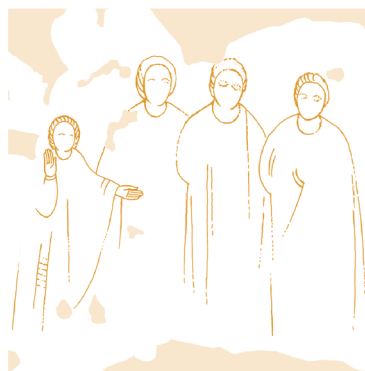


The oldest scene of the Entrance of the Virgin Mary into the Temple? A new identification of wall paintings from the Faras Cathedral



Abstract: This paper offers a new identification of two paintings executed on the first layer of plaster in the northern transversal aisle of the Faras Cathedral, which, due to their poor state of preservation at the time of discovery, were impossible to remove from the walls. Interpretations to date have linked the first painting with the Apostles or Christ teaching in the Temple and the second one with the Resurrection cycle or treated both scenes as unidentified. I propose, instead, that both paintings belonged to the cycle of the Childhood of the Virgin and showed her Entrance into the Temple and being fed by an angel. This identification, based on a comparison of these scenes with Cappadocian and Byzantine masterpieces, is further reinforced by the placement of the paintings within the iconographic program of the Faras Cathedral.

Keywords: Mother of God, iconography, apocrypha, Nubia, St. Anne, *Menologion of Basil II*, Byzantium, Christian Egypt

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this paper to the memory of Stefan Jakobielski, whose work and extensive knowledge of the excavations in Faras inspired me to write it. Special thanks to Catherine Jolivet-Lévy for her comments on the paintings from Cappadocia. I would also like to express my gratitude to Małgorzata Smorąg-Różycka for some bibliographical suggestions and Anna Kostrzyńska-Miłosz as well as Alin Suciu for explanations regarding aspects of their research fields. Last but not least, a particular acknowledgment is due to Marta Momot for her beautiful drawings.

INTRODUCTION

A comprehensive catalogue of the wall paintings from the Faras Cathedral, published several years ago by Stefan Jakobielski, Magdalena Łaptaś, Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, Bożena Mierzejewska, and Bożena Rostkowska (Jakobielski et al. 2017), presents all the paintings from the Faras Cathedral uncovered during the so-called Nubian Campaign — a rescue operation conducted between 1959 and 1969 under the auspices of UNESCO. The campaign aimed to record and protect the monuments located in the area to be flooded by the surging waters of the Nile following the construction of the High Aswan Dam. Among the most prominent discoveries of the Polish archaeological mission, headed by Kazimierz Michałowski, was the Faras Cathedral with a well-preserved set of paintings. The conservation works were led first by Stanisław Jasiewicz and then by Józef Gazy assisted by Marta Kubiak and Kamila Kołodziejczyk. Of over 150 paintings discovered, 124 were successfully removed from the walls (Michałowski 1974: 66). The explorers were faced with the daunting task of preserving and removing as many murals as possible during four excavation seasons (1961–1964). The paintings that were preserved in very poor condition and considered to be damaged beyond reconstruction were left on the walls. Due to the salvage character of the Nubian Campaign, the governments of Egypt and Sudan exceptionally allowed the partitioning of the recovered monuments: half of them would be allotted

to the country of origin of the mission operating in Egypt or Sudan. Accordingly, half of the wall paintings found their way to the National Museum in Khartoum — among them two monumental paintings: the Nativity and the Three Holy Youths in a Fiery Furnace — and the remaining pieces were transported to Poland, where the National Museum in Warsaw created the Faras Gallery (Mierzejewska 2014: 13).

In 1974, a catalogue of paintings from Faras, comprising items from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, was published in Polish, English, French, and German (Michałowski 1974). However, work on the complete catalogue was launched much later and took more than twenty-five years (Jakobielski et al. 2017). This new catalogue included the collections from Khartoum and Warsaw, as well as the unpreserved paintings, thus providing a foundation for further research. Already during the work on the catalogue, some of the lost scenes were reinterpreted on the basis of digitally processed images (Łaptaś and Jakobielski 2001). Not all of them, however, have been identified so far, understandably so given their extremely poor state of preservation.

This paper offers a new identification of two paintings from the northern transversal aisle¹ of the Faras Cathedral. Recorded as Nos 100 and 237, both were painted on the first layer of plaster. As shall be argued below, the two scenes seem to constitute episodes of one cycle.

1 Jakobielski and other scholars use the term “vestibule” because the entrance to the Cathedral was located in the northern wall of this part of the building (Jakobielski 2016: 84; Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132). However, I follow Włodzimierz Godlewski (2006: 168, Fig. 54), who called it the “northern, transversal aisle of the church”.

STATE OF RESEARCH

The painting on the northern wall of the northern transversal aisle of the church (No. 100 [Figs 1, 2]) was first mentioned in an article published by Martens, who, in the early 1970s, described it as “*Fragment de personnages (Apôtre?)*” (Martens 1972: 210) and referred to the image on the western wall as “*Personnages*” (Martens 1972: 209). Subsequently, in the 1974 catalogue, Michałowski (1974: 60) concurred that the painting on the northern wall (No. 100) depicted an apostle. In his paper of 1982, Jakobielski (1982: 166) referred to this image as “*Fragments de personnages (Christ avec Apôtres)*” and included it in the “*Style de Transition (C)*”.

Painting No. a37 [Figs 3, 4], in turn, was described by Jakobielski (1982: 147) as “*Scène narrative non identifiée (?)*, *Style Violet (A)*”. However, Godlewski, in his article of 1995, associated painting No. a37 with the Passion cycle:

A tiny fragment of another narrative composition was found on the wall opposite the Nativity. It depicted the stone structure with an entrance (the tomb?) approached by a few human figures. Although its condition upon the moment of discovery precluded its identification, the scene may safely be considered as part of the Passion



Fig. 1. Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple (?). The Faras Cathedral. Northern wall by the northern entrance; photo *in situ* (PCMA UW)

cycle, which was depicted so magnificently in the Petros Cathedral south apse, next to the enthroned Christ. (Godlewski 1995: 238)

Subsequently, in his book on the architecture of the Faras Cathedral, Godlewski discussed the location of the two paintings within the broader context of the whole building (Godlewski 2006: Fig. 54: 12, Fig. 55: 11).

The fullest description and interpretation of both murals was provided by Jakobielski in the complete catalogue of paintings from the Faras Cathedral (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132–134).² As I intend to refer to the description of painting No. 100 further in my paper, I quote it here *in extenso* [see Figs 1, 2]:



Fig. 2. Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple (?). The Faras Cathedral. Northern wall by the northern entrance (PCMA UW | drawing W. Chmiel, modified by M. Momot)

Four figures are represented (there may have been more), three of these standing frontally, the last one on the left turned slightly to the left. The figure is also the shortest; the three others are of similar height. All are clad in long white robes with indiscernible decoration rendered in purple, gray and red. Contour lines are in pale purple. The smallest figure raises its right arm, grasping most probably a *rotulus* in his hand. The left arm, swathed in a voluminous robe, is stretched out toward the other figures. (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132)

Therein, in his commentary following the description of the painting, Jakobielski argues as follows:

1. The scene is not a representation of the Apostles.
2. It shows twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple based on a fragment of the Gospel according to Luke.
3. The scene, placed on the first plaster layer, may date back to “the 8th or the 9th century”, as supported by the use of colors such as red, which, according to Jakobielski, was not used in paintings from the early 8th century.
4. All the paintings from the so-called “vestibule” (i.e. both scenes discussed in this article) and the Nativity scene placed on the eastern wall of the vestibule “could have been painted at one go” (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132).

² However, some details of these two paintings had already been included in Jakobielski’s book published a year earlier in Polish (Jakobielski 2016: 84). Scene No. 100 was identified as “Twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple” (*Dwunastoletni Jezus w świątyni*) and scene No. 137 as “Scene by the Tomb after the Resurrection” (*Scena u Grobu po Zmartwychwstaniu*).

Jakobielski also offers a fuller description of painting No. 237 [see *Figs 3, 4*]:

The figure shown in the extant part of the mural appears against the background of a structure or else it is seated on a throne. The face is depicted frontally. The entire figure is turned somewhat to the right with both arms stretched out to the right. Facial features are indistinct. Hair, or a narrow diadem, is depicted above

the forehead. The figure wears a long robe tied at the waist. It has short, wide sleeves and a rounded neckline. The upper part of the purported throne (its top edge is missing) is decorated with an element reminiscent of loose knotwork in a pattern difficult to recognize. On the right side there are traces of a vertical beam(?), possibly studded with jewels, the beam(?) on the left being



Fig. 3. The Virgin Fed by an Angel (?). The Faras Cathedral. Western wall of the northern, transverse wall; photo *in situ* (PCMA UW)

decorated with a diaper pattern featuring circular elements at the line intersections [Fig. 8:A54]. Two unidentified, round-topped elements are positioned parallel to one another at the right side of the composition. Lattice-motif decoration appears on the upper part of the furthestmost, lower object [Fig. 8:A32], its lower half being divided into segments and decorated with a series of short, horizontal lines (as if imitating a wall) [Fig. 8:A56]. The object nearer the throne(?) features a widely spaced large dots. Traces of vertical lines visible on the left side of the painting may be the remains of the robes of one of the larger standing figures. Vestiges of purple paint to the right of this scene indicate that the composition was continued to the right. (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 133)

In his commentary to the painting, Jakobielski argues as follows:



Fig. 4. The Virgin Fed by an Angel (?). The Faras Cathedral. Western wall of the northern, transverse wall (PCMA UW | drawing W. Chmiel, modified by M. Momot)

1. The depicted figure was part of a larger composition probably based on a biblical text.
2. The suggestion that the figure was sitting on a throne is based on the decoration of vertical elements on its sides.
3. The distinctive decorative motif in the background could represent a fabric.
4. Godlewski's interpretation of the figure as sitting at an open tomb was a "highly probable idea".
5. The figure might be an angel, as indicated by the upper parts of wings on either side.

As a counterargument, he indicated:

The strange position of the arms of the figure brings to mind the scene of Pilate washing his hands (Mt. 27:24), but the scene as such fails to have any parallels in Nubian art. The actual hands are similarly depicted in a representation at Abdalla-n Irqi (van Moorsel, Jacquet, and Schneider 1975: 81–83, Inv. No. 6/7, Pl. 70), which shows an archangel protecting a Nubian whose hands are held in the same manner. The mural derives from the same school of painting. While it has no bearing on the identification of our scene, it could explain the gesture as that of entrusting oneself to someone's care. (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 134)

Summarizing the state of research presented so far, both paintings from the Faras Cathedral have been linked to the Apostles, Christ, possibly an angel, and even Pilate. The figures depicted in the paintings were, therefore, identified as men. However, it seems that one im-

portant detail, overlooked so far, makes it possible to identify these figures as women, as I will try to demonstrate in

the following part of my argument. To support my interpretation, I will start with a new description.

DESCRIPTION

My description of the two wall paintings was not, for obvious reasons, prepared from autopsy *in situ* — I mainly based it on black-and-white photographs taken after the discovery, and, to some extent, on drawings by Wojciech Chmiel, who used the same photos.

The surviving fragments of scene No. 100 [see *Figs 1, 2*] measured 48 cm (smaller figure) and 58 cm (taller figure) in height (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132). The state of preservation of the paintings was very poor. Already at the time of their discovery, the paint layer was so weathered that the outlines of two figures were only faintly visible, while the silhouettes of another two were even more vague.

Both the smaller figure and the larger one, to the left of the former, are depicted standing and turned three-quarters to their left.³ The outlines of their white oval faces are visible. The smaller figure extends her left hand forward, while in her right hand she appears to be holding an object suspended on three chains radially extending downward (or was it an ornament on a robe?). Both figures are clad in long, ankle-length robes and their hair is covered with *maphoria*. In all probability, two more figures can be distinguished in front of them, to the left, though it is difficult to determine whether they are portrayed frontally (as shown in Chmiel's

drawing) or slightly turned towards the two figures described above. Jakobielski shared an opinion that one of them may have been bearded (personal communication, 25 November 2023). In the catalogue of paintings from Faras, the color of the robes was specified as white (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132); nevertheless, looking at the black-and-white photograph, it is apparent that they were darker than the figures' white faces and hands.

Composition No. 437 [see *Figs 3, 4*], painted on the western wall of the northern transversal aisle of the Cathedral — or at least its surviving fragments — measured 75 cm in height and 85 cm in width (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 133). The fragment preserved at the time of discovery shows a figure positioned on a massive seat (throne?). Her oval countenance is shown frontally, while the body is turned slightly to the left, with both hands reaching out in that direction. The face has a pale-white complexion, and the hair is hidden under a bonnet, on which a crown studded with precious stones and perhaps pearls is placed above the forehead. The figure is fairly petite, especially in contrast to the massive throne on which she is seated. The head seems relatively big in comparison with the figure. She is dressed in a long tunic with a semi-circular neckline and wide purple sleeves, three-quarters of the length of the arms

3 As in heraldry, I use reversed directions: the scenes are described from the perspective of the figures depicted rather than the viewer.

(Jakobielski et al. 2017: 133). The throne is a massive structure, perhaps of stone (marble), with armrests supported by solid vertical posts studded with precious stones, carved in a lattice motif, and with a high backrest emerging behind the head of the

seated figure. Very indistinctly preserved fragments of the painting on the left and right indicate that the composition was originally much more elaborate, and one more person may have been represented on the left side of the seated figure.

THESIS

All figures discernible in the scenes Nos 100 and a37 have their heads veiled. While in scene No. 100 not all the figures are clearly visible, at least two have prominent head coverings: the larger figure and the smaller one standing next to her. In scene No. a37, the figure seated on the throne also has the hair covered (hidden beneath a bonnet surmounted with an open crown).

According to the Scripture, women were supposed to wear head coverings, especially while praying:

Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces

his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head — it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved, For if a woman will not veil herself then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. (1 Cor 11:4–6)⁴

In the paintings from the Faras Cathedral, female figures, including saints, have their heads covered, as exemplified by the images of the Virgin Mary, as well as the early 8th-century depiction of St. Anne now housed in the National Museum in Warsaw. It is noteworthy that in this early representation St. Anne lacks a halo [Fig. 5].

In composition No. 100, we have a larger and a smaller female figure standing side by side. The smaller figure extends her hand to her left and is headed in the same direction. As shall be argued below, scene No. 100 shows the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple (Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple),⁵ while scene No. a37 depicts Mary Fed by an Angel.



Fig. 5. St. Anne. The Faras Cathedral, northern aisle, northern wall; photo *in situ* (IKŚiO PAN | photo M. Niepokólczycki)

4 The English version quoted after Coogan 2010: 2014–2015.

5 Both names of this feast are used, e.g., Brubaker 2019: 129.

RESEARCH METHOD

The two abovementioned episodes from the cycle of the Childhood of Mary lack known parallels among contemporaneous Nubian and Coptic paintings. Therefore, in my analysis I intend to refer to analogies in Byzantine art. The latter is justified by the fact that, after the conversion of the Nubian kingdoms by missions dispatched from Constantinople in the 6th century, Nubia found itself in the sphere of Byzantine influence (Łaptaś 2021: 234, with further references). Notably, Jakobielski dated the Faras murals Nos 100 and 237 to the late 8th or early 9th century (Jakobielski et al. 2017: 132–133), while the oldest scenes of the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple known to date, found in Cappadocian churches (e.g. Kızıl Çukur), are not earlier than the 9th century (Weyl Carr 1991b: 2175; Jolivet-Lévy and Lemaigre Demesnil 2015: 151).⁶ Therefore, for comparison with the paintings from the Faras Cathedral I have selected three parallels dated to the 9th and 10th or early 11th centuries.⁷

The selected examples comprise scenes from the cycle of the Childhood of Mary from the Church of Kızıl Çukur in Cappadocia, a representation on an ivory plaque from Constantinople, and a miniature from the *Menologion of Basil II*. Below, I compare these masterpieces to the Faras paintings pointing to similarities and differences in their redactions. Next, I try to consider whether the interpretations proposed by other scholars are applicable to the Faras paintings. Finally, I interpret the context of these paintings in the northern transversal aisle of the Faras Cathedral and consider their reference to the Nativity scene painted on the eastern wall of the transept.

Before proceeding with the discussion of iconography, however, I refer to the literary sources on which these images could have been based. To date, scholars interpreting the two Faras paintings have built their interpretations upon passages from the New Testament, while many scenes from the lives of saints, especially the Virgin Mary, in fact refer to apocryphal texts.

WRITTEN SOURCES

Information about the life of the Virgin Mary in the canonical Gospels is rather scarce. This gap is filled by apocryphal texts, especially the Greek *Protevangelium of James*, assumed to have been written in the second half of the 2nd or the early

3rd century (Starowieyski 2003: 266) and subsequently translated into a number of languages and paraphrased (Różycka-Bryzek 2006: 36). In it, the description of the entrance of the Virgin Mary into the Temple reads as follows:

6 The cycles of the childhood of the Virgin were also painted in Cappadocian churches Göreme 2B (Jolivet-Lévy and Lemaigre Demesnil 2015: 52) and Göreme 9 (Chapel of *Theotokos*, St. John the Baptist and St. George), although they are dated to the 10th century; see Jolivet-Lévy and Lemaigre Demesnil 2015: 24–25. I am very grateful to Catherine Jolivet-Lévy for pointing these two examples out to me.

7 For more examples see the seminal book by Lafontaine-Dosogne 1964–1965/I: 136–166.

And the Child became three years old, and Joachim said: Call for the daughters of the Hebrews that are undefiled, and let them take every one a lamp, and let them be burning (...). And they did so until they were gone up into the temple of the Lord. And the priest received her [Mary]⁸ and kissed her and blessed her. (*Protevangelium* 7:2, English translation after James 1926: 41).

Further on, the same text names those who took care of Mary in the Temple and who offered her food: “she received food from the hand of the angel” (*Protevangelium* 8:1, English translation after James 1926: 42).

The Latin version of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* offers one more detail later used in the iconography of the scene of the Entrance of the Virgin Mary into

the Temple, i.e. steps. Mary (...) “is taken to the temple and walks up fifteen steps” (*Pseudo-Matthew*, English translation after James 1926: 73).

Importantly, lives, several homilies, and panegyrics recounting Mary’s birth and childhood have been preserved in Coptic literature (James 1926: 87). A fragment of a Sahidic homily attributed to Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem (Orlandi 2008: 19, MONB.DL)⁹ features a theme from the lives of Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anne. An angel appears before the priest in the Temple and instructs him to inform Anne and Joachim that Mary will be dedicated to the Temple for three years (Robinson 1896: 11). The Presentation/Entrance of the Virgin in(to) the Temple is, moreover, part of a Coptic narrative series on the life of Mary (cf. Orlandi 2008: 91). The purpose of introducing

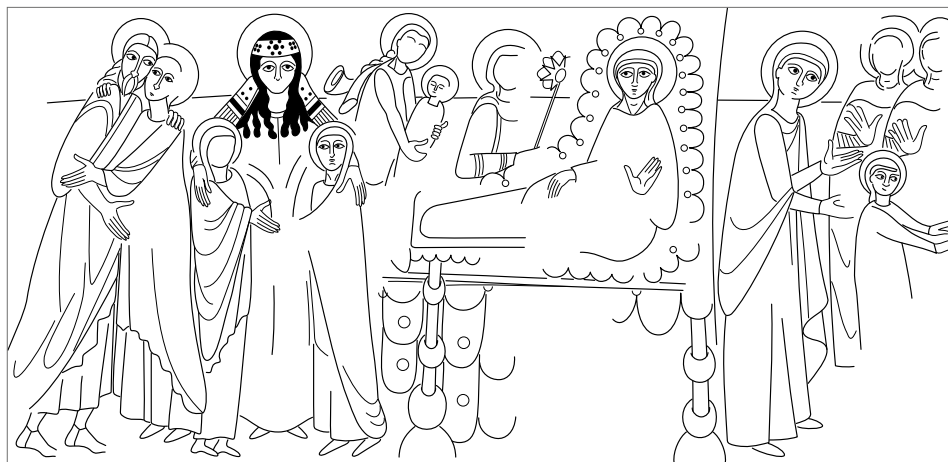


Fig. 6. The Nativity of the Virgin. Church of Joachim and Anne in Kızıl Çukur. Vault (Drawing M. Momot after Thierry 2002)

8 Comment by the author of this paper.

9 The fragments published by Robinson come from the fragmentary White Monastery Codex labeled as MONB.D (according to the nomenclature of the project “Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari” directed by Tito Orlandi). I am grateful to Alin Suciu for his comments to this codex.

motifs of angelic epiphanies into the narratives concerning Mary's conception and childhood was to highlight the miracles that accompanied her birth and life. These supernatural phenomena were to herald Mary's future immaculate motherhood (Różycka-Bryzek 2006: 36).

At the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, the Virgin Mary was acclaimed *Theotokos* (God-bearer). Subsequently, from the 7th century, her feasts, including the Nativity,

the Presentation in the Temple, and the Annunciation were introduced (Różycka-Bryzek 2006: 36). Although, as mentioned above, the oldest cycles of paintings related to the childhood of Mary from Cappadocia (Kızıl Çukur) are dated to no earlier than the 9th century, it is assumed that episodes based on the *Protevangelium of James* and *Pseudo-Matthew* were represented before iconoclasm — as early as the 5th century (Jensen 2016).¹⁰

ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES

THE CYCLE OF THE VIRGIN'S CHILDHOOD IN KIZIL ÇUKUR

The scene of the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple was included in the cycle presenting her childhood in the Church of Joachim and Anne in Kızıl Çukur (Cappadocia), which is most probably dated to the 9th century (Weyl Carr 1991b: 2175; Jolivet-Lévy

and Lemaigre Demesnil 2015: 151).¹¹ The cycle, depicted in the northern chapel of the church, includes episodes from the life of Joachim and Anne before Mary was born, then the scene of the Birth of Mary, conveyed through the image of Anne supported by two women, and subsequently the Presentation of Mary to Anne [Fig. 6]. In the latter



Fig. 7. The first steps of the Virgin and her Entrance into the Temple. Church of Joachim and Anne in Kızıl Çukur. Western vault (Drawing M. Momot after Thierry 2002)

10 Cf. also Lafontaine-Dosogne 1964–1965/I: 35–37.

11 Another cycle of the Childhood of the Virgin was painted by the same workshop in Uçhisar (Derebağ). Cf. Jolivet-Lévy and Lemaigre Demesnil 2015: 122–124.

scene, Mary's mother is depicted in a semi-recumbent position, lying on a massive bed with a high backrest and tall legs. Her right hand rests on her hip, her open left hand is directed towards the viewer, as is her face, while her body is turned slightly towards two women approaching her from the right. The first of them, closer to Anne, holds a *rhypidion* placed on a long pole held in her left hand. The second woman, standing next to her, identified with the name MEA, holds Mary wrapped in linen bands and presents her to Anne. To the right of the woman's head is the inscription ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΣ, which refers to Mary (Thierry 2002: 224, Fig. 66).

The next scene, painted on the western wall, is Mary's First Steps [Fig. 7]. Anne (her figure only fragmentarily preserved) faces left and walks behind Mary, extending both arms towards her (Thierry 2002: Fig. 67). Mary, who is shorter than Anne, walks to the left, also extending both arms in front of her. Both mother and daughter are clad in long robes, their hair covered with *maphoria*. In front of them, to the left,

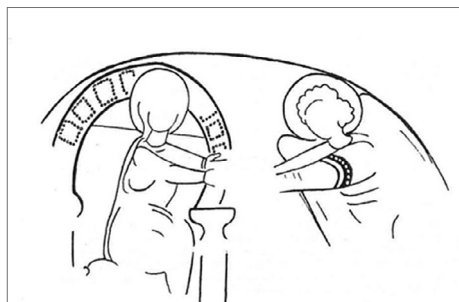


Fig. 8. The Virgin Fed by an Angel. Church of Joachim and Anne in Kızıl Çukur. Western niche of the northern wall (Drawing M. Momot after Thierry 2002)

there are two other frontally depicted women gesturing towards the viewer with their open palms. This scene flows seamlessly into the next one, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, set against the backdrop of the building's arcades. In it, Joachim is shown stretching his arms in front of him like Anne and Mary in the previous scene. Little Mary, whose figure is not completely preserved, also reaches forward. Both Joachim and Mary are shown walking to the left where Zechariah stands facing them. Despite damage to the upper part of his face, the priest's shoulder-length hair and beard are clearly visible. Zechariah leans towards Mary, extending his arms to her.

The next scene of this cycle shows Mary seated on a throne, facing right towards Zechariah, who is standing before her. Both the priest and Mary extend their arms towards one another. Zechariah raises his hands upwards, while Mary lowers hers towards the priest. The image of the throne seat is damaged to the point that only the three steps leading up to it are visible.

The scene of Mary Fed by an Angel is placed in a niche west of the northern wall (Thierry 2002: Fig. 68). In it, Mary is depicted seated on a throne with a semi-circular backrest studded with precious stones; she faces left and reaches towards the angel approaching with his arms extended in her direction. Mary's head is covered with a *maphorion*, while the angel is bare-headed, the curly hair fastened with a *taenia* [Fig. 8]. The cycle ends with the scene of the Council of the Priests on the Marriage of the Virgin (Thierry 2002: 227).

IVORY PLAQUE FROM CONSTANTINOPLE

The second parallel is an ivory plaque, currently housed in the Museum für Byzantinische Kunst at the Bode-Museum Berlin (Inv. No. 2551, Effenberger 2008: 59).¹² The tiny plaque, 15 cm high and 13.2 cm wide, is ascribed to the Constantinopolitan milieu and dated to the 10th century (Goldschmidt and Weitzmann 1934: 28). It features two episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary: the Presentation in the Temple and Mary Fed by an Angel [Fig. 9]. The former one, occupying the bottom of the composition, depicts Mary turned towards her left, standing in front of Zechariah. She looks older and taller than a three-year-old, appearing rather to be four or five years of age. She extends her hands, covered by the edge of the cloth, towards the priest, and, at the same time, lifting her head slightly upwards, gazes at his face. Mary's head, covered with a *maphorion*, is surrounded by a halo. The priest, a slender, tall man with a long beard and hair, stands against the background of the ciborium. His head is crowned with a tiara and surrounded by a halo. A group of children follow Mary into the Temple, their faces are shown isocephally in two rows. Those depicted in the second row hold candles in their hands. Joachim and Anne, with their heads surrounded by halos, stand behind this procession, facing each other and engaged in conversation.

The second episode of this scene is shown above Zechariah's head. Mary is seated on the arch under the dome of the

ciborium, leaning upwards and reaching out towards the unpreserved silhouette of an angel that originally emerged from the top of the plaque. The figure of the angel has not survived, and only a fragment of the wings is visible. Mary's head is surrounded by a halo. Mary is facing to her right, looking out and extending both arms upwards. The presence of the angel in this scene, as well as Mary's position and the gesture of her outstretched arms, indicate that this is indeed a representation of her being fed by an angel in the Temple. A Greek inscription carved on Mary's right side reads: "The Holy of the Holies" (Effenberger 2008: 59).

MINIATURE FROM THE *MENOLOGION OF BASIL II*

The third parallel comes from the *Menologion of Basil II* (976–1025), a work currently in the Vatican Library (Vat. Gr. 1613), dated to after 979, i.e. to the late 10th or early 11th century (Patterson Ševčenko 1991: 1341–1342). The *Menologion* is a liturgical manuscript, which in fact includes the text of the *Synaxarion of Constantinople* (Patterson Ševčenko 1991: 1341). In the *Menologion of Basil II*, the feast of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, recorded as celebrated on 21 November, is accompanied by an illustration (Vat. Gr. 1613, fol. 198) [Fig. 10].¹³ In the central part of the horizontal composition, with a wall as a backdrop and the golden sky above, Mary is shown heading towards Zechariah (*Il menologio...* 1907/I: 53–54; II: 198). The priest stands against

12 Formerly in the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum Berlin. Cf. Goldschmidt and Weitzmann 1934: Cat. No. 11, Pl. IV.

13 A color photo of this miniature is available online at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Presentation_of_Virgin_Mary_\(Menologion_of_Basil_II\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Presentation_of_Virgin_Mary_(Menologion_of_Basil_II).jpg).

the background of the ciborium and the altar. He leans towards Mary, extending both arms towards her.

Zechariah is shown as an elderly man with a gray frayed beard and tousled hair. Mary is followed by Joachim and Anne, who are, in turn, followed by seven girls

holding torches. Mary, who is approximately half her parents' height, raises her right hand towards Zechariah and covers her left palm with the hem of her *maphorion*. The purple *maphorion* is draped over her shoulders and head, which is surrounded by a halo. She wears a long



Fig. 9. Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple, Constantinople, ivory plaque. Bode Museum (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Icon_with_the_Presentation_of_the_Virgin_in_the_Temple,_Constantinople,_10th_century,_ivory_-_Bode-Museum_-_DSC03482.JPG. Public domain)

blue tunic and red shoes. Standing behind Mary, Joachim raises his right arm, which is bent in front of him, and extends his left towards Mary, almost touching her halo. He looks towards Zechariah. With her right arm, Anne makes a gesture similar to Joachim's, while her left hand is concealed by the hem of her robe. Her head, covered with a *maphorion*, is modestly lowered, and she does not look at Zechariah's face. Behind them, the girls holding torches are depicted in naturalistic poses, engaged in conversation. They are clad in elegant gowns with decorative collars and their hair is long and curly. The dome of the

ciborium is supported by four slender columns and, behind it, to the left of Zechariah, there is a throne standing on a high plinth made of blocks of gray stone (marble?). Mary, seated on the throne, faces to her right and lifts her head, extending both her arms up towards the angel descending from heaven. The figure of the angel is partially overlapped by the dome of the ciborium. Still, his right hand, stretched out towards Mary and giving her food, as well as his right wing are visible. In his left hand, the divine messenger holds a scepter. He turns his face towards the viewer as if to acknowledge his epiphany.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Faras scene No. 100, painted by the northern entrance to the Cathedral, was best preserved in the part showing

a woman and a girl walking by her side. Their gender is clearly indicated by *maphoria* covering their heads. Therefore,

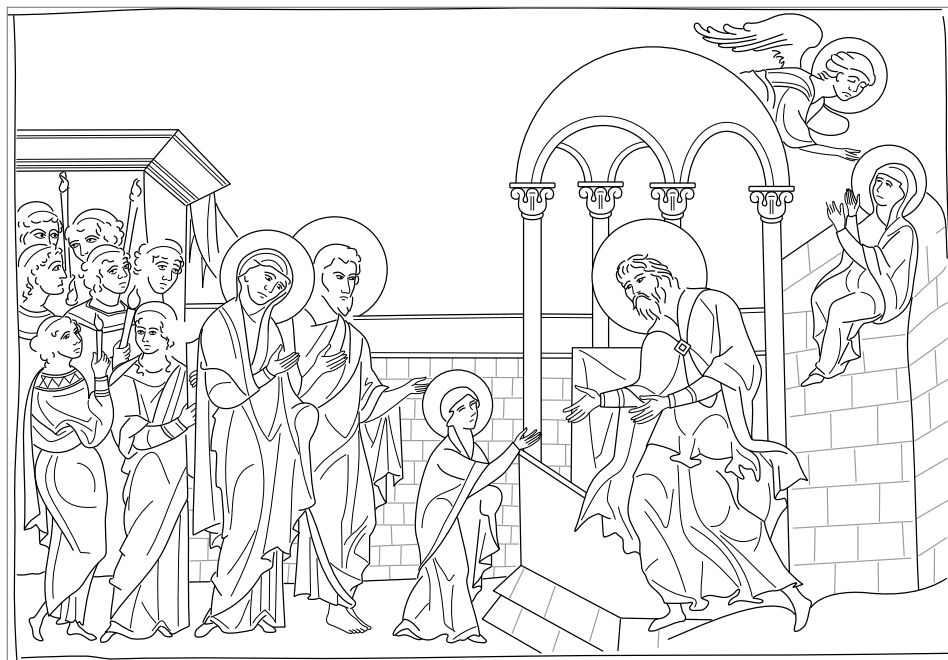


Fig. 10. Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple, Constantinople, *Menologion of Basil II* (Drawing M. Motot)

these figures should be identified as Mary and her mother, St. Anne. Chmiel's drawing shows two more female figures standing next to Mary and Anne. Based on this drawing, one could argue that the scene most closely resembled Mary's First Steps from the cycle in the church of Kızıl Çukur in Cappadocia. On the other hand, this interpretation is not entirely certain, given the Faras painting's poor state of preservation already at the time of its discovery; the two figures standing alongside Anne and Mary were so indistinct that they might as well have been facing three-quarters of the way towards the viewer. According to

personal information passed on to me by Jakobielski (25.11.2023), who took part in the excavations at Faras, one of these two figures may have been bearded. If so, then this could have been the priest Zechariah welcoming Mary to the Temple. It proves the identification of this scene as the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple. The placement of the scene by the northern entrance to the Cathedral would thus be justified and logical. On the ivory plaque from Constantinople, this place is described as "The Holy of the Holies". The faithful entering the Cathedral thus followed the path of the Virgin entering the holy space.



Fig. 11. The Virgin Fed by an Angel. Göreme 9 (Photo by courtesy of Catherine Jolivet-Lévy)

Unlike in the Cappadocian and Byzantine examples, the Faras painting features Anne and Mary without halos. It is possible that the halos were not preserved; however, the absence of this element may have also been common in the Faras paintings of the early period, as the other representation of Anne from Faras, painted on the first layer of plaster, also lacks a halo [see Fig. 5].

The second painting from Faras, No. a37, located on the western wall of the northern transverse aisle, most probably represents the Virgin Mary seated

on a throne and being fed by an angel. All records (the photo taken *in situ*, the drawing made by Chmiel, and the description by Jakobielski) indicate that Mary was shown extending her arms to her left. However, her hands were not raised upwards, as in the ivory plaque from Constantinople and in the miniature from the *Menologion of Basil II*, where they were rather turned to her right. Therefore, it seems that in the Faras scene the angel did not approach Mary from the top of the composition, but from her left side, as in the Kizil Çukur painting and also

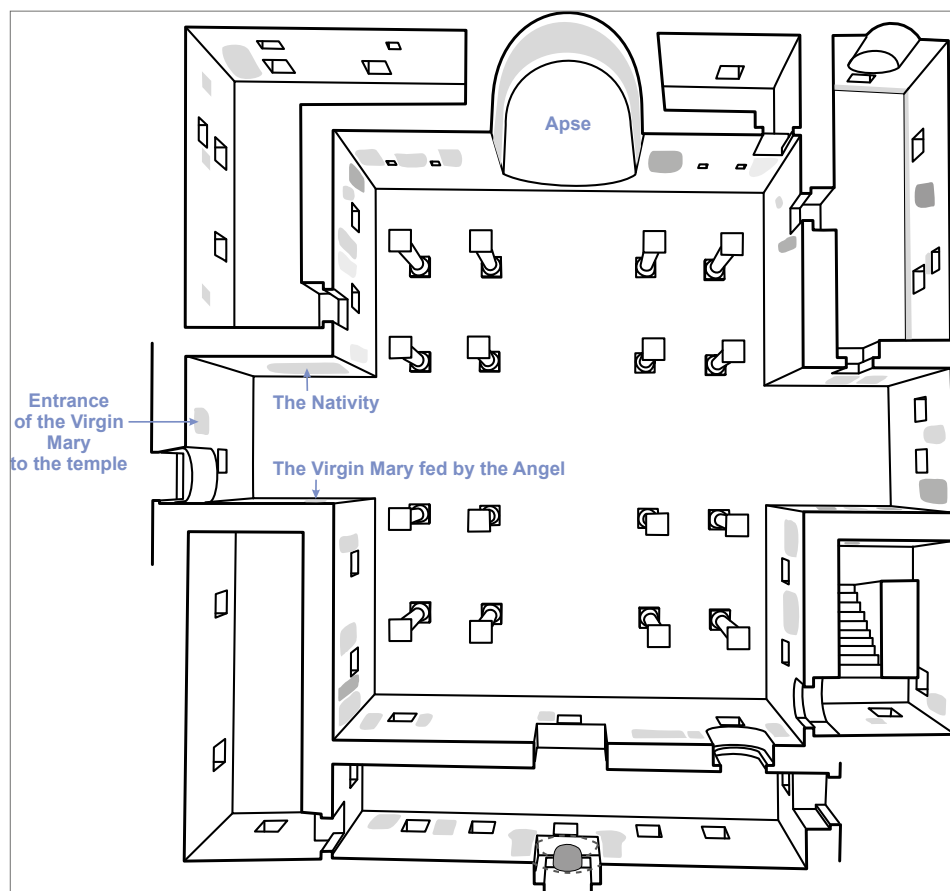


Fig. 12. Axonometric plan of the Faras Cathedral (of Paulos) (After Jakobielski et al. 2017)

as in the painting from Göreme 9 [Fig. 11]. The latter seems very probable, as noted by Jakobielski.¹⁴

The solid throne in the Faras painting No. 237 most closely resembles the throne from the miniature in the *Menologion of Basil II* (since on the ivory plaque from the Bode-Museum Mary is seated on a rainbow-like arch). The form of the throne in the *Menologion*, however, differs slightly in that the vertical supports of the armrests are clearly marked. The open crown upon Mary's bonnet alludes to imagery representing her as an empress.

This type of representations of Mary first appeared as early as the 5th century, after the Council of Ephesus (AD 431), at which she was recognized as Θεοτόκος

(Jastrzębowska 1997: 123). Although the enthroned Mary in the painting from the Faras Cathedral is still a girl, it is worth noting that already in the series of paintings from the church of Kızıl Çukur, in the scene of the presentation of newborn Mary to Anne, Mary is referred to as Θεοτόκος and depicted as such regardless of her age.

According to Jakobielski, the two here-discussed scenes from the northern and western walls of the northern transverse aisle of the Cathedral, as well as the Nativity scene from the eastern wall, were painted between the late 8th and the early 9th centuries. He claimed that all three scenes may have formed a program. Considering the proposed



Fig. 13. The Nativity. The Faras Cathedral (of Paulos) (Courtesy of the National Museum in Khartoum | photo M. Łaptaś)

14 "Vestiges of purple paint to the right of this scene indicate that the composition was continued to the right". Jakobielski uses the viewer's perspective when indicating directions (right, left) from the viewer's side, whereas I use reversed directions, therefore in my description the left side of the Virgin is what Stefan Jakobielski's described as the right.

interpretation of scenes Nos 100 and a37, along with their location by the northern entrance to the Cathedral, these scenes indeed appear to have been part of a well-structured iconographic program. The faithful, passing through the northern entrance to the church, would see on the left, by the entrance, an image of Mary being led into the Temple; on the right, on the western wall, Mary would be seen seated on the throne, fed by an angel; on the left, on the eastern wall, was the Nativity scene.¹⁵ Mary enthroned would, therefore, be depicted across from the birth of Christ [Figs 12, 13].

The scenes from the Faras Cathedral, like the cycle from the Church of Kizil Çukur and the miniature from the *Menologion of Basil II*, feature the Virgin Mary seated on a throne that resembles a stone structure. It seems that the choice of this particular architectural form of the throne is not accidental, for it defines the space which Mary resides in, and, at the same time, co-creates.

As early as in the 3rd century, Alexandrian theologians came up with a concept of Mary as an allegory of the Church (Knapiński 2002: 176). It developed in subsequent centuries, leading to the perception of Mary as *Mater Ecclesiae* — the figure of the Church. St. Augustine wrote:

Mulierem illam virginem Mariam significasse, quae caput nostrum integra integrum peperit, quae etiam ipsa figuram in se sanctae Ecclesiae demonstravit. (De Symbolo IV, 1, after: Migne 1845: 660)

In the Nativity scene depicted across from Mary Enthroned, the Mother of God may also be identified as *Mater Ecclesiae*. The three images — the Entrance of the Virgin Mary into the Temple, Mary Enthroned (Fed by an Angel), and the Nativity — closely correspond to one another [see Fig. 13]. They also fit the liturgical cycle of the Mother of God feasts: according to the *Jacobite-Arab Synaxarium* used in Egypt, the Entrance of the Virgin Mary into the Temple was celebrated on 3 Koiahk (29 November) (Basset 1971: 374–375), while Christmas was on 29 Koiahk (25 December) (Basset 1971: 537–540).

Finally, another aspect related to the wider context of the location of these three paintings in the northern transverse aisle of the Faras Cathedral is worth highlighting. Many female figures were represented on the wall of the northern aisle of the Faras Cathedral (Sulikowska-Belczowska 2016: 118). Thus, the association of the two paintings discussed in this article with the Virgin Mary also finds support in the iconographic program of this part of the Cathedral.

¹⁵ Two Nativity scenes have been preserved in the Faras Cathedral. The earlier one, painted on the first layer of plaster, dated to the 8th century (Jakobielski et al. 2017: Cat. No. 10–10a, pp. 128–131), and the second, later one, painted on the eastern wall of the northern aisle, dated to the end of the 10th century or beginning of the 11th century (Jakobielski et al. 2017: Cat. No. 70, pp. 240–247). The latter one is a complex scene with the Mother of God as the main figure of the composition. The analysis and interpretation of the function of the Virgin in both scenes is the subject of an article I am currently preparing for publication, which is why I chose to exclude this topic from the present paper.

DISCUSSION

Initially, the figures depicted in the composition No. 100 were thought to represent the Apostles. Jakobielski (Jakobielski et al. 2017), however, rejected this interpretation, justifiably in my opinion, as the figures have their heads covered, while the Apostles are usually shown with their hair exposed. A case in point are the images of Peter and John painted on the first layer of plaster in the Faras Cathedral [Fig. 14]. In addition, the object interpreted by Jakobielski as a *rotulus* might actually be a lamp or a censer suspended on three

chains, held by the Virgin or by a child following her (if there indeed was one). Lamps brought into the Temple were mentioned in the *Protevangelium* (7: 2), quoted above.

Jakobielski's hypothesis that the smaller figure depicted in the painting is Christ teaching in the Temple is, in my opinion, erroneous for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the figures in this scene have their hair covered, while Christ is typically shown bare-headed. Secondly, the very type of composition in which Christ is shown debating with the wise men is different. From as early as the 5th century, in this kind of compositions Jesus is depicted as a young teacher sitting among other men (Osteneck 1972: 583).

As far as the interpretation of scene No. 437 is concerned, in my opinion it presents Mary being fed by an angel in the Temple. Mary Enthroned was indeed also depicted in other scenes, e.g. the Annunciation. However, in the Annunciation scenes, Mary is shown in a cowering position, as if startled by Archangel Gabriel, who has to reassure her (Luke 1: 29–31). Even when depicted as a proud empress, Mary would be shown raising a hand in a gesture of conciliation rather than stretching both arms towards the angel, as in the scene from Faras. Another interpretation, namely that this scene depicts an angel by the tomb (*Myrrhophoroi*), is unlikely, given that the figure would probably have been shown with the hair uncovered, sitting on a stone rather than a throne (Weyl Carr 1991a: 1430).



Fig. 14. St. Peter and St. John the Apostles. The Faras Cathedral (Courtesy of the National Museum in Warsaw)

CONCLUSIONS

The interpretation presented in this paper, though admittedly based on paintings badly damaged at the time of discovery, is both justified in the context of the Byzantine tradition and firmly rooted in the iconographic program of the Faras Cathedral. To date, these representations were associated with male figures and correlated with the Nativity scene painted on the first layer of plaster in the Cathedral. While the focus of the Nativity is Jesus Christ, it was thanks to Mary, and her pure and pious life, that the Savior came to redeem mankind. This is why Mary's role was so prominently displayed in this part of the Cathedral, from the northern entrance to the apse, in the center of which the Virgin Mary was also painted.

There remains the question of the murals' chronology. Assuming that Jakobielski's dating to the late 8th or early 9th century is correct, these would be the oldest known surviving paintings of this type — older than the Cappadocian ones, which are dated to the 9th century. This is theoretically possible, given that illustrations of the *Protoevangelium of James* cycle likely circulated in Byzantium already before the iconoclasm (Lafontaine-Dosogne 1964–1965/I: 35–37; Jensen 2016). Perhaps the dating of the early paintings from the Faras Cathedral should be slightly revised; this, however, requires a separate study in the context of the entire arrangement of paintings from the Faras Cathedral.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Undoubtedly, the scenes located in the northern part of the Faras Cathedral also require a more detailed interpretation in the theological context; this is the subject of an article I am currently preparing for publication.

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