

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

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Fundić introduces the article's purpose, which frames her research in a particular context.

UDC 75.052.033»12/13»  
75.046.5:271.2-312.3/.4  
DOI 10.2298/ZOG1337103F  
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The author introduces the historical context of her research object and establishes the *shared disciplinary knowledge* for her interpretations.

Fundić repeatedly highlights the iconographic methodology of her paper.

The author describes the data that her analysis focuses on.

Fundić identifies a problem and a *research gap* that her study seeks to resolve.

The author articulates the study's purpose. She begins with "In addition to this" to signal that her study's knowledge contribution resolves the aforementioned *research problem and gap*. She then describes additional contributions.

*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

\* A version of this paper was presented at the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies, 22–27 August 2011, Sofia (L. Fundić, *Two Scenes of Christ's Childhood in Byzantine Art*, in: *Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, Sofia, 22–27 August 2011, III. Abstracts of Free Communications, Sofia 2011, 313–314). This publication is a result of my participation in the project *Byzantine Monumental Paintings in Eastern Crete (Greece)*, which has been conducted under the aegis of the Metropolis of Hierapytna and Siteia and led by Prof. Georgios Foustieris since 2008. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Georgios Foustieris and Archimandrite Cyrillos Diamantakis, who included me in the project. During our field research, we identified a large number of unpublished or poorly studied fresco decorations in more than sixty monuments. This material will be published in a separate monograph. In this article I shall partly present unknown mural painting from two churches: St. Antony at Koutsouras and St. Marina at Meseleroi. It should be mentioned that, following my presentation at the Sofia Congress, Brigitte Pitarakis published the article *Les images décoliers dans l'art byzantin et post-byzantin* [CA 54 (2011/2012) 83–98], in which she discusses the relevant fresco from Koutsouras. I want also to thank the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, for providing me with the photo from *Manuscript hs78. D I, fol. 9r* (Fig. 2) and Georgios Foustieris for the drawings which I have included in this article. I also owe much to Nikoletta Pyrrou for her assistance and Bronwen Neil for her help with the language. Finally, I wish to thank Andrea Babuin and the two anonymous readers, whose comments and suggestions have helped me clarify several points in the text.

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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 Schrade 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.

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