondakov. Archéologie, histoire de l'art. Études byzantines*, Prague 1926, 133–134; R. Lange, *Die Byzantinische Reliefikone*, Recklinghausen 1964, 115–117, fig. 44; M. F. Castelfranchi, *Pittura monumentale bizantina in Puglia*, Milano 1991, 203; P. Eugenikos, *Παρατηρήσεις σε εικονιστικά γλυπτά τῆς Ὑστερῆς βυζαντινῆς περιόδου ἀπὸ τὴν περιοχή τοῦ Πηλίου*, Βυζαντινά 28 (2008) 294–296, εἰκ. 7–8; I. Varalēs, *Δύο ἀνάγλυφες εἰκόνες ἀπὸ τῆ Θεσσαλίας στο Βυζαντινὸ καὶ Χριστιανικὸ Μουσείο Ἀθηνῶν*, in: *Αρχαιολογικὸ Ἔργο Θεσσαλίας καὶ Στερεᾶς Ἑλλάδας 2. Πρακτικὰ Ἐπιστημονικῆς Συνάντησης* (Βόλος, 16. 3. – 19. 3. 2006), I. Θεσσαλία, ed. A. Mazarakēs Ainian, Volos 2009, 506–508.

⁴ For further interpretation cf. Varalēs, *op. cit.*, 506–508.

⁵ Castelfranchi, *Pittura monumentale bizantina*, 201–210, fig. 182.

⁶ This event is briefly described in the *Gospel of Matthew* (2, 13–23). However, in the Apocryphal Infancy Gospels mentioned above the description of this event is enriched by different stories about miracles which the child Christ had been performing during the flight. The examples of this representation are preserved in the Western Art. Cf. n. 1 above. In the Byzantine representations of the Flight into Egypt, Jesus child is never depicted as walking but is always either in Virgin's arms or is carried on the shoulders of Joseph. In some cases the wicker basket appears on these scenes in Joseph's hand, as for instance on the example from Dečani monastery. Cf. B. Todić, M. Čanak-Medić, *Manastir Dečani*, Beograd 2005, 367.

⁷ In the *Vetingera manuscript*, which is kept in the Kantonsbibliothek in Aarau, Ms. Wett. Fol 1 (Ms. 7), fol. 260 dated to 1280, the Virgin holds the child Jesus who has a basket in his right hand and a tablet in the left. Cf. Wentzel, *Des Jesuskind an der Hand Mariae*, 258. abb. 8.

⁸ For more on this scene cf. *infra*.



Fig. 3. *Jesus' schooling. Church of St. Nicholas at Kyriakoselia, Crete, the third zone of the north wall of the transept*

St. Nicholas going to school from his pictorial life in which either Nicholas or his mother carries a wicker basket and a wax tablet. Presumably Nicholas's basket contains food for his own lunch or for his poorer schoolmates.⁹ Since the fresco from the Cripta Candelora in Apulia does not depict a tablet with the alphabet in Christ's hand but only a wicker basket, this fresco could also be related to another representation known as Jesus the nurturer (*Ἰησοῦς ὁ τροφεύς*),¹⁰ as M. F. Castelfranchi has proposed.¹¹ A characteristic example of this theme is the representation of the Christ child in the Virgin's arms holding a wicker basket, preserved in Bogorodica Ljeviška monastery (Fig. 5).¹² The main difference between the two frescoes is that on the example from Bogorodica Ljeviška the Virgin and the child are not walking together; rather the child is in her arms. However, this does not necessary change the meaning of the scene.

The scene from Apulia is the most similar to the representation of St. Dorothy and the infant Christ bearing a basket of roses and apples. St. Dorothy is a Christian martyr condemned to death in 303 because of her Christian faith during the persecution of Christians by

⁹ Cf. the description of St. Neophytos as a schoolchild giving away his lunch to his poorer schoolmates, Th. Ioannou, *Μνημεια Ἀγιολογικὰ*, Venice 1884 (reprinted Leipzig 1973) 242. However, in some examples from Byzantine art, St. Nicholas or his mother holds both a writing tablet and a wicker basket. These examples, with the two mentioned attributes in the scene of Saint Nicolas going to school, are encountered in the churches of St. George in the village of Staro Nagoričino (cf. N. P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art*, Torino 1983, 72) and in Bogorodica Ljeviška (cf. D. Panić, G. Babić, *Bogorodica Ljeviška*, Beograd 1975, fig. XXXVI).

¹⁰ The word 'trofeus', which means someone who rears, nurtures, or provides food for the poor, is one of the old Christ's epithets, which has been used in both liturgical texts (*troparion* of the third Ode of the second canon on the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary) and patristic literature, cf. *John Chrysostom. In Math. 79.2* (PG 57, 761A). For more about these representations, v. N. Davidović, *Predstava Bogorodice sa Hristom „Krmiteljem“*, in: *Starine Kosova i Metohije* I (1961) 85–94.

¹¹ Castelfranchi, *op. cit.*, 204, 205, fig. 185.

¹² Davidović, *op. cit.*; Panić, Babić, *op. cit.*, 96, fig. XXXVI.



Fig. 4. *Jesus' schooling. Church of St. Nicholas at Kyriakoselia (drawing G. Fousteris)*

Diocletian. The child Jesus, holding a basket filled with roses and apples, appeared to St. Dorothy as she was being taken to her martyrdom.¹³ The inspiration is taken from the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*) written by Jacopo da Varagine, a Dominican friar who became archbishop of Genoa in 1292.¹⁴

Examples of a rare iconographic theme from Christ's childhood inspired by the Infancy Gospels are preserved among the wall paintings from three churches located on

¹³ On her way to execution she was mocked by a lawyer who asked her to send him flowers and fruits from the heaven. In that moment the child Christ appeared with a basket with fruits and flowers. The wicker basket filled with both became her attribute in art representations. One of the famous representations of St. Dorothy and the infant Christ is the painting by Francesco di Giorgio in London National Gallery. Cf. L. Syson et al., *Renaissance Siena. Art for a City*, London 2007, 108.

¹⁴ *Jacobus de Voragine. The Golden Legend. Lives of the Saints*, ed. G. V. O'Neill, transl. W. Caxton, Cambridge 1914, 56–62.



Fig. 5. Virgin Mary with the child Jesus the nurturer, Monastery of Bogorodica Ljeviška in Prizren

the island of Crete. The first one is the church of St. Nicholas in Kyriakoselia, which is one of the most important churches on the island, dated to between 1230 and 1236.¹⁵ The third zone of the north wall of the transept depicts the Virgin Mary walking with the child Christ at her left side (Figs. 3 and 4).¹⁶ The child has a closed scroll in his right hand and a wicker basket in his left.¹⁷ They approach an old man on the left corner. The fresco has been identified as Jesus' schooling, although the child does not hold a wax tablet, as it is common for this kind of representations preserved in Western Europe. A very similar depiction to Kyriakoselia's is the representation of the finding of the child Jesus after his teaching in the temple (Luke 2, 48–49) from the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ochrid (Fig. 6).¹⁸ Joseph and Mary visited the temple

¹⁵ K. Gallas, K. Wessel, M. Borboudakis, *Byzantinisches Kreta*, München 1983, 248; M. Borboudakēs, *Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου στα Κυριακοσέλια Αποκορώνου*, in: *Πεπραγμένα Ι' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου (Χανιά, 1–8 Οκτωβρίου 2006)*, T. B2. *Βυζαντινή και Μεταβυζαντινή περίοδος (αρχαιολογία – ιστορία της τέχνης)*, Χανιά 2011, 273–316, πίν. 19–27.

¹⁶ Borboudakēs, *op. cit.*, 293, πίν. 25, εικ. 10.

¹⁷ I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Maria Vassilaki, who brought into my attention this fresco, and Nikoletta Pyrou, who very graciously facilitated my access to the monument.

¹⁸ On the south-western bay of the nave two scenes inspired by the story of Jesus among the teachers of the Law are preserved: Jesus' discussion with the teachers in the temple, and Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the temple. Cf. M. Marković, *Ikongrafski program najstarijeg*



Fig. 6. Finding of the child Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2, 48–49). Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, south-western bay of the nave. Photo: I. Djordjević

of Jerusalem every year at the Passover. When Jesus was twelve years old he went with his parents to Jerusalem and stayed there for some days after they left, discussing with Jewish teachers different topics from the Scriptures. The fresco depicts the moment when the Virgin Mary found him after his speech. Jesus holds an unfurled scroll in his hand with the text from Luke 2, 49: ΤΙ ΟΤΙ ΕΖΗΤΕΙΤΕ ΜΕ; ΟΥΚ ΗΔΕΙΤΕ ΟΤΙ ΕΝ Τ(ΟΙ)Σ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΤΡ(Ο)Σ ΜΟΥ ΔΕΙ ΕΙΝΑΙ ΜΕ (“Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business”).¹⁹ Although the representation from Kyriakoselia has some similarities with the one from Ochrid, it is more likely that we should see here the depiction of schooling rather than an event related to Christ's attendance at the temple. On the fresco from the Peribleptos, Christ seems older, looking like a twelve-year old boy as described in *Luke's Gospel* (Luke, 2, 42). On the contrary, on the representation from St. Nicholas in Kyriakoselia, he is much younger, probably about six years old. An additional argument in favour of the hypothesis that this fresco represents Jesus' schooling is the fact that the Virgin Mary leads the child Jesus to one teacher, and not to a group of teachers, as the event in the temple is usually depicted. Furthermore, on the north side of the transept of the church in Kyriakoselia the schooling of St. Nicholas is depicted (Fig. 7), just opposite of Jesus'

živopisa crkve Bogorodice Perivlepte u Ohridu. Popis fresaka i beleške o pojedinim programskim osobenostima, Zograf 35 (2011) 123, 126, sl. 7.

¹⁹ Images of the Virgin Mary leading the Christ child by the hand, as an integral part of the story of twelve-year-old Jesus among the teachers of the Law, were widespread in the Western Medieval art. Cf. Wentzel, *Mariae mit dem Jesusknaben*, 216–219, abb. 23–32.



Fig. 7. *St. Nicholas' schooling. Church of St. Nicholas at Kyriakoselia, Crete, the third zone of the south wall of the transept. Photo: G. Fousteris*

schooling. Hence, the possibility should not be excluded that the representation of St. Nicolas' schooling inspired the creator of the iconographic program to depict Jesus' schooling as its pendant.

Another similar depiction to the one from church of Kyriakoselia is preserved in the small cemetery church of St. Marina in the village of Meseleroi in the prefecture of Lasithi, in east Crete. It is a simple single-nave barrel-vaulted church of 4.00 × 7.00 meters. Despite the widespread loss of the painted layer in the upper parts of the pointed arch, the iconographic program of the church survives almost in its entirety in the better preserved part of the Sanctuary apse and the western wall.²⁰ Based on stylistic features, its frescoes can be dated to the first half of the fourteenth century and they are of excellent quality. On the fresco of the equestrian figure of St. George on the south wall two dates written in Roman numerals can be discerned; one reads 1373 and the other 1455.²¹ The Virgin Mary walking with young Jesus at her side is depicted in the lowest zone of the north wall (Figs. 8 and 9).²² In his right hand the child has a tablet with Greek letters on it. They are approaching the figure of St. John the Baptist,

who is depicted on the right. St. John has his right hand extended towards the Virgin and the child as if to greet them, while holding in his left hand a scroll with the following text:

ΟΥΤΟΣ Ε
ΣΤΙΝ ΠΕΡΙ
ΟΥ ΕΓΩ Η
ΠΟΝ ΗΜΗΝ
Ο ΟΠΙΣΘΕΝ
ΕΡΧΩΜΕ
ΝΟΣ Ο ΕΜ
ΠΡΟΣΘΕΝ
ΜΟΥ ΓΕΓΟΝΕΝ
ΟΤΙ ΗΣΧΗ
ΡΩΤΕΡΟΣ ΜΟΥ
ΕΣΤΗΝ

It is a combination of two passages from the New Testament, namely John 1, 30 and John 1, 15, respectively: “Οὗτός ἐστι περὶ οὗ ἐγὼ εἶπον· ὀπίσω μου ἔρχεται ἀνὴρ ὃς ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν” (“This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me’”), “Οὗτός ἦν ὃν εἶπον, ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν” (“He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me”).

²⁰ G. Gerola, *Τοπογραφικός κατάλογος των τοιχογραφημένων εκκλησιῶν της Κρήτης*, Hērakleïōn 1961, 102; S. N. Maderakēs, *Οι τοιχογραφίες της Αγίας Μαρίνας στους Μεσελέρους Ιεράπετρας*, in: *14ο Συμπόσιο Βυζαντινῆς καὶ Μεταβυζαντινῆς. Αρχαιολογίας καὶ τέχνης*, Athēna 1994, 25– 26.

²¹ Maderakēs, *op. cit.*, 26.

²² *Ibid.*, 25; Fundić, *Two Scenes of Christ's Childhood*, 313– 314.

The same scene has been found in the church of St. Antony in the settlement of Koutsouras, also located in Lasithi prefecture, twenty-two kilometers east of Ierapetra. Koutsouras used to be the administrative centre of the municipality of Makry Gialos and is the biggest village in the region. The small single-nave barrel-vaulted church of St. Antony (6, 30 × 2, 80) is adorned on all its internal surfaces with frescoes currently unknown in relevant literature. Unfortunately, they have not been well preserved. The frescoes are covered with a layer of soot.²³ All the identifiable scenes belong to the Christological cycle (Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Crucifixion, and Ascension). A rare depiction of Mary leading the infant Christ to St. John the Baptist can be discerned among the saints depicted in full body lowest zone of the north wall (Figs. 10 and 11). The scene is poorly preserved, but it is clear that it exhibits the same iconography as in St. Marina at Meseleroi, although it is significantly smaller. It is possible to recognize child Jesus, who has a nimbus that has a decorated cross and a tablet with the Greek alphabet in the right hand, and the Virgin behind him. The shape of tablet is the same as in the previous church of St. Marina, on which it is possible to read a few letters. In front of the Virgin is John the Baptist. Both the figure and the scroll are damaged significantly. However, some words can be recognized and are identical to the ones from Meseleroi:

ΟΥΤΟΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΠΕ
 ΠΙ

 ΕΡΧΩΜΕΝΟΣ

 ΓΕΓΟΝΕΝ

Koutsouras

ΟΥΤΟΣ Ε
 ΣΤΙΝ ΠΕΡΙ
 ΟΥ ΕΓΩ Η
 ΠΙΟΝ ΗΜΗΝ
 Ο ΟΠΙΣΘΕΝ
 ΕΡΧΩΜΕ
 ΝΟΣ Ο ΕΜ
 ΠΡΟΣΘΕΝ
 ΜΟΥ ΓΕΓΟΝΕΝ
 ΟΤΙ ΗΣΧΗ
 ΡΩΤΕΡΟΣ ΜΟΥ
 ΕΣΤΗΝ

Meseleroi

In terms of style, the fresco decoration in these two churches is unrelated. Both of them are of relatively high quality and can be dated to around 1340.

The inclusion of the figure of St. John, instead of the teacher Zacchaeus, in this rare representation, who appears in the role of the witness of the Messiah, is particularly noteworthy. These examples indicate that their creators were Byzantine painters who knew very well the fourteenth-century painting tendencies of the so-called Macedonian school, while certain details, e.g. the weapons of the warriors and the clothes, show the influence of Western art. As no evidence exists that can confirm the Byzantine origin of the Jesus' schooling theme, I tend to believe that the examples from Crete might have been influenced by works of Western art. If we keep in mind the

²³ The mural paintings of this church will be published in *Byzantine Monumental Paintings in Eastern Crete (Greece)*, which is under preparation. V. p. 133, n. * above.



Fig. 8. Virgin Mary leading the child Jesus to St. John the Baptist. Church of St. Marina, Meseleroi, Crete, the lowest zone of the north wall. Photo: G. Fousteris

historic fact that the island of Crete was under Venetian rule from 1212 to 1669 (the so-called Ducato di Candia), which certainly was reflected in the works of the Greek Orthodox artists in terms of Western influences, my claim seems even more plausible.²⁴ Previous studies have demonstrated that western influences on artistic production on Crete during the period in question are not limited to architecture and sculpture alone; they can be observed in wall paintings as well.²⁵ A number of iconographic themes indicate that western influence on iconography is wider than previously believed. Examples include representations of St. Romanos the Sklepodioktis, protector and healer of horses,²⁶ of St. Francis,²⁷ as well as a western type of depiction of Saints Bartholomew and Stephan.²⁸ Amongst the earliest preserved scenes depicting Jesus' schooling are those that accompany the text of the Latin Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew in the Parisian codex BNF lat. 2688 (fourth quarter of the thirteenth century).²⁹ Circulation of manuscripts and other works of art through the western monastic orders were ample on this Greek island.³⁰

²⁴ T. E. Gregory, A. Kazhdan, *Crete under Venetian rule*, in: *The Oxford dictionary of Byzantium*, I, ed. A. P. Kazhdan, New York 1991, 546.

²⁵ Cf. St. Papadakē Oekland, *Δυτικότερες τοιχογραφίες του 14ου αιώνα στην Κρήτη. Η άλλη όψη μιας αμφίδρομης σχέσης*, in: *Ευφρόσυνον. Αφιέρωμα στον Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη*, 2, Αθήνα 1999, 49–56; Ν. Ρυρρου, *Θεραπευτής και πεταλώτης: νέα στοιχεία για τον Ρώμανο τον Σκλεποδιώκτη από τη μνημειακή ζωγραφική της Κρήτης*, *Δελτίον ΧΑΕ* 34 (2013) 167–178. For western influences, v. also M. Vasilakē, *Καθημερινή ζωή και πραγματικότητα στη βενετοκρατούμενη Κρήτη: η μαρτυρία των τοιχογραφημένων εκκλησιών*, in: *Ενθύμησις Νικολάου Μ. Παναγιωτάκη*, eds. S. Kaklamanēs, A. Markopoulos et al., Ηράκλειο 2000, 57–80.

²⁶ Ρυρρου, *op. cit.*, 167–178.

²⁷ Χ. Ρανουτσακῆ, *Απεικονίσεις του Φραγκίσκου της Ασίζης στις εκκλησίες της Κρήτης*, Πραγματούμενα Ι' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου (Χανιά 1–8 Οκτωβρίου 2006), II/3, Χανιά 2011, 111–134.

²⁸ Ρυρρου, *op. cit.*, 174–175, with an extensive bibliography on the representations in question.

²⁹ Ε. Αντόπουλος, *Παιδαριολόγος: Η απεικόνιση της πρώιμης σοφίας*, in: *Οι χρόνοι της ιστορίας για μια ιστορία της παιδικής ηλικίας και της νεότητας*, ed. G. Kokkōnas, Αθήνα 1998, 225.

³⁰ Ρυρρου, *op. cit.*, 175.

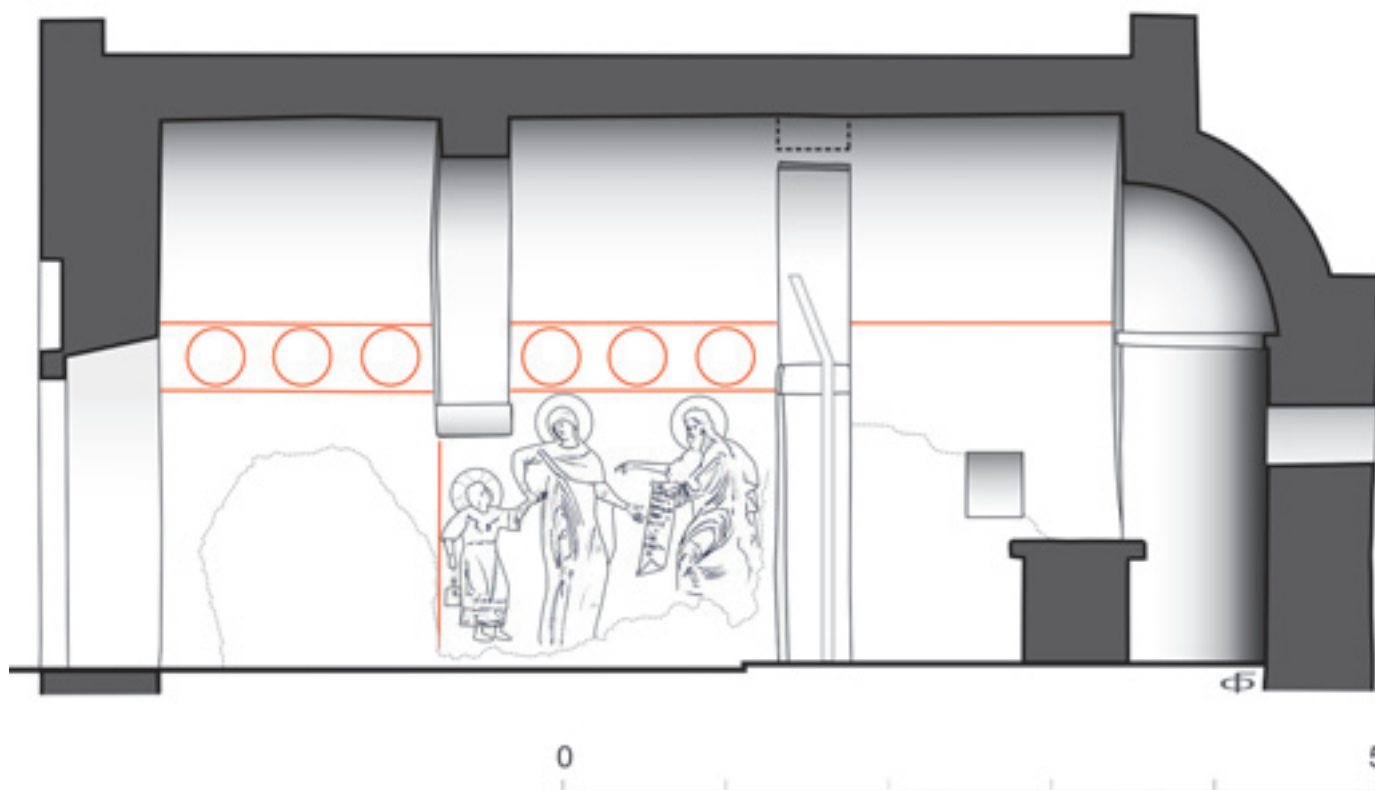


Fig. 9. Church of St. Marina, Meseleroi, Crete, the north wall (drawing G. Fousteris)



Fig. 10. Virgin Mary leading the child Jesus to St. John the Baptist. Church of St. Antony at Koutsouras, near Ierapetra, Crete, the lowest zone of the north wall



Fig. 11. Virgin Mary leading the child Jesus to St. John the Baptist. Church of St. Antony at Koutsouras (drawing G. Fousteris)

The representations of Jesus' schooling from the churches of St. Marina at Meseleroi and St. Antony at Koutsouras are not only very rare in Byzantine art, but this theme is also unique from the Western perspective. Furthermore, the scene is also characterized by an anach-

ronism; while according to the Gospels the age difference between Jesus and John the Baptist is six months only, in both Cretan representations Jesus is depicted as a six-year-old boy, and John as an adult in his thirties. Hence, I would argue that John's personality in these paintings is

imbued with a dual role, namely as a witness of Jesus' advent as well as his teacher.

In addition to the aforementioned, one more detail should be pointed out regarding the broader context of the iconographic program of St. Marina church, within which the representation of the child Jesus' schooling is situated. It is worth noting that the theme of the childhood is particularly highlighted in the mural paintings in this church. This is evident from the fact that exactly across from the representation of Jesus' schooling, another unique representation in Byzantine fresco decoration appears, namely that of St. Julitta mourning her child Cyricus (Fig. 12). Mandarakis misidentified this scene as the Virgin Mary mourning her child Jesus, who shows his forehead and probably wears a crown.³¹ In Byzantine fresco decoration, the three-year-old martyr St. Cyricus and his mother Julitta are usually depicted as individual standing figures or inside a medallion, as for instance in the church of the Virgin Peribletos in Ochrid,³² St. Nikita in Čučer,³³ the Virgin in the village of Kučevište near Skopje,³⁴ in the church of St. Cyricus and Julitta in Veroia,³⁵ etc. Along with the individual figures or busts, scenes of their martyrdom are preserved as well. For instance, in Santa Maria Antiqua a cycle of the martyrdom of these saints divided into eight scenes is depicted.³⁶ Moreover, in the church of St. Archangel Gabriel in the village of Lesnovo (ca. 1342) the saints are represented in pair, with the child Cyricus holding a cross and looking at his mother (Fig. 13).³⁷ In both those cases scholars have connected the presence of the martyrs in the fresco decoration, to the significance that the saints had for the founders of those churches.³⁸ The representation from St. Marina at Messeleroi has some similarities to the one depicted above the South entrance of the church of Archangel Gabriel at Lesnovo.³⁹ From the fourteenth century onwards, depictions of large crosses with cryptograms were put in this place. Representations of the cross conveyed an old idea of sacrifice and sacrificial blood, and had as a goal to increase the faith in its apotropaic power. In the context of this symbolism Smiljka Gabelić attempted to interpret the place and way in which Cyricus and Julitta are depicted in Lesnovo. According to his *Vita*, Cyricus was murdered by the governor of Tarsus Alexander.⁴⁰ For that reason she proposed that the founder might have ordered this representation as an allusion to the death of their child that was, perhaps,

buried there.⁴¹ This hypothesis could also be put forward regarding the choice of this scene in St. Marina church at Meseleroi. First of all, the emphasis in the scene is put on Julitta mourning her child. Next to her, the church patron, St. Marina, is depicted, as she will mediate to Christ for the deceased at his Second Advent. In the second zone the following scenes are represented: Presentation of Christ to the Temple and Nativity, and directly across from the Presentation and above from Jesus' schooling is the Stone and the Descent into Hades. The combination of these representations indicates the apotropaic symbolism of suffering and death with the resurrection as the ultimate goal. The inclusion of John the Baptist in the rare scene of Jesus' schooling should probably be seen in this context, since according to the Christian tradition he also was a witness of Jesus' descent into Hades as a prelude to his triumphant resurrection and is depicted along with the Virgin Mary in the representation of this event.

Little detail of Jesus's childhood is provided in the canonical Gospels. This gap was filled in by a number of second-century and later texts known as *Infancy Gospels*.⁴² None of those has been accepted into the biblical canon, but the sheer number of surviving manuscripts attests to their continued popularity. The oldest *Infancy Gospel* is *Evangelium Thomae Graecae* A and B,⁴³ and the others were based on its text, such as *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* (known also as *Liber de Infantia*),⁴⁴ *Evangelium infantiae arabicum*,⁴⁵ the Aramaic Gospel,⁴⁶ *Historia Iosephi*,⁴⁷ and *Liber de infantia Salvatoris* – Arundel 404.⁴⁸ All these apocrypha describe different events from Jesus's childhood between the ages of five and twelve. In chapters VI to VIII and XIV to XV in *Thomae Graecae* A a story of the child Jesus' schooling is preserved.⁴⁹ The same event is also described in *Thomae Graecae* B (chapters VI and VII) in which a detail that partly corresponds to the iconographic model examined in this paper is encountered: the child Jesus is led to the teacher Zacchaeus. Besides, a difference can also be observed in this account: Joseph, not the Virgin Mary, holds the child Jesus by his hand and leads him to the teacher:

And on the morrow he took him by the hand and led him to a certain teacher, Zacchaeus by

⁴¹ Gabelić, *op. cit.*, 120.

⁴² J. H. Charlesworth, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. A Guide to Publications*, Chicago–Metuchen 1987, 1–4; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Oxford 1993; I. D. Karavidopoulos, *Απόκρυφα Χριστιανικά Κείμενα Α΄. Απόκρυφα Ευαγγέλια*, Thessalonikē 1999.

⁴³ C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, Leipzig 1853, 150–155 (*Evangelium Thomae Graecae* B). For the *Gospel of Thomas* and its translations, cf. Karavidopoulos, *op. cit.*, 77, 78.

⁴⁴ Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, 53–105, chapters 26–34, 37–39, 41; O. Schade, *Lieber de Infantia Mariae et Christi Salvatoris*, Halle 1869; P. Peeters, *Évangiles apocryphes, II. L'évangile de l'enfance*, Paris 1914.

⁴⁵ Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, 71–202.

⁴⁶ Peeters, *op. cit.*, 69–286.

⁴⁷ Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, 115–133.

⁴⁸ It has been kept in the British library. Cf. M. R. James, *Latin Infancy Gospels*, Cambridge 1927.

⁴⁹ Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, 138–142. I am quoting passages from the *Evangelium Thomae Graecae* A and B because they were sources for all the other Infancy Gospels. The *Protoevangelium of James* is the only Infancy Gospel that does not mention Jesus' schooling.

³¹ Maderakēs, *op. cit.*, 26.

³² Marković, *Ikonografski program*, 131, 136.

³³ S. Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo. Istorija i slikarstvo*, Beograd 1998, 120.

³⁴ S. Gabelić, *Zabeleške iz Kučevišta*, Zograf 31 (2006–2007) 126; eadem, *Manastir Lesnovo*, 120.

³⁵ Th. Papazōtos, *H Bēpoia kai oi vnoi tēs*, Athēna 1994, 179.

³⁶ G. McN. Rushforth, *The Church of S. Maria Antiqua*, Papers of the British School at Rome 1/1 (1902) 45–51; N. Teteriatnikov, *For whom is Theodotus Praying? An Interpretation of the Program of the Private Chapel in S. Maria Antiqua*, Cahiers archéologiques 41 (1993) 41, 43.

³⁷ Gabelić, *Manastir Lesnovo*, 120.

³⁸ Teteriatnikov, *op. cit.*, 41, 44, 45; Gabelić, *op. cit.*, 120.

³⁹ The busts of St. Cyricus and Julitta are also represented above the south entrance of the church of the Virgin Peribletos in Ochrid as well. Cf. Marković, *op. cit.*, 131, 136.

⁴⁰ *Acta Sanctorum Junii III*, Antwerpen 1701 (repr. Bruxelles 1969), 24–28; D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Oxford 2011, 111–112.



Fig. 12. *St. Julitta mourning her child Cyricus. Church of St. Marina at Meseleroi, Crete, the lowest zone of the south wall*

name, and said unto him: Take this child, O master, and teach him letters.⁵⁰

In the other Infancy Gospels, like *Evangelium Infantiae Arabicum* (chapter XLVIII) or *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* (chapters XXX–XXXIX), in the chapters with the same story of the child Jesus' schooling, both Maria and Joseph are mentioned. As an example the next passage from the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* should be quoted:

And again teacher Zacchaeus, instructor of the law, said to Joseph and Mary: Give me the boy and I shall entrust him to teacher Levi to teach him words and educate him. Then Mary and Joseph agreed and took Jesus to school to be taught letters by the old man Levi.⁵¹

Along with the texts from the Infancy Gospels, literary parallels and possible source of inspiration for the representations of Jesus' schooling from the churches of St. Marina at Meseleroi and St. Antony at Koutsuras, are encountered in Theophany carols (κάλαντα in Greek);

⁵⁰ “Τῇ δὲ ἐπαύριον κρατήσας αὐτοῦ τῆς χειρὸς ἤγαγε πρὸς τινα καθηγητὴν, Ζακχαῖον ὀνόματι, καὶ φησὶ πρὸς αὐτόν: λάβε τὸ παιδίον τοῦτο, καθηγητά, καὶ δίδαξε γράμματα...”; cf. Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, VI, 152. The English translation has been taken from *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas Greek Text B*, in: M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1924.

⁵¹ “Iterum magister Zachyas, legis doctor, dixit ad Ioseph et Mariam: Date mihi puerum, et ego tradam illum magistro Levi qui doceat eum litteras et erudiat. Tunc Ioseph et Maria blandientes Jesum duxerunt in scholas ut doceretur litteras a sene Levi” (chapter XXXI).



Fig. 13. *St. Julitta and Cyricus. Church of St. Archangel Gabriel at Lesnovo, above the south entrance to the church.*

despite being used by modern Greeks they should be dated to the Byzantine period.⁵² Although their theme is Christ's baptism, a similarity can be seen in the fact that the Virgin Mary addresses John the Baptist as an adult inviting him to baptise her child

Σήμερα τα φῶτα κι ο φωτισμός
 Η χαρά μεγάλη και οι αγιασμοί.
 Ἦλθε η Κυρά μας η Παναγία
 σπάργανα μαζεύει και κρατεί
 και τον Αἰ-Γιάννη παρακαλεῖ.
 Ἄγιε μου Αἰ-Γιάννη και βαπτιστή
 ἔλα (ἢ πάρε) να βαπτίσεις Θεοῦ παιδί.

Today is the <the day of> light and illumination,
 Great joy and sanctification.
 Our Lady, the All-Holy <Virgin> has arrived!
 She collects and holds swaddling clothes,
 And asks Saint John:
 My dear Saint John the Baptist,
 Come, baptise this divine child.

However, this hypothesis requires more detailed folkloristic and philological analysis not only of the carols, but also of other sources related to the local tradition.⁵³

Wentzel, who studied more than seventy examples of such images from Western Christian art, where the *Virgin is walking with the child Jesus*, implies that this painted motif, which appears in the West around the year of 1220, is probably of Byzantine provenance.⁵⁴ The representations of the mother leading her child by the hand was known in Byzantine art, but not in the cycle of Christ's life. That motif is encountered in the aforementioned scenes from the life of St. Nicholas. The earliest preserved representation of St. Nicholas' schooling occurs on a Sinitic icon dated to ca. 1200.⁵⁵ In a couple of cases, Ni-

⁵² G. V. Sergē, *Να τα πούμε; Παραδοσιακά κάλαντα*, Athēna 1999.

⁵³ Wentzel in his attempt to interpret the examples from Western Europe relates this theme with some literary sources. Among them, he quotes a vision of a certain Dominican Reihgard in Engelthatl (Germany): “Our Lady came here holding her son by hand, who was ten years old”. It is very likely that this vision, as well as the vast majority of others attributed to pious monks and nuns from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, has to do with the effect of the exposed saint images and statues upon the fantasy of some religious people. Cf. Wentzel, *Das Jesuskind an der Hand Mariae*, 266–267.

⁵⁴ Cf. n. 3 above.

⁵⁵ N. Patterson Ševčenko, *The Vita Icon and the Painter as Hag-iographer*, DOP 53 (1999) 149–165; D. Mouriki, *Icons from the 12th to the 15th Century*, in: *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, ed. K. A. Manafis, Athens 1990, 115, fig. 51. For the more examples



Fig. 14. *St. Nicholas' schooling.*
Monastery of Bogorodica Ljeviška in Prizren

cholas lags behind his parents who grip him by the hand, e.g. on the icon from Sinai, in the church of St. George in the village of Staro Nagoričino, and so on. Starting with the thirteenth century, St. Nicholas carries a small wooden writing tablet (*πινακίδιον/δέλτος*), which is usually inscribed with letters of the Greek alphabet.

Some Biblical compositions from Byzantine art also make use of the same motif, like in the angel taking the young John the Baptist into the desert or the child Moses being presented to the Pharaoh in Octateuchs.⁵⁶

As a consequence of the aforementioned, it is possible to infer that images of the Virgin Mary leading the child Jesus by the hand, accompanied by different objects such as a writing tablet, a book or a wicker basket with flowers or fruits, are extremely rare in Byzantine art. As we have seen, the examples analysed above differ significantly in their iconography and meaning, and should probably be considered unique in both Byzantine and

of the Schooling of St. Nicholas in the Byzantine art cf. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 70–75.

⁵⁶ A. Katsiotis, *L'ange conduisant saint Jean-Baptiste dans le désert à l'église de la Dormition à Vladimir (1408)*, *Cahiers balkaniques* 11 (1987) 77–89.



Fig. 15. *Virgin Mary and the child Jesus, Icon from the monastery of Leimon, Lesbos, end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century (after G. Gounaris)*

Western artistic production. Unlike the representations of St. Nicholas's childhood, which fit well in the narration of his life, the preserved scenes that depict Jesus' schooling do not belong to a broader Christological cycle; for instance, they are not depicted as a continuation of the scenes showing his Nativity and Presentation to the Temple. The scenes of Jesus' schooling are represented isolated as, for example, in the Cripta della Candelora a Massafra in Apulia and in the church of St. Antony at Koutsouras. In some other cases, like in the church of St. Nicholas at Kyriakoselia and St. Marina at Meseleroi, they are situated next to other scenes related to Christ's resurrection. For this reason I argue here that these representations were imbued with more profound symbolism, which depended on a broader iconographic context of the specific monument or is related to a personal preference of the founder of a particular church. In conclusion, it is worth noting that such representations are extremely rare in post-Byzantine art, as well. It seems that the only similar example is the representation of the Virgin Mary and the child Jesus on an icon from the monastery of Leimon on the island of Lesbos, dated to the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century (Fig. 15).⁵⁷ The icon is named the *First steps of Jesus Christ*, but the figures depicted on it do not hold any object in their hands. The icon also represents a unique example of this theme in Byzantine and post-Byzantine Art.

⁵⁷ G. Gounarēs, *Τα „πρώτα βήματα“ του Χριστού. Φορητή εικόνα από τη Μονή Λειμώνος Λέσβου*, *Κληρονομία* 25 (1993) 9–13; idem, *Εικόνες της μονής Λειμώνος Λέσβου*, Thessalonikē 1999, 126–128, fig. 59.

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Сликање Христовог детињства. Неколико примера ретке иконографије надахнуте апокрифним јеванђељима детињства

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Добро је познато да канонска јеванђеља пружају мало података о Христовом детињству. Ту празнину попуњавају поједини апокрифни текстови настали у II веку и касније, познати као *јеванђеља о дејињствима Христовом*. Ниједан од тих текстова није уврштен у новозаветни канон, иако велики број сачуваних рукописа сведочи о њиховој популарности. То је нашло одраза и у хришћанској уметности, нарочито на Западу. У раду се разматра ретка и необична иконографска тема у византијској уметности, везана за Христово детињство – Христос дете с таблицом за писање, кога Богородица, држећи га за руку, води учитељу.

Представе Богородице која води дете Христа са атрибутима попут дрвене таблице за писање са алфаветом, писаљке, књиге, плетене корпе, цвета или штапа биле су веома распрострањене у западној уметности. Такве представе сачуване су на витражима, фрескама, у илуминираним рукописима, црквеном везу, као и на печатима који се могу датовати у XIII век. На основу Христових атрибута, а понекад и Богородичиних, истраживачи су ове сцене препознали као Христов одлазак у школу, Бекство у Египат или Повратак из Египта. Примери те необичне иконографије веома се ретко срећу у византијској уметности. Најпознатији су онај с мермерног саркофага из манастира Епископи код Волоса и фреска из цркве Светог Николе у месту Киријакосеља близу Хање на Криту (XIII век), на којима дете Христос носи таблицу за писање, док Богородица корача према учитељу. Сличан пример јесте и фреска у крипти Канделоре у Масафри, у Апулији, на којој је Христос приказан с плетеном корпом у руци, док корача с Богородицом, с тим што је лик учитеља изостављен. Тим познатим представама могу се додати још два слична примера са иконографијом јединственом не само у византијској већ и у западној уметности. Реч је о представама у црквама Свете Марине у Меселерима и Светог Антонија у Куцурасу, обема на источном делу Крита. На њима Христос држи у руци таблицу са грчким ал-

фаветом, а Богородица га не води ка учитељу, већ ка Јовану Претечи. Приказивање Јована Крститеља, као онога који је сведочио о Христу, уместо учитеља Захеја нарочито је вредно пажње. Претеча у левој руци држи свитак с текстом из Јовановог јеванђеља (1,30 и 1,15). Сликаство у обе наведене цркве дело је добрих мајстора, а настало је око 1300. године.

Ова необична и ретка иконографска представа догађаја из Христовог детињства могла је бити надахнута западном уметношћу. Новије студије показале су да западни уметнички утицаји на Криту, који се појављују од почетка XIII века, нису били сведени само на архитектуру и скулптуру већ се испољавају и у сликарству. Известан број нових тема у критском зидном сликарству, попут сложених представа са светим Романом Склеподиоктисом, заштитником и исцелитељем коња, затим портрета светог Фрање из Асизија, као и западни тип сликања светих Вартоломеја и Стефана, потврђују ту претпоставку. Критски сликари лако су могли да дођу до сазнања о новим представама пре свега посредством илуминираних рукописа који су кружили највећим грчким острвом захваљујући различитим монашким редовима. Не сме се заборавити ни чињеница да је Крит од 1212. до 1669. године био под венецијанском влашћу. Најстарији сачувани пример представе Христовог одласка у школу налази се у латинском рукопису Псеудо-Матејевог јеванђеља који се чува у Националној библиотеци у Паризу (*BNF lat. 2688*, последња четвртина XIII века).

Догађаји из Христовог детињства насликани у критским споменицима посебно су занимљиви због своје јединствене иконографије, то јест због тога што је на месту учитеља приказан Јован Претеча. Избор сцене несумњиво треба довести у везу са ширим контекстом иконографског програма храма Свете Марине, у којем су наглашене теме повезане с детињством. Поред других тема из Христовог детињства, наспрам сцене Христовог одласка у школу насликана је још

једна изузетна представа – Света Јулита оплакује сина Кирика. У старијим студијама та фреска погрешно је идентификована као Богородица која плаче за дететом Христом. Сликање мученика Кирика и Јулите у фреско-ансамблима често је довођено у везу са значајем који су ти свети имали за ктиторе храма, што би се могло односити и на ктиторе Свете Марине у Меселерију. Нагласак је стављен на лик свете Јулите која оплакује сина. Уз њу је насликана света Марина, патрон храма, будући да ће она посредовати за умрле приликом Другог Христовог доласка. У другој зони приказани су Сретење и Рођење Христово, а наспрам Сретења и изнад Христовог одласка у школу насликани су Мирносице на гробу Христовом и Силазак у ад. Комбинација тих представа указује на апотропејски симболизам страдања и смрти, с васкрсењем као крајњим циљем. Сликање Јована Крститеља у ре-

тој сцени из Христовог детињства могло би се сагледати у овом контексту, будући да је, према хришћанској традицији, Јован био сведок Христовог силаска у ад, што је представљало увод у његово тријумфално васкрсење, а у приказу тог догађаја Јован Претеча насликан је поред Богородице.

Поред несумњивог утицаја апокрифних јеванђеља детињства и западних илуминираних рукописа на настанак представе о којој је реч, не треба искључити ни могуће утицаје византијског фолклора, попут грчких богојављенских песама (*καλαντα*), у којима Богородица позива Јована да крсти Богомладенца. Ипак, да би се потврдила та претпоставка, неопходна је много дубља фолклористичка и филолошка анализа, која надилази оквире ове студије.