

Bread of Betrayal, Bread of Sorrow: Decorative Program in the Bema of the Church of Panagia Phorbiotissa, Asinou (Cyprus)

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The Troodos Mountains, which occupy western Cyprus, are home to numerous churches adorned with Byzantine and post-Byzantine frescoes. Ten have been designated World Heritage sites and are visited by many tourists. Nikitari, located at the northeastern foot of Mount Olympus, Cyprus' highest mountain, is a village with a population of less than 500. The Church of Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, approximately 5 km outside of Nikitari, is the subject of this study. The structure may have been a catholicon of the Phorbia monastery; however, no annexed structures remain. The etymology of the monastery's name is attributed to the term *phorbia*, which is said to be a reference to a herb that was believed to enhance milk production. The site likely attracted female worshippers.

The church architecture and murals reflect a complex historical timeline. The original church was built by Magistros Nikephoros Ischyrios in the early 12th century in the form of a single-aisled basilica without a narthex, a common feature in Cypriot church architecture. According to the dedicatory inscriptions on the fresco, it was founded in 1105/06. Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komninos (r. 1081-1118) stationed legions in Cyprus; consequently, many painters from Constantinople were invited to work in Cyprus around 1100. The island of Cyprus enjoyed a golden age of art during this period.

This study does not address architectural changes such as the addition of a narthex in the first half of the 12th century (after 1115) and the reconstruction of the apse conch in the 13th century (after 1227). For the various phases of fresco from the 12th to the 16th century, see the massive book co-edited by Weyl Carr and Nikolaïdès.⁽¹⁾ Instead, this study focuses on the relationship between the Annunciation in the bema and some surrounding images.

* This is the revised and enlarged English version of my article, firstly published in Japanese (*Bulletin of the Graduate School of Letters, Arts and Sciences of Waseda University*, 68 (2023), 449-65).

Description of the frescoes

In addition to the bema, the frescoes from the original construction (1105/06) can be seen above the doorway of the east wall of the narthex (the original entrance to the church) [Fig.1] and on the west side of the naos. The current apse, restored at the end of the 13th century, depicts the Virgin in Orans. However, for the following reasons, it can be safely considered that the original image was of the Virgin with a medallion of the infant Jesus on her chest (the Blachernitissa type).⁽²⁾

First, the apse of the Church of Theotokos in Trikomo, northern Cyprus, attributed to the same artist, also depicts the Virgin and Child of the Blachernitissa type [Fig.2]. Second, the apse of Trikomo has an inscription almost identical to that of Asinou; thus, the images were most likely the same. Third, the Virgin and Child of the Blachernitissa type are often depicted in the apses of Cypriot churches. In other words, the same image was repeated in the form of a full-length figure (apse) and a half-length figure (lunette above the main entrance) at the original structure of Asinou. Although the Virgin in Orans, in full length with a medallion of the



Fig.1: The Virgin and Child above the Eastern Doorway of the Narthex

(1) A. Weyl Carr, A. Nikolaïdès (eds.), *Asinou Across Time: Studies in the Architecture and Murals of the Panagia Phorbiotissa, Cyprus*, Washington, D.C. 2013. In addition to this, basic studies on Asinou include: A. and J.A. Stylianou, *The Painted Church of Cyprus*, London 1997 (1964); M. Sacopoulo, *Asinou en 1106, et sa contribution à l'icongraphie*, Brussels 1966; Ch. Hadjichristodoulou, D. Marianthefts, *The Church of Our Lady of Asinou*, Nicosia 2002.

(2) Carr, in: *Asinou Across Time*, 217.

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Fig.2: The Virgin in the Apse, Church of Theotokos in Trikomo



Fig.3: Iconographic Layout of the Bema

infant Jesus on her chest, are often represented in the apses of churches on Cyprus, Asinou is the only example where the same image is repeated above the church door.

This study focuses on the images of the bema [Fig.3]. After collapsing during an earthquake in the 13th century, the conch of the apse was rebuilt closer to front than the original, with a full-length painting of the Virgin in Orans with two Archangels. The narrow arc-shaped section surrounding the conch features the Sacrifice of Isaac, which is an unusual choice for this location. However, as the altar is a place for offering sacrifices to God, the intention is

understandable. All the bema's scenes, other than the conch, date to the early 12th century. The ceiling vault of the bema features the Ascension; however, when the conch was rebuilt, approximately one-quarter of the eastern part was lost. Although Sacopoulo's monograph (1966) deals with the original frescoes, it does not include the Annunciation and the two scenes from the life of the Virgin, because they had not yet been restored, and the images could not be identified. Carr and Nikolaïdès' recent magnum opus excludes the original murals. Consequently, the entire decorative program of the original frescoes inside the bema has not yet been discussed, an unusual situation.

The frieze below the conch depicts the Communion of the Apostles. This part was not damaged during the earthquake, and the original image remains largely intact. Above the central triple arch window is a depiction of the altar, with Christ repeated on either side. On the left is a scene that depicts Christ giving bread to six Apostles led by Peter, with the heads of Christ and the first three disciples missing [Fig.4]. On the right is a scene in which Christ gives wine to six disciples led by John. Christ, tilting a jar with a quatrefoil spout, gives John wine to drink [Fig.5]. Only Peter and John were given a nimbus, not the other ten Apostles. The disciple on the far right is noteworthy; solely depicted in profile, he has his back turned to Christ. He is eating bread with his right hand, his right leg raises as if to leave. He is the betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

The Communion of the Apostles is a ritualized theme based on the Last Supper, where Christ says, "the man to whom I



Fig.4: The Communion of the Apostles (Bread) in the Apse



Fig.5: The Communion of the Apostles (Wine) in the Apse

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give this piece of bread” (Jn 13:26) is the betrayer. The passage continues, “He, as soon as he received the morsel, had gone out” (Jn 13:30). Asinou’s Communion of the Apostles is an interesting iconography that explicitly depicts Judas by incorporating narrative details from the Last Supper.⁽³⁾ The Communion is an iconography of the Apostles receiving bread and wine from Christ. Judas is usually excluded from this representation, which features an idealized version of the Twelve Apostles. The inclusion of Judas, the betrayer, in the iconic Communion revives the narrative aspect, as Judas was originally present at the Last Supper.

On the east wall, adjacent to the frieze of the Communion, the Annunciation is represented on the left and right, which is standard in Byzantine church decoration. The Archangel Gabriel on the left holds a scepter in his left hand, steps forward with his right foot, and extends his right hand to announce the Conception to the Virgin. The Virgin on the right, seated on a chair, has a spindle shaft in her right hand and an inkwell-like container (spindle bearing) on her left thigh [Fig.6]. The container appears to be filled with red wool. She raises her left hand to her neck, holding a folded, red, belt-like object. Regarding the Virgin’s gesture, we refer to the Annunciation in the Church of Theotokos in Trikomo, painted by the same artist [Fig.7], and the 12th-century Annunciation icon in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai [Fig.8].⁽⁴⁾

(3) For Judas’ theological position in the Communion of the Apostles, see below. G. Sekulovski, “Judas a-t-il sa place dans la composition iconographique de la ‘communion des apôtres?’” in: A. Lossky, M. Sodi (eds.), *Rites de communion. Conférences Saint-Serge L’Ve Semaine d’Études Liturgiques*, Vatican 2010, 211-26. The Judas motif in the Communion is repeated in Panagia Apsinthiotissa in Sychari (c.1100), although the quality of the mural is inferior and appears to be a copy of Asinou. A. Papageorghiou, *Christian Art in the Turkish-Occupied Part of Cyprus*, Nicosia 2010, 402, fig.1. Asinou, Sychari, Trikomo, St. Chrysostom Monastery in Koutsoventis, Panagia Aphenrika in St. Chrysostom Monastery, St. Joachim and Anna in Kaliana, Panagia Amasgou in Monagri, and St. Nicholas tes Stegis in Kakopetria (2nd phase) are similar in style and iconography. They may have been produced by the same workshop or painter. However, as a whole, other churches do not adopt an iconographic program similar to that of Asinou. In the Church of Holy Apostles in Perachorio, Cyprus, and the Church of Metamorphosis in Plemeniana, Crete, the disciple with his back to Christ is depicted at the right end of the Communion of the Apostles beneath the apse; however, he is depicted with a nimbus. The painter might not have realized that this was Judas. From examples of post-Byzantine art, I will cite the Church of St. Nicholas in Galataria (first half of the 16th century), where two disciples are depicted leaving Christ, with their hands covered by their robes, on either side of the Communion. Here too, the painter does not understand the meaning of the iconography. Ch. Bakirtzis, G. Philotheou, *Εκκλησιαστικά μνημεία της Κύπρου. Κατάλογος εκκλησιών συντηρημένων από το τμήμα αρχαιοτήτων με χορήγηση του Ιδρύματος Α.Γ. Λεβέντη*, vol.2, Nicosia 2022, 58-83, figs.10-12.

(4) There is a vast amount of literature on this icon. I will cite here only one: K. Weitzmann, “Eine spätbyzantinische Verkündigungssikone des Sinai und die zweite byzantinische Welle des 12. Jahrhunderts,” rep. in: K. Weitzmann, *Studies in the Art at Sinai*, Princeton 1982, 271-83.



Fig.6: The Virgin in the Annunciation



Fig.7: The Virgin in the Annunciation in Trikomo

The icon in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai realistically depicts the real-life activity of spinning yarn from wool. Mary, holding up a lump of scarlet-dyed wool in her left hand, twists out the thread with her fingers. She spins the spindle with her right hand, twisting the thread as she winds it. The spindle already has a considerable amount of thread wound around it. The circular container placed on her thigh appears to be a bearing to turn the spindle smoothly.⁽⁵⁾ A similar gesture is depicted in the mid-12th-century Annunciation in the Church of La Martorana in Palermo (Sicily) [Fig.9].⁽⁶⁾

Conversely, the Virgin in Asinou and Trikomo offers a less realistic depiction of yarn-spinning. The

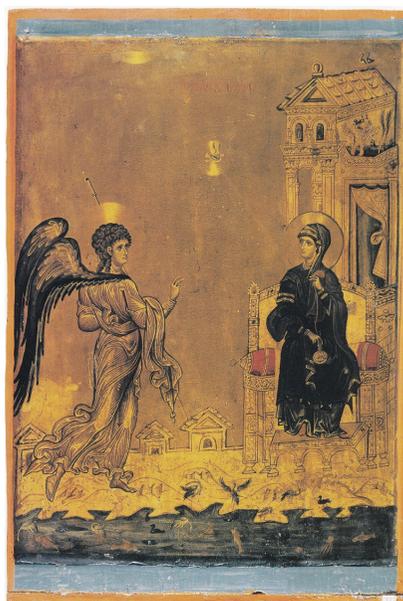


Fig.8: The Annunciation Icon, Monastery of St. Catherine of Mt. Sinai

(5) So far, this object has been described as a basket (or more vaguely a 'container') for yarn. M. Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The theological connotations of a narrative iconographic element in Byzantine images of the Annunciation," in: A. Eastmond, L. James (eds.), *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies presented to Robin Cormack*, Aldershot 2003, 266.

thread has not yet been wound onto the spindle in her right hand, and the thread connects the object in her left hand to the spindle is not visible. If the inkwell-shaped container on her thigh is the bearing that turns the spindle, the spindle and bearing are in contact in Trikomo, while they are not in Asinou. The red object she holds up in her left hand also does not resemble a woolen mass in either Asinou or Trikomo but a double-



Fig.9: The Virgin in the Annunciation,
La Martorana in Palermo

folded bundle of cloth or yarn. If these peculiar depictions were not due to the artist's lack of understanding, they would have had some iconographic significance.

In the lower part of the Annunciation on the east wall, two niches with prothesis and diaconicon functions are perforated (north: St. John *ho Eleemon*; south: St. Tryphon). In the narrow rectangular spaces at the inner sides of the niches, paintings depict St. Mary of Egypt (north) and St. Zosimus (south) on either side of the real altar. Mary has shaggy white hair and white eyebrows, emphasizing her thin, wrinkled face in old age [Fig.10]. She is half-naked without a tunic, wearing only a toga. Her right shoulder is exposed, and her body hair on her arms, chest, back, and legs hides her nudity. She raises her hands toward Zosimus in prayer.

The abbot Zosimus, a white-haired, white-bearded man in monastic robes, with a paten in his left hand, holds out a *kochliarion* (communion spoon)⁽⁷⁾ to Mary [Fig.11]. Female images are extremely rare in the bema of Byzantine churches, exception of for the Annunciation and the Virgin and Child. Asinou adopted two scenes from the life of the Virgin, the Birth of the Virgin and the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple (*hagia ton hagon*, or *eisodia tes Theotokou*), for the decoration of the bema, which alone is an exceptional program. However, it is unusual to portray Mary of Egypt, a former prostitute, in this place, although she was a *hosia*.

(6) E. Kitzinger, *The Mosaics of St. Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo*, Washington, D.C. 1990, 172-75.

(7) For information on its relationship with Byzantine liturgy and usage, see R.F. Taft, "Byzantine Communion Spoons: A Review of the Evidence," *DOP* 50 (1996), 209-38.



Fig.10: St. Mary of Egypt in the Apse



Fig.11: St. Zosimus in the Apse

The lunette-shaped section on the north wall adjacent to the Archangel Gabriel of the Annunciation depicts the Birth of the Virgin [Fig.12].⁽⁸⁾ A large bed occupies approximately 60% of the left half of the composition. On it lies postpartum Anna, clad in a vermilion maphorion. Two female attendants offer Anna a bowl of food. An arch is depicted in the foreground on the right, difficult to reproduce in a



Fig.12: The Birth of the Virgin in the Bema

(8) The Church of St. Joachim and Anna in the village of Kaliana, northwest of Galata (Stylianou, *Painted Churches*, 107-09), has the same layout, with the Birth of the Virgin in the arched section of the north wall of the bema (early 12th century) [Fig.13]. However, the composition is reversed left to right, and Mary's birthing water is not depicted within the arched section. There are no existing images on the south wall of the bema or in the apse. The Kaliana Church is thought to have been influenced by Asinou, as it also depicts the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste on the north wall of naos. In Kaliana, the Holy Communion of St. Mary of Egypt is depicted on the west side of the niche on the north wall of the naos, although it is a later addition (16th century?).

three-dimensional space, where two female servants place Mary in a birthing tub. One of the servants is checking the temperature of the bath, and the other is pouring hot water from a jar, a depiction borrowed from the Nativity of Christ.⁽⁹⁾ Above the arch is a wing that appears to be a part of it, and Joachim's upper body peeks out from a window above the floor.⁽¹⁰⁾



Fig.13: The Birth of the Virgin in the Bema, Church of St. Joachim and Anna, Kaliana (Composite inside and outside the iconostasis)

Opposite the Birth of the Virgin, in a niche on the south wall adjacent to Mary of the Annunciation, is the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple [Fig.14]. On the left, a waist-high wall depicting the Holy of Holies (*hagia ton hagion*) in the Temple of Jerusalem is depicted, and in the foreground, the priest Zacharias bends down to receive the three-year-old Mary. Mary, walking toward the Holy of Holies, is half the height of an adult. Behind Mary, her parents Joachim and Anna raise their hands in praise of God. Behind them, seven Hebrew maidens, acting as distractions, stand in a row holding lit candles. Given the premise of the story, the maidens should have parents behind them, but there are many examples where the two roles are reversed. Behind Zacharias, high in the Holy of Holies, Mary sits receiving food from an angel [Fig.15]. The angel appears to be offering her bread, although the image is badly damaged.



Fig.14: The Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple in the Bema

Mary appears to be sitting on the third step of the altar. The depiction is faithful to the

(9) See Nativity in Panagia Arakiotissa in Lagoudera, Cyprus (1192), though a later example.

(10) For Joachim's depiction of peering into Mary's birth, see, for example, the Chora Monastery. P.A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, New York 1966, vol.1, 66-68.

description in the *Protevangelium of James* (7:3), the image's source. Although the *Protevangelium of James* does not specify the number, the representation of seven Hebrew maidens is a standard motif in Byzantine iconography. Usually, in the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple, the altar is placed on the right, and the young Mary is depicted walking toward the right. By revers-



Fig.15: Mary Nourished by the Angel (detail of Fig.14)

ing the composition, Mary's direction of movement matches the orientation of the church itself. Simultaneously, the reversal of the composition made it possible to place Mary Nourished by the Angel near the Virgin of the Annunciation. Four medallions of saints are lined up on the arch surrounding this section, including James, the Brother of the Lord, and the author of the *Protevangelium*.

Analysis of the Decorative Program

Except for iconic images of saints, we have briefly described the images in the bema. Asinou is dedicated to the Virgin. Two scenes from the life of the Virgin are arranged in the bema, and the Dormition of the Virgin (*Koimesis tes Theotokou*) is placed above the door of the west wall; thus, the three scenes concisely represent the life of the Virgin. An overview of the Byzantine churches of the 12th century shows that this pattern of presenting the Virgin's life in three scenes was widely accepted. The Church of St. Panteleimon in Nerezi (North Macedonia, 1164)⁽¹¹⁾ depicts three scenes on the west wall of the naos: the Birth of the Virgin, the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple, and the Dormition of the Virgin (flaked). These three events in the life of the Virgin are feast days in the Orthodox church calendar, and celebrated on September 8, November 21, and August 15 respectively, with long rites, including *orthros* and *leitourgia*. Unless the life of the Virgin is depicted in a long cycle, the selection of these three scenes is reasonable; however, examples of two of these scenes being placed within

(11) I. Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi. Architecture, Programme, Patronage*, Wiesbaden 2000.

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the bema are rare.

A Decorative program representing only the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple in the bema is not uncommon in the late Byzantine churches on Crete. The bema of the Church of St. George in Vathiako of Amari, Rethymnon, has the Presentation of Christ to the Temple on the south wall and the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple on the north wall.⁽¹²⁾ As both themes share the English phrase "Presentation to the Temple," it seems appropriate to contrast them. In Greek, the former is *Hyrapante* and the latter *Hagia ton hagion* (or *Eisodiatēs Theotokou*); there are no common elements in the subject names themselves. The two themes are contrasted here based on their common theme of infants entering the synagogue to be dedicated to God. In the context of other churches on Crete, this was not a standard pattern in decorative programs. In the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Selli, Rethymnon, the south wall of the bema depicts the Presentation of the Virgin, while the north wall represents the Anastasis and the Myrrh-Bearers.⁽¹³⁾ In the Church of Panagia Eleousa, north of Amari Dam, Rethymnon, the Virgin's Presentation is on the south wall and the Anastasis is on the north wall. In the Church of Christ the Savior in Myrthios, Rethymnon, the Virgin's Presentation is on the south wall, and an unidentified image is on the north.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the Church of Panagia in Prasses, Rethymnon, the Flight into Egypt is on the south wall and the Virgin's Presentation is on the north.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the Church of Panagia in Sklaverochori, Herakleion, an unidentified image is on the south wall and the Virgin's Presentation is on the north.⁽¹⁶⁾ The examples are not exhaustive but limited to what I have seen. They show that it was not uncommon to place the Virgin's Presentation in the bema, that there was no guiding principle regarding the south and north walls, and that there was no fixed pattern for the opposing images.

Examples from the 12th-century that give a detailed account of the life of the Virgin include the Ateni Sioni Church in Georgia,⁽¹⁷⁾ the Mirozh Monastery in Pskov,⁽¹⁸⁾ and the

(12) I. Spatharakis, T. van Essenbergh, *Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete, vol.3, Amari Province*, Leiden 2012, no.34; K. Gallas, K. Wessel, M. Borboudakis, *Byzantinisches Kreta*, München 1983, 311; M. Bissinger, *Kreta. Byzantinische Wandmalerei*, München 1995, no.36/117; A. Lymberopoulou, R. Duits (eds.), *Hell in the Byzantine World*, vol.2, Cambridge 2020, no.72.

(13) I. Spatharakis, *Dated Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete*, Leiden 2001, 163; id., *Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete, vol.1, Rethymnon Province*, London 1999, no.20; *Byzantinisches Kreta*, 270; Bissinger, *Kreta* no.186; K. Kalokyres, *The Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete*, New York 1973, 36, 44; *Hell*, no.70.

(14) I. Spatharakis, *Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete, vol.4, Agios Besileios Province*, Leiden 2015, no.22; *Hell*, no.66.

(15) Spatharakis, *Crete, vol.1*, no.16; *Byzantinisches Kreta*, 270; Kalokyres, *Crete*, 39.

(16) *Byzantinisches Kreta*, 395; Bissinger, *Kreta* no.222; Kalokyres, *Crete*, 40.

Annunciation Church in the village of Arkazhi on Lake Myachino in Novgorod (1189).⁽¹⁹⁾ Examples from the 11th century include the frescoes in the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kyiv.⁽²⁰⁾ However, the actual circumstances surrounding the spread of images of the cycle of the Virgin from the Byzantine Empire to the Russian sphere are unclear. Ateni Sioni depicts the story of the young Mary on one side of a trefoil-shaped church, Mirozh in the southwestern chapel, and Arkazhi in the prothesis. All these churches follow the descriptions in the *Protevangelium*. The principle of which episodes to adopt had not yet been established.

The most unusual iconographic choice in the Church of Asinou is the representation of the Holy Communion of St. Mary of Egypt, depicted on the left and right sides of the apse. The former prostitute of Alexandria may have served a model for monks in terms of her repentance and life of prayer; nonetheless, it was extremely unusual to depict her image in a bema. Even today, the Orthodox Church does not allow women to enter the bema.

The standard arrangement of this iconography is to depict Mary and Zosimus separately on the left and right sides of a church door; not limited to the west doorway, it is also often placed on secondary entrances in the north and south. The Church of Panagia Arakiotissa (1192) in Lagoudera, Cyprus, is an example from around the same period as Asinou. In this church, Mary and Zosimus are arranged on either side of the south doorway [Fig.16]. The medallion above the door is St. Christopher, which has no connection to Mary of Egypt. Although two-thirds of Mary's face are missing, her white shaggy hair, prominent cheekbones, pointed chin, short toga revealing her right shoulder, and body hair covering her entire body are considerably similar to Asinou. The depiction



Fig.16: St. Mary of Egypt and St. Zosimus, Church of Panagia Arakiotissa, Lagoudera

(17) T. Virsaladze, *Росписи Атенского Сиона*, Tbilisi 1984; D. Mouriki, "Observations on the Style of the Wall Paintings of the Sion Church at Ateni, Georgia," rep. in: *Studies in Late Byzantine Painting*, London 1995, 443-71.

(18) V. Sarabianov, *Transfiguration Cathedral of the Mirozh Monastery*, Moscow 2002.

(19) T.Y. Tsarevskaya, *Фрески церкви Благовещения на Мячине («в Аркажах»)*, Novgorod 1999.

(20) O.S. Popova, V.D. Sarabianov, *Мозаики и фрески Святой Софии Киевской*, Moscow 2017.

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of the tip of Zosimus' communion spoon resting on the crimson frame is similar to that of Asinou. The painter of Lagoudera, Theodore Apeudes of Constantinople, probably had a model from the Capital, but he may have deliberately followed the example of Asinou. Even so, this image was not placed in the bema of Lagoudera. The placement of St. Mary's Communion on both sides of door is used in many Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches.

The Church of S. Maria Antiqua in Rome has one of the earliest surviving images of St. Mary of Egypt, too fragmentary to discuss the program.⁽²¹⁾ In Cappadocia, there are also several early images of Mary of Egypt not located on either side of the doorway. In Yılanlı Kilise⁽²²⁾ in Ihlara district, on the south wall of the small funeral chapel, which also serves as a narthex, from left to right, are Zosimus Giving the Eucharist to Mary of Egypt, Zosimus Burying Mary, and the Flight into Egypt. Are the three scenes arranged together based on the commonality that they are set in Egypt? In Ala Kilise⁽²³⁾ in Ihlara (Belisırma, 10th century), the Three Boys in the Fiery Furnace are depicted on the north side of the ceiling vault in the southwestern section, and two scenes of St. Mary of Egypt (Zosimus Giving Clothes to the Naked Mary and Zosimus Giving the Eucharist to Mary) on the south side. On the south doorway of the Church of St. George in Agios Georgios of Ierapetra, Lassithi on Crete (14th century)⁽²⁴⁾, there are depictions of the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt on the left and right sides, and the Three Boys in the Fiery Furnace in the upper lunette. Although the region and era are far from Cappadocia, there must have been some significance in the connection between the two themes.

The Göreme No.7, the New Church of Tokalı Kilise (mid-10th century)⁽²⁵⁾, should be compared with Asinou. The church has three apses. The main apse has a unique program depicting the cycle of the Passion and the Resurrection, beginning with the Crucifixion. The scene of Mary of Egypt is located at the bottom of the conch of the prothesis apse (north subsidiary sanctuary). Surrounded by the two Archangels, Seraph and Cherub, the Majestas Domini reigns supreme in its conch. The frieze-like lower part of the conch depicts, from left to right,

(21) J. Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom 4. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg 1916, pl.227-2.

(22) C. Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce. Le programme iconographique de l'abside et des ses abords*, Paris 1991, 307-10.

(23) Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises*, 329-30.

(24) *Byzantinisches Kreta*, 440

(25) Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises*, 96-108; ead., *La Cappadoce. Un siècle après G. de Jerphanion*, Paris 2015, vol. 1, 73-80.

the Dialogue between the Angel and the Devil, the Holy Communion of St. Mary of Egypt, the Philoxenia of Abraham, and five monastic saints.⁽²⁶⁾ The Dialogue between the Angel and the Devil is a unique image but is not within our present scope. The juxtaposition of Mary's Communion and Abraham's Philoxenia is recognizable when one considers that this is the prothesis, because the Philoxenia is a



Fig.17: St. Mary of Egypt and St. Zosimus, Church of St. Nicholas, Geraki

theme that prefigures the bread of the Eucharist. A subsidiary apse of Tokali depicts St. Mary of Egypt in the sanctuary in connection with the dogma of the Eucharist.

The Church of St. Nicholas in Geraki in the Peloponnese Peninsula (14th century),⁽²⁷⁾ to my knowledge, also represents Mary of Egypt in the bema [Fig.17]. Only the north church of the double church, with two single-aisled basilicas, has frescoes remaining. The stone iconostasis, built at the same time as the main building, exists today, with a seated Christ on the right (south) side of the royal gate and a seated Virgin with Child on the left (north). The reverse side, which can only be seen by clergy, shows the image of Mary's Communion (Mary on the left/south and Zosimus on the right/north). It is difficult to guess the intention behind this iconographic arrangement. If this is a message for the priest who saw it, is it meant to encourage the salvation of women? Or perhaps it emphasizes the authority of priests?

St. Mary of Egypt was a desert ascetic with a strong sense of repentance. She is often depicted alongside St. Zosimus as the Holy Communion rather than as an independent iconic image. Small cycles of multiple scenes have survived from Cappadocia in the 10th century. As a theme representing the Eucharist, she is represented at the bottom of the prothesis apse of the Tokali New Church. Asinou attempts an even bolder endeavor by depicting Mary of Egypt in the main apse rather than the subsidiary apse. We are accustomed to seeing compositions divided into left and right sections since the 12th century. Then, from the viewpoint of

(26) A. Wharton Epstein, *Tokali Kilise. Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia*, Washington D.C. 1986.

(27) N.K. Moutsopoulos, G. Dimitrokallis, *Γεράκι. Οι εκκλησίες του οικισμού*, Thessaloniki 1981, 47-73.

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Entwicklungsgeschichte, can we consider that the split layout on doorways, as seen in Lagoudera and many other churches, came first, and the arrangement on the left and right sides of the apse, as in the case of Asinou, may have been modeled after this?

Zosimus offers Mary a piece of bread on the communion spoon. When images are placed on either side of the church door, we pass through the space between them; this act of passing through seems to interfere with the Holy Communion. However, if they are placed on either side of the apse, there is a real altar in the center, over which the Eucharist will pass. In other words, it makes more sense to place the split composition on either side of the apse rather than the church doorway, as it is more meaningful in terms of iconography. It is extremely unusual to depict women other than the Virgin in the bema; nevertheless, it is meaningful to represent the act of the Communion here. Based on the number of examples on split compositions, the overwhelmingly majority are on doorways; nonetheless, it is also possible that the rare case of the apse came first. Although a frequently observed inference in Byzantine art, where most examples from the Capital have been lost, the lost murals of Constantinople likely served as models for Asinou.

Theme of Bread

I have described and examined the decorative program of the bema in Asinou. It is impossible not to notice that the theme of bread is concentrated around Mary of the Annunciation. To the left is the Communion of the Apostles, with Judas closest to Mary, his back turned away from Jesus as he puts bread in his mouth, as if he is advancing toward Mary. Below her, St. Zosimus, holding a piece of bread on the communion spoon, offers it forward. Adjacent to the right is the Virgin's Presentation, and near the head of Mary of the Annunciation, there is the motif of Mary Nourished by the Angel, where the three-year-old Mary is receiving bread from the angel. The theme of bread is concentrated on the three sides adjacent to Mary of the Annunciation. My position is that this is not a coincidence but a carefully considered decorative program.

The addition of Judas to the Communion is a rare iconography. There are no other examples of Mary of Egypt being depicted in the main apse. The placement of the Virgin's Presentation in the bema is a phenomenon seen only in the small churches of late-Byzantine Crete. The three themes surrounding Mary of the Annunciation are all exceptional and were placed there with intentionality.

To consider the intention of the three themes of bread, we must first discuss the meaning

of Mary Nourished by the Angel. The motif of Mary Nourished by the Angel in the upper part of the Virgin's Presentation is a standard feature of this iconography. After being dedicated to the Temple at the age of three, "Mary was in the temple of the Lord nurtured like a dove and received food from the hands of an angel" (*Protevangelium of James*, 8:1).⁽²⁸⁾ In the usual iconography, the angel extends its hand holding bread toward Mary, but in Geraki, there are several examples of the angel holding bread and a jug of wine. The oldest is the Church of Evangelistria, followed by the Churches of St. Sozon, St. Athanasios, and St. John Chrysostom.⁽²⁹⁾

Giving wine to a three-year-old child is strange; however, its iconographic significance is clear in the layout of the Church of St. Athanasios. The apse adopts the Virgin and Child with two Archangels, while on the wall on the left (north) of the bema is the Virgin's Presentation to the Temple, and on the wall on the right (south), the Last Supper. The Last Supper is, of course, the theme of the establishment of the dogma of Holy Communion, in which Christ gave bread and wine to his disciples. In the opposite scene, the young Mary receives bread and wine from the angel. The motif of Mary Nourished by the Angel is a prefiguration of the Holy Communion, and the angel tells the three-year-old girl her cruel fate that the son she will give birth to in the future will be sacrificed to God.⁽³⁰⁾

The program creator's intention when placing the three themes of bread around the Virgin of the Annunciation is clear. At the age of three, Mary was already being taught by the angel about the future destiny of her child through bread. Judas' betrayal fulfills Christ's Passion; although Judas received bread from Christ's hands, he turned his back on Christ and left. Mary's sorrow accomplishes the atonement of mankind. Even Mary of Egypt, a former prostitute, is saved by being given bread. Bread symbolizes Judas' bread of betrayal, the Virgin Mary's bread of sorrow, and humankind's bread of salvation (especially for women).

It is difficult to imagine that the decorative program of Asinou's bema, which is centered on bread, was originally conceived in this place. It is more likely that the painter brought the iconographic arrangement of a small chapel dedicated to the Virgin in Constantinople to

(28) J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1993, 60.

(29) Moutsopoulos, Dimitrokallis, *Γεράκι*.

(30) J. Olkinuora ("Four Typological Images of Mary in the Hymnography for the Feast of the Entrance," *Journal of the International Society for the Orthodox Church Music*, 1 (2014), 33-42, esp.40) discusses the connection between the bread given to Mary by the angel and the Eucharist, as, particularly in liturgical texts, Mary is referred to as the bread of life (ἄρτος ζωῆς) and the altar of the bread of life (ζωῆς τοῦ ἁγίου τράπεζα).

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Cyprus. The Virgin's Presentation, reversed from left to right in its composition, has no iconographic peculiarities. However, Judas in the Communion of the Apostles and the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt may have been devised or modified for this program.

In the Communion of the Apostles, the group on the left, led by Peter, receives bread, while the group on the right, led by John, receives wine. Judas, who took the bread and left, must have been among the disciples on the left. Nevertheless, Judas is deliberately depicted on the far right, and, as the Communion of the Apostles and the Annunciation are placed at the same height, Judas appears to be turning his back on Christ and walking toward Mary.

In the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt, Zosimus gives the bread to Mary. In Western art, the giver is usually placed on the left and the receiver on the right; however, in Asinou, Zosimus, the giver, is depicted on the right. By reversing the usual iconography, Zosimus is placed next to the Virgin of the Annunciation. In later examples of the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt, Zosimus is often depicted on the right.⁽³¹⁾ The image of Mary of Egypt was established as a narrative on the Holy Communion of a monastic female saint in the desert. It was exceptionally placed in the bema of a Constantinopolitan church during the Middle Byzantine period, forming a unique program. At that time, Zosimus was placed on the right side to be near the Virgin of the Annunciation. The image of Zosimus on the right seems to have spread independently of its original context.

Dedicatory Inscriptions and the Donor

The name Nikephoros (Ischyrios), a patron of Asinou, appears in two inscriptions; one is partially preserved under the apse, and the other is above Constantine and Helena in the west part of the naos. A longer dedicatory inscription is recorded in the semi-circular section above the south doorway. The dedicatory panel was painted in the 14th century; nonetheless, based on the content of the inscription, it is assumed to be a copy of the original one.⁽³²⁾

On the right, the donor Nikephoros stands holding the church's maquette, while the Virgin, two heads taller, places her hand on the roof of the church and leads him to Christ on the left. Christ, sitting on a throne, extends his right hand to bless Nikephoros. Behind him is a host of

(31) Panagia Arakiotissa in Lagoudera (1192) and St. Nicholas in Geraki also place Zosimus on the right. However, early Cappadocian examples of the Communion of St. Mary of Egypt, such as Yılanlı Kilise in Ihlara and Ala Kilise in Belisırma, place Zosimus appropriately on the left.

(32) Sacopoulo, 10-11; N.P. Ševčenko, in: *Asiou Across Time*, 77-80; A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Fresken und Mosaiken*, Wien 2009, 348-50, no.236. On the fresco, Carr, in: *Asiou Across Time*, 291-98.

angels. In the center of the composition, between the Virgin and Christ, there is an inscription of seven lines of verse:

Having been blessed in life with many good things
Of which thou, O Virgin, wast seen to be the provider,
I, Nikephoros magistros, a pitiable supplicant,
Erected this church with devotion,
In return for which I beg to find thee my protectress
On the terrible day of judgement.⁽³³⁾

Behind Nikephoros stands a woman half his height, making a gesture of supplication. Above her is the following inscription:

December 17, Indiction 15, the Year 6608 (=1099), the servant of God, Gephyra has fallen asleep.

Unlike the inscription quoted above, which is in verse, this inscription is in the simple form of an epitaph. It is unclear whether Gephyra's tomb is inside or outside the church. The date 1099 is a mistake made by the painter, who copied the inscription in the 14th century. Most sources state that Gephyra died on December 15, 1106, shortly after the completion of the church.⁽³⁴⁾ Nikephoros donated the church to the Virgin. The fresco decorations were completed shortly before he lost his wife, Gephyra. In mourning her death, he had her image and epitaph added on the blank space of the donor panel.

The decoration of Asinou's bema clearly shows the intention to redeem women. Although it does not seem to matter if a male patron planned it, is it permissible to imagine that Gephyra's intentions were at work in the program? If Gephyra had been bedridden for a long time rather than dying suddenly, it would make sense to depict Mary of Egypt as having been saved by receiving the Eucharist from Zosimus before her death. However, such speculation is beyond the scope of this study.

(33) Ševčenko, in: *Asinou Across Time*, 79.

(34) C. Mango, "Chypre, carrefour du monde byzantine" (1976), rep. in: *Byzantium and its Image*, London 1984, art.17, 7 n.14; G. Grivaud, in: *Asinou Across Time*, 22-23; A. Papageorgiou, in: *ibid.*, 53-54; Carr, in: *ibid.*, 293, 297.

Spindle and Communion Spoon

Before concluding the article, a few comments on the interpretation of the Virgin's Annunciation. As mentioned earlier, Mary's spindle has no thread wound around it, and the cloth or bundle of thread she holds in her left hand is folded in half. We cannot yet say with certainty whether this iconographic detail, which has no known parallel, is significant. If we provisionally discuss this as a general iconography of the Annunciation, the implication of bread is also relevant to this Virgin. In this article, I follow Evangelatou's argument, which extensively quotes the writings of the Church Fathers.⁽³⁵⁾

The thread that Mary was spinning when Gabriel visited her was for weaving the temple's curtain. Many Church Fathers regarded the temple's curtain as a typos of Christ, especially of his humanity; therefore, Mary's spindle became a symbol of the Incarnation. Evangelatou takes it a step further and sees the spindle bearing as a symbol of the Virgin's womb, the vessel of God. However, we do not need to think that far ahead right now. The morphological correspondence between the Virgin's spindle bearing and St. Zosimus' paten, and between the Virgin's spindle and Zosimus' communion spoon is notable here [Figs. 6, 11].

There are examples of the Annunciation in which the vessel (spindle bearing) is depicted as large and contains red dye⁽³⁶⁾ for dyeing wool; thus, the container filled with red liquid can also be seen as a prefiguration of the charice.⁽³⁷⁾ However, the vessel of bread held by Asinou's Zosimus, whose left hand is covered with red cloth, is similar to the bearing on Mary's thigh. Additionally, both figures are holding white rod-like objects in their right hands: Mary a spindle, and Zosimus a communion spoon. If we consider that the thread is not wound around Mary's spindle, contrary to its usual depiction, to emphasize its similarity to the communion spoon, the meaning of this exceptional motif becomes clear. Just as Zosimus takes the bread out of the container with the communion spoon, Mary brings the temple curtain, which is the body (bread) of Christ, out of the bearing with her spindle.

Needless to say, this is merely an interpretation without any supporting evidence from the homilies of the Church Fathers. Byzantine painters often created images inspired by the allegorical interpretations of the Church Fathers. Therefore, presenting the writings of the Church

(35) Evangelatou (n.5), 261-79.

(36) In the *Protevangelium of James*, the color of the veil designated for Mary is described as "deep purple and crimson /ή ἀληθινή πορφύρα και τὸ κόκκινον" (10:2). In the homilies of the Church Fathers, purple, a noble color, tends to be emphasized, but in works of art, due to the difficulty of vividly expressing purple, it is often depicted in a slightly muted reddish color.

(37) Evangelatou, 267-68.

Fathers as supporting evidence lends to persuasiveness to the interpretation of the iconography. Nevertheless, there existed in the Byzantine world a decorative program that was based solely on formal similarities rather than on the textual discourse of the Church Fathers.⁽³⁸⁾

The Church Fathers' homilies extended the temple curtain (*καταπέτασμα*) various fabrics, such as the veil of the Virgin, or the Aër (a cloth covering the paten and chalice on the altar), and is discussed in relation to the Incarnation of Christ.⁽³⁹⁾ Although the three themes surrounding the Virgin of the Annunciation clearly depict the motif of bread, the image of bread is not directly represented in Mary herself. However, in a Byzantine thought, the cloth that Mary is weaving is the curtain of the temple, which represents the body of Christ, and also the cloth that covers the consecrated bread on the altar. The ingenuity of the Byzantine painter in representing Mary, who was involved with bread throughout her life, through such a combination of images, is as eloquent as the homilies of the Church Fathers.

[postscript]

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[Photo Credit]

Fig. 8: P.L. Vocotopoulos, *Βυζαντινές εικόνες*, Athens 1995, fig.49.

All other figures were photographed or created by the author.

(38) E.g. the King's Church in Studenica Monastery. T. Masuda, "Reinterpretation of the Life of the Virgin in the King's Church of Studenica Monastery," *Bulletin of the Graduate School of Letters, Arts and Sciences of Waseda University* 67 (2022), 459-78. https://www.waseda.jp/flas/glas/assets/uploads/2022/02/MASUDA-Tomoyuki_0459-0478.pdf

(39) E.g. *St. Germanus of Constantinople. On the Divine Liturgy* (trans. P. Meyendorff), New York 1984, 88-91.