

## I Female Iconography in the Northern Aisle of Faras Cathedral

The question posed by the present text investigates the interpretation of the iconography of mural paintings from the northern aisle of the cathedral in Faras (**fig. 1**). According to a rather common belief, this part of the church was dedicated to women, and therefore its iconographic programme was addressed to women and adapted to their needs.<sup>1</sup> My intention is to reflect upon the function of the aisle, as well as to analyse the iconography of selected works discovered in this part of the church. By reason of the alleged context of these depictions, they are going to be discussed both in reference to their principal theological meanings as well as in the light of the research outcome concerning the role and position of women in the circle of the tradition of the Eastern churches. This issue has been present in the research on Byzantine art since the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> yet the potential interpretations of images and iconographic programmes have not been fully explored yet. It should be assumed that the works from Faras cathedral form an exceptional corpus in Nubian painting and are not representative for the art of this region.<sup>3</sup> The present paper does not aim at formulating general statements on universal rules governing monumental Christian art of this part of Africa. It is, rather, an attempt at connecting certain aspects of research on Nubian painting to the Byzantine context, and at outlining further research perspectives for the points raised below.

There is every reason to believe that Faras cathedral was dedicated to Theotokos – Mother of God,<sup>4</sup> even though scholars also pointed at The Twelve Apostles as the church's patron saints.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that the church was originally dedicated to the Apostles and renamed to Virgin Mary in the 8<sup>th</sup> century after Bishop Petros's reconstruction works.<sup>6</sup> The wall paintings in the altar apse could actually support both theses, because of the presence and domination of a depiction

<sup>1</sup> Bożena Mierzejewska, "Wall Paintings from Faras Cathedral," in *The Professor Kazimierz Michałowski Faras Gallery. Guidebook* (Warsaw, 2014), p. 110. See also Stefan Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions* (Warsaw, 1972), p. 180. Faras, 3.

<sup>2</sup> See, i.a., Sharon E.J. Gerstel, "Painted Sources for Female Piety in Medieval Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 52 (1998), pp. 89–111; Liz James, "Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex and Power," in *A Social History of Byzantium*, John Haldon, ed. (Oxford, 2008), pp. 31–50; ead., "Society: The Role of Women" in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon, Robin Cormack, eds (New York, 2008), pp. 643–51.

<sup>3</sup> Karel C. Innemée, "Observations on the System of Nubian Church-Decoration," *Cahiers de Recherches de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille*, no. 17 (1995), p. 279.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques van der Vliet, "The Church of the Twelve Apostles: The Earliest Cathedral of Faras," *Orientalia. NOVA SERIES*, vol. 68, no. 1 (1999), p. 91, n. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras*..., op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Włodzimierz Godlewski, *Pachoras. The Cathedrals of Aetios, Paulos and Petros. The Architecture*, tr. Iwona Zych (Warsaw, 2006), p. 72.

of Virgin Mary and of Christ's disciples in this spot. Still, numerous Marian representations (depictions with Christ Child and the presence of Mary in compositions evoking protection and guardianship) as well as inscribed invocations addressed to the Mother of Jesus found in different places in the temple suggest that Theotokos played a crucial role.<sup>7</sup> We should, however, keep in mind that Marian iconography in the Eastern tradition – reflecting the veneration of Theotokos – was one of the best-developed. Depictions of Mary, both those related with festivities devoted to Her and votive images featured in great numbers in all churches in the entire Christian area regardless of the saintly person that a given church was dedicated to.<sup>8</sup>

The topic of Faras cathedral's iconographic programme was approached already in the first years after the discovery. In 1970, an article by Kurt Weitzmann was published in which the author assessed the group of wall paintings as devoid of distinctive ideological contents or a clearly formulated programme. The eminent scholar based his judgment upon the small quantity of elaborate biblical depictions preserved on the church's walls. He concluded that no narrative series recounting the holy history and no counterpart of a liturgical calendar, typical for the Eastern Christian tradition, were to be found in Faras. Weitzmann was therefore inclined to perceive the Faras wall paintings as a group of independent depictions which received veneration on their own, like icons. He also further deducted that the lack of complex iconographic programmes which are typical for the Byzantine circle was a specific trait of Nubian art.<sup>9</sup>

Further years brought polemics with these statements, involving the voices of Piotr Szolc,<sup>10</sup> Karel C. Innemée,<sup>11</sup> Włodzimierz Godlewski<sup>12</sup> and Dobrochna Zielińska,<sup>13</sup> who fundamentally rejected Weitzmann's conclusions. However, the discussion did not offer any solutions to many aspects of the issue. In reference to the numerous groups of Nubian wall paintings – including the Faras murals – our knowledge is based on the fragmentarily preserved evidence. It is also dependent on the perception which was to a great extent defined by the permanent displays at the National Museum in Warsaw organized in 1972 and 2014. In the new arrangement of the Faras Gallery, the paintings found in the northern aisle create a coherent group which was preserved in a distinctly better state and in greater number than works from the southern part of the church. The concept of the iconographic programme in the northern aisle of

<sup>7</sup> See Kurt Weitzmann, "Some Remarks on the Sources of the Fresco Paintings of the Cathedral of Faras," in *Kunst und Geschichte Nubiens in christlicher Zeit. Ergebnisse und Probleme auf Grund der jüngsten Ausgrabungen*, Erich Dinkler, ed. (Bongers, 1970), p. 336; Tadeusz Gołgowski, "On the Iconography of the Holy Virgin Represented on Faras Murals. Standing Virgin Holding the Child on Her Arm," *Études et Travaux*, no. 2, (1968), p. 296; id., "Malowidła z katedry w Faras. Przedstawienia Marii z Chrystusem typu Eleusa i Galaktotrophusa," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 14 (1970), p. 389.

<sup>8</sup> See Annemarie Weyl Carr, "The Mother of God in Public," in *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantium*, Maria Vassilaki, ed. (Athens, 1999), p. 325.

<sup>9</sup> Weitzmann, op. cit., pp. 335–36.

<sup>10</sup> Piotr Szolc, "The Iconographical Programme of the Faras Cathedral. Some Marginal Remarks Concerning Professor K. Weitzmann's Theory," *Études et Travaux*, no. 8 (1975), pp. 296–299.

<sup>11</sup> Innemée, *Observations...*, op. cit., pp. 279–87.

<sup>12</sup> Włodzimierz Godlewski, "Nubia, Egypt and Byzantium," in *Perceptions of Byzantium and Its Neighbors (843–1261)*, Olga Z. Pevny, ed. (New York, 2000), pp. 168–81.

<sup>13</sup> Dobrochna Zielińska, "The Iconographical Program in Nubian Churches: Progress Report Based on a New Reconstruction Project," in *Between the Cataracts. Part 2, fascicule 2. Session Papers*, Włodzimierz Godlewski, Adam Łajtar, eds (Warsaw, 2010), pp. 643–51; ead., "The Painted Decoration of the Church at Sonqi Tino in the Context of the Iconographical Program of Nubian Churches," *Scienze dell'Antichità*, no. 18 (2012), pp. 593–97.

Faras cathedral appears the more worthy of exploration – or, rather, the question whether this concept actually existed and if it did, whether and how it was coherent.

One fundamental rule in the Byzantine tradition was – as written down by Chorikios of Gaza in the 6<sup>th</sup> century – that persons of different sex “should not be mingled” with each other<sup>14</sup> in the church. The separation of women and men in religious practices resulted from complex beliefs regarding the topic of gender.<sup>15</sup> As in the Orthodox church today, the tradition clearly banned women from entering the sanctuary under the threat of desecralization. The normative texts dedicated to this issue are often objects of controversion, like the 44<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council in Laodicea of c. AD 360 forbidding women to enter the altar area, a rule which, according to Robert F. Taft, originally applied to women taking active part in the liturgical action and was meant to exclude this group in particular from the altar area, and not to segregate the sexes.<sup>16</sup> We can find an explanation of actions eliminating women from active participation in the cult or division of the church’s space into men’s and women’s area in the First Epistle to the Corinthians: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” (1 Cor., 14:34–35).<sup>17</sup> Following the words of Paul of Tarsus, the 70<sup>th</sup> canon of the Council in Trullo of AD 692 forbade women to talk during liturgical service, recommending them to ask questions to their husbands at home. As underlined by Judith Herrin, it contributed to the ultimate exclusion of women from certain spheres of ecclesiastic life.<sup>18</sup>

Sources point at the profound conviction of worshippers that even the presence of woman and her gaze (even if she remained silent) might negatively affect the course of services. In the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, Symeon the Metaphrast recounts in his *Life of Chrysostom* that once during the liturgy John Chrysostom began to see a vision of the Holy Spirit descending upon the Eucharistic offering when suddenly one of the diacons caught sight of a woman looking at him and returned the glance, causing the vision to disappear. John Chrysostom ordered the diacon out and to avoid similar situations, to cover the women’s gallery with a curtain.<sup>19</sup> In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, normative texts appeared in Syria and Egypt which stated that the period of menstruation and puerperium is a hindrance for women’s participation in the Eucharist.<sup>20</sup> Much later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Theodore Balsamon explained that women during their menstruation period are banned, as “impure,” not only from the Eucharist but even from entering the church.<sup>21</sup> Other instances of the limitation of women’s access to holy places unrelated to the period of impurity mostly applied to men’s monasteries, including important pilgrimage

<sup>14</sup> Robert F. Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When and – Why?,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 52 (1998), p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 2008), pp. 28–29, 110–114. Columbia Classics in Religion; see also Aleksandra Sulikowska, *Ciała, groby i ikony. Kult świętych w ruskiej tradycji literackiej i ikonograficznej* (Warsaw, 2013), pp. 88–91.

<sup>16</sup> Taft, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> The Holy Bible cited after the King James Version.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Herrin, “Femina Byzantina: The Council in Trullo on Women,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 46 (1992), pp. 99–100.

<sup>19</sup> Taft, op. cit., pp. 49–50.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society*..., op. cit., passim.

<sup>21</sup> Taft, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

centres<sup>22</sup> (which is best exemplified by the modern-day ban on the presence of women in the cloisters on Mount Athos). Women who set their minds on gaining access, for instance, to a holy reliquary, would resort to dressing up as eunuchs to conceal their gender and enter a place otherwise forbidden to them.<sup>23</sup>

In the literature of the subject, it is assumed that the church space was divided into a women's section (Gr. *gynaikonitis*, Lat. *gynaeceum*) and an area for men in the churches of the Eastern rite. It is confirmed by many sources, though they may not be always consistent in this point. Procopius of Caesarea, describing the interior of Hagia Sophia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, recalls that, "One of this pair of colonnaded aisles has been assigned to the praying men, while the other is reserved for women doing the same."<sup>24</sup> The popular text *Narratio de structura templi S. Sophia* of the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century locates the women's area more precisely in the northern aisle.<sup>25</sup> Sources also reveal that in Constantinople's Hagia Sophia there was an isolated place in the southern gallery for Byzantine Empresses, used both in the 6<sup>th</sup><sup>26</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>27</sup>

The Great Church of Constantinople – by reason of its rank and frequent attendance of the imperial court – was not a typical example of religious cult celebration, particularly in regards to the area that was occupied by female members of the imperial court. The existence of separate areas for women was recounted by sources describing other churches of Constantinople. The *Book of Ceremonies* (*De ceremoniis*) of the 10<sup>th</sup> century mentions such a space in the temple of the Apostles and locates it in the "left side of the church", i.e., in its northern part. The place for women in the Church of Theotokos in Chalkoprateia is described the same.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes, as in the basilica of St John the Forerunner at the Stoudios monastery and in the church called Nea Ekklesia, the women's area was situated in the southern aisle.<sup>29</sup>

The long tradition of the Eastern Churches, as documented above, involved the rule of gender segregation, and the northern part of the church could be used first of all by women, while they had only limited access to other parts except for vestibules. There are no known sources, though, which would unambiguously confirm the existence of such a regulation in Nubian Christianity. Its longevity in the Eastern Churches permits the assumption that the aforementioned rules were also observed in Nubia. It is generally accepted that the high status of women was a specific trait of Nubian Christianity,<sup>30</sup> however, the effect on segregation

<sup>22</sup> Gerstel, "Painted Sources for Female Piety...", op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Alice-Mary Talbot, "Women's Space in Byzantine Monasteries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 52 (1998), p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Procopius of Caesarea, *De aedificiis*, I, 1, 56, cited after Taft, op. cit., p. 35. Since Procopius writes about the place for women both in the nave and in the galleries (I, 1, 58; *ibid.*, pp. 35–36), the fragment has been object of many interpretations and discussions. See Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople. Architecture and Liturgy* (London, 1971), p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> "The whole right-hand part of the gynaeceum up to the pillar of St Basil..." – *Narratio de p. Sophia*, cited after Taft, op. cit., pp. 37–38. The column was situated on the north-western side (*Ibid.*)

<sup>26</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 31, cited after *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, tr. with an introduction by Michael Whitby (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 233–35. Translated Texts for Historians, 33; see also Mathews, *The Early Churches...*, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Taft, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 48.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Lajtar, Jacques Van der Vliet, "Rich Ladies of Meinarti and Their Churches. With an Appended List of Sources from Christian Nubia Containing the Expression 'Having the Church and So-and-so'," *Journal of*

cannot be conclusively determined. The key issue is to determine if the painting group from Faras provides us with information in regards to the use of the northern aisle of the church. In this part of the cathedral, as many as 30 paintings have been preserved. Almost half of them are depictions involving women,<sup>31</sup> while in the remaining parts of the church women are rarely represented – apart from the Virgin Mary.

In the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, on the eastern wall of the northern aisle of the cathedral, a painting of Virgin Mary holding the Child on Her arm was applied (**fig. 2**). An archangel on Her left and the bust of Saint John on Her right were painted at the same time (**fig. 3**). On the neighbouring northern wall, depictions of Saint Anne (**figs 4, 5**) and a queen protected by an angel (**fig. 6**)<sup>32</sup> were placed. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a large Nativity scene was painted, as well as a portrait of a Nubian queen (?) on the eastern wall (**figs 1, 7**), while on the northern wall – an image of Virgin Mary and Queen Marta (**fig. 8**) and a warrior saint.<sup>33</sup> Eastwards, the Holy Trinity represented as three figures of Christ was added, and, on the western side of a pillar, Virgin Mary with the Child were depicted as symbolically protecting a Nubian princess (**fig. 9**).<sup>34</sup> On the neighbouring pillar, a depiction of Saint Anne with Mary (Anna Lactans?) was painted.<sup>35</sup> On the eastern wall of the transept, a Nativity scene was applied sometime between the mid-8<sup>th</sup> and mid-10<sup>th</sup> century (**fig. 10**).<sup>36</sup> In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, on a pillar adjacent to the wall in this part of the church, a representation of Maria Lactans (**fig. 11**) was painted.<sup>37</sup> Opposite, that is, on the western wall, a triumphal cross with images of apocalyptic creatures was placed.<sup>38</sup> In the western part of the northern aisle, on its northern wall, preserved are the 9<sup>th</sup>-century portraits of (left to right) a bishop (Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch?), a warrior saint with a dragon at his feet (Theodore Stratelates?) and apostles Peter and John. In the later period, a figure of a Nubian woman protected by Saint Aaron, and a cross between the bishop and the warrior were painted.<sup>39</sup> In the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the following paintings were added looking from east towards west (**fig. 12**): angel Lithargoel, Christ in Glory, Maria Lactans (**fig. 13**), image of Mary, of which only a bottom part of the figure has been preserved, another depiction of Maria Lactans (**figs 14, 15**), and farther – Saint Damiana (**fig. 16**) and Saint

*Jouristic Papyrology*, no. 28 (1998), pp. 35–53; Godlewski, “Nubia, Egypt...,” op. cit., pp. 169–171; Bożena Rostkowska, “The Title and Office of the King’s Mother in Christian Nubia,” *Africana Bulletin*, no. 34 (1983), pp. 75–77.

<sup>31</sup> Stefan Jakobielski, “Remarques sur la chronologie des peintures murales de Faras aux VIII<sup>e</sup> et IX<sup>e</sup> siècles,” in *Nubia Christiana*, I, Stefan Jakobielski, Bożena Rostkowska, eds (Warsaw, 1982), pp. 152–53, plan I.

<sup>32</sup> Kazimierz Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, aufnahmen von Georg Gerster, Zürich–Köln, 1967, figs 32–33; Godlewski, *Pachoras...*, op. cit., fig. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., figs 64–65, 77; id., *Faras. Malowidła ścienne w zbiorach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, inscriptions edited by Stefan Jakobielski (Warsaw, 1974), pp. 49–50; see also Jadwiga Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* (Warsaw, 1974), p. 125, n° 68, fig. 61. Faras, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Godlewski, *Pachoras...*, op. cit., p. 112, fig. 101; see also J. Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques...*, op. cit., p. 126, n° 70, fig. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Malowidła...*, op. cit., p. 59; Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques...*, op. cit., pp. 120–21, n° 61, fig. 55.

<sup>36</sup> Godlewski, *Pachoras...*, op. cit., fig. 53.

<sup>37</sup> See Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques...*, op. cit., p. 123, n° 64, fig. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Godlewski, *Pachoras...*, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, fig. 55.

Aaron the Anchorite.<sup>40</sup> On the neighbouring western wall, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch was portrayed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and later – Athanasius of Alexandria, next to whom a small horse was imaged (fig. 12).<sup>41</sup>

Even a cursory description of paintings preserved in the cathedral's northern aisle created in consecutive stages of application indicates a certain iconographic incoherence. In the eastern part of the northern aisle, there are at least two iconographic concepts, first of which is dated to the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, and the latter – to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the first one, on the eastern wall, especially important because of its proximity to the altar, icon-like depictions of Virgin Mary with the Child (fig. 2), of an angel and of Saint John (fig. 3) appeared. The paintings do not seem to be involved in any iconographic concept linking them together, which fits well Weitzmann's past conclusions about the lack of relations between the individual representations in the cathedral.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the group of paintings from Faras should be perceived from a different angle, which was already commented upon in 1975 by Piotr Szolc who emphasized their link to the pre-iconoclastic tradition to which they owe their profoundly archaic character.<sup>43</sup> Remaining cautious about Weitzmann's statements, one cannot nevertheless deny the accuracy of his qualification of the paintings as "icon-like." It is particularly evident in the case of murals with a painted border added, owing to which they actually assumed the role of wall icons.<sup>44</sup> The similarities of the cathedral paintings' system and the programme of Roman Santa Maria Antiqua of 6<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, similarly heterogeneous and conceptually dual, is evident in this context. Our attention should be particularly drawn to the appearance, beside the narrative series, of pictures funded by private donors which function as wall icons.<sup>45</sup> Another issue is the lack of direct iconographic interdependence between the consecutive layers of polychromy in Faras (fig. 15), which resembles the preserved fragments of the palimpsest-like polychromy decoration of Santa Maria Antiqua.<sup>46</sup>

Since its very beginnings, Christian art employed complex iconographic programmes centered around events from the Old and the New Testament, arranged in definite ideological sequences.<sup>47</sup> The order of paintings was determined by the chronology of the liturgical calendar: the events unfolded from the eastern side of the southern aisle and accordingly in the northern aisle.<sup>48</sup> This is why the reduction of the narrative cycle in Faras, encompassing

<sup>40</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Malowidła...*, op. cit., p. 59; Godlewski, *Pachoras...*, op. cit., p. 112, fig. 101.

<sup>41</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., p. 111, fig. 29; id., *Faras. Malowidła...*, op. cit., pp. 206–7.

<sup>42</sup> Weitzmann, op. cit., p. 336.

<sup>43</sup> Szolc, "The Iconographical Programme...", op. cit., pp. 296–97.

<sup>44</sup> In Faras, especially the depiction of Virgin Mary Eleusa. See Weitzmann, op. cit., p. 336; Gołgowski, *Malowidła z katedry w Faras...*, op. cit., p. 390; see Małgorzata Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings from the Monastery on Kom H in Dongola* (Warsaw, 2011), p. 105. Dongola, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London, 1994), p. 116; Stephen J. Lucey, "Art and Socio-Cultural Identity in Early Medieval Rome. The Patrons of Santa Maria Antiqua," in *Roma Felix – Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, Éamonn Ó Carragain, Carol Neuman de Vegvar, eds (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 139–158.

<sup>46</sup> Myrtila Avery, "The Alexandrian Style at Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome," *The Art Bulletin*, no. 7 (1925), p. 136, fig. 2.

<sup>47</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, "Early Christian Images and Exegesis," in *Picturing the Bible. The Earliest Christian Art*, Jeffrey Spier, ed. (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 65–84.

<sup>48</sup> Still in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dionysius of Fournia, discussing the order of scenes running from the image of Virgin Mary in the sanctuary, wrote: "Then begin from the left to paint the twelve principal feasts, the Passion and

a small number of these depictions, not forming any coherent programme resembling the Byzantine canon, seems so significant. The layout of paintings in Faras fundamentally differs from the Byzantine tradition which provided the basis for the disposition of the church's space and the accentuation of symbolical meanings of its particular parts.<sup>49</sup> Regarding this tradition as a blueprint, in Faras we can perceive almost an inversion of the order of paintings. If a narration evoked by depictions in a Byzantine church runs from the left to the right around the aisle,<sup>50</sup> in Faras, depictions chronologically prior (the Nativity) appear on the northern side of the altar, and later ones (the Passion) – on the southern side. The distinctive prevalence of portrayals of mortals protected by Christ, Virgin Mary or saints as well as saints themselves over other, more elaborate themes should be underlined. These images must have had functions like thanksgiving, supplication or intermediation.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the order of depictions and their repertoire, the presence of “women-themed” paintings in the northern aisle seems in accordance with the iconographic standards of the Byzantine circle. One could think of the mosaics from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (and refurbished in the 6<sup>th</sup> century) where, on the southern side of the aisle, there were grouped martyrs heading towards Christ, and on the northern side – women martyrs marching towards Theotokos.<sup>52</sup> Another example is provided by the famous 6<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics in Ravenna's San Vitale representing the imperial retinues of Justinian and Theodora.<sup>53</sup> In both cases, the iconographic segregation of the men's and women's side is very clear, though our attention should be drawn by the fact that in the first case the southern part can be described as “men's” and the northern as “women's” while in the latter case this order is reversed.

The division into two parts applying to the eastern and western aisle whose iconographic programmes seem to have respectively “male” and “a more female” character, is to be found in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome.<sup>54</sup> Among the later examples of programmes involving a distinction between the men's and women's parts, Hagia Sophia in Thessalonica,<sup>55</sup> Hagios Stefanos in Kastoria,<sup>56</sup> the old metropolis in Veroia,<sup>57</sup> Hagios Demetrios in Servia<sup>58</sup>

the events after the Resurrection. Paint them round the whole church [...]” *The ‘Painter’s Manual’ of Dionysius of Fourna*, tr. and ed. Paul Hetherington (London, 1974), p. 84.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas F. Mathews, “Religious Organization and Church Architecture,” in *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261*, Helen C. Evans, William D. Wixom, eds (New York, 1997), p. 32; see also Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings...*, op. cit., p. 108; Bożena Mierzejewska, “Postacie fundatorów trzymających gałązki na malowidłach ściennych w Nubii,” *Ikonotheka*, no. 21 (2008), p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> Mathews, “Religious Organization...,” op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Martens-Czarnecka, *The Wall Paintings...*, op. cit., p. 108; Bożena Mierzejewska, “Nubian Imagines Potes-tatis in the Collections of the National Museum in Warsaw,” *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, Ann. 41, n° 1–4 (2000), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Corine Schleif, “Men on the Right – Women on the Left: (A)symmetrical Spaces and Gendered Spaces,” in *Women’s Space. Patronage, Place, and Gender in Medieval Church*, Virginia Chieffo Raguin, Sarah Stanbury, eds (Albany, 2005), pp. 219–20.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 221–22.

<sup>54</sup> Lucey, “Art and Socio-Cultural Identity...,” op. cit., pp. 154–56.

<sup>55</sup> Gerstel, “Painted Sources for Female Piety...,” op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 96.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

and Mystras<sup>59</sup> and the cathedral in Athens<sup>60</sup> could be cited. Unfortunately, the analysis of Byzantine source texts which can be considered and which are very late, does not bring any confirmation of the differentiation of an iconographic programme resulting from gender segregation of depicted figures.

The most significant fragment of paintings in the northern aisle of Faras cathedral in terms of ideological contents seem to be the ones on the eastern side, and in the context of a “women-oriented” programme it is the portrayal of Saint Anne on the northern wall of this aisle, discussed in an in-depth 1988 study by Tadeusz Dobrzeński (figs 4, 5).<sup>61</sup> The preserved depiction of a woman with a maphorion on her head who looks straight ahead with eyes wide open and her index finger on her lips, must have originally been part of a larger whole. The inscription accompanying the image of Saint Anne<sup>62</sup> implies that an image of Her daughter – Mary was also a part of the painting.

Representations such as this one appear in the art of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, to mention only the paintings from Rome’s Santa Maria Antiqua, where the portrait of Saint Anne holding infant Mary on her arm is placed on the southern wall of the chancel. Hans Belting describes it as a votive picture of private nature.<sup>63</sup> The figure of Saint Anne appears in this church for the second time in a group represented in a niche in the right-hand aisle, where Theotokos with the Child was painted in a medallion worn on the chest with Anne and infant Mary and Elizabeth with infant John the Baptist.<sup>64</sup> Yet the portrayal of Saint Anne from Faras is for many reasons exceptional. The missing halo around the saint’s head is indeed curious and the reason for such a depiction calls for answers. Similar cases – be they rare – are known of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, the wall icon of Theotokos at Santa Maria Antiqua from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, in which Belting observes an analogy to mummy portraits.<sup>65</sup> Another singular trait is the juvenile or perhaps timeless appearance of Saint Anne’s face. Sharon Gerstel, analysing the veneration of Saint Anne in Byzantium, states that her portrait-like depictions always underline her old age.<sup>66</sup> And yet in Faras, we are faced with an original version of a depiction of Mary’s mother, with the distinctive gesture of the index finger on the lips.

In accordance with the long literary and iconographic tradition, the gesture can be understood as a sign of silence. The literature of the subject considers it to symbolize contemplation. It could also express either sorrow or stupefaction in the face of sanctity – and, consequently, create a symbolic image of a human being listening to the voice of God.<sup>67</sup> As we know from the apocryphal texts, Anne experienced all the listed states. The *Infancy Gospel of James* being the

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Tadeusz Dobrzeński, “Święta Anna z Faras w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie. Symbolika gestu milczenia,” *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 32 (1988), pp. 95–214.

<sup>62</sup> Stefan Jakobiński, “Inskrypcje” in Michałowski, *Faras. Malowidła...*, op. cit., no. 5, p. 286; see also Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques...*, op. cit., p. 122, n° 62, fig. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence...*, op. cit., pp. 120–21.

<sup>64</sup> Ann van Dijk, “The Veronica, the Vultus Christi, and the veneration of icons in medieval Rome,” in Rosamond McKitterick et al., eds, *Old Saint Peter’s* (Rome, Cambridge 2013), pp. 248–249, fig. 12.8.

<sup>65</sup> Belting, *Likeness and Presence...*, op. cit., pp. 118–19, figs 68–69.

<sup>66</sup> Gerstel, “Painted Sources for Female Piety...,” op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>67</sup> See Dobrzeński, “Święta Anna z Faras...,” op. cit., pp. 125–196.



main source of information on Anne's life recounts that while still childless, she felt profound sorrow, and while visited by the angel announcing her the birth of Mary – she also directly faced the sacred sphere.<sup>68</sup> In the text concerning the conception of Mary, the extraordinary nature of this event and the intervention of supernatural power are emphasized. John of Euboea wrote the following in his *Homily on the Conception of the Theotokos* of the 8<sup>th</sup> century: “Behold, sorrow changed to joy and lamentation to gladness. Behold, groaning and timely tears, and unutterable joy of eternity! Behold, reproach removed and an inalienable gift brought to God, who contains the uncontainable God in a womb!”<sup>69</sup> As much as the portrait of Saint Anne from Faras is devoid of any direct or obvious analogies, we can nevertheless find similarities with, for instance, the portrayal of Sarah in the picture of the Hospitality of Abraham from San Vitale, where the gesture of Sarah – who is looking at the celestial visitors the moment she is learning she is going to become a mother in spite of her old age – has something of the contemplation and melancholy evoked in the painting from Faras.<sup>70</sup> Mary was depicted in a similar manner in 6<sup>th</sup> century Annunciation scenes, e.g., in Poreč<sup>71</sup> or Al-Adra.<sup>72</sup> Doubtlessly, all these depictions represent women who were confronted with the sacred sphere. In Faras, Anne is likewise portrayed.

The veneration of Saint Anne is oftentimes cited as specifically “female.” Gerstel points out that Byzantine women praying for a child addressed Saint Anne<sup>73</sup>. The scholar highlights that depictions of Anne with infant Mary on her hands or Anne Lactans always appear next to votive images<sup>74</sup> and that probably the majority of them also have this role. The function of the painting of Saint Anne with Mary, which in Faras was situated near the entrance to the *prothesis* chapel,<sup>75</sup> should likely be interpreted along these lines, too. In the context of the discussions during the Council in Trullo about women remaining quiet in the church, as well as the very location of the saint's depiction, the painting can be explained as a certain kind of instruction or warning for women to maintain silence and earnest conduct in the sacred space.

However, the appearance of the portrayal on the cathedral wall could be also linked to the feast of the Conception of Mary observed in Byzantium in the 8<sup>th</sup> century on 9 December.<sup>76</sup> The image of Saint Anne in the context of the feast day has a much wider meaning than simply a woman-oriented message. It connects with the entire context of the history of salvation,

<sup>68</sup> *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, Ron Cameron, ed. (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Holy Theotokos* in: *Wider Than Heaven: Eighth-century Homilies on the Mother of God*, tr. Mary B. Cunningham (New York, 2008), p. 176.

<sup>70</sup> Dobrzeniecki, “Święta Anna z Faras...,” op. cit., p. 180, fig. 78; Jensen, “Early Christian Images...,” op. cit., fig. 50.

<sup>71</sup> Dobrzeniecki, “Święta Anna z Faras...,” op. cit., p. 194, fig. 83; Henry Maguire, “Body, Clothing, Metaphor: The Virgin in Early Byzantine Art,” in *The Cult of Mother of God in Byzantium. Text and Images*, Leslie Brubaker, Mary B. Cunningham, eds (Farnham, 2011), fig. 3.10.

<sup>72</sup> Dobrzeniecki, “Święta Anna z Faras...,” op. cit., p. 194, fig. 87, 99; Karel C. Innemée, “Deir al-Sourian – The Annunciation as a Part of a Cycle,” *Cahiers Archéologiques*, no. 42 (1995), pp. 129–32.

<sup>73</sup> Gerstel, “Painted Sources for Female Piety...,” op. cit., pp. 96–98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>75</sup> Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques...*, op. cit., pp. 120–21, n° 61, fig. 55.

<sup>76</sup> John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception...*, op. cit., p. 196; see also Gabriel Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Évangile aux XIV<sup>e</sup>, XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles, d'après les monuments de Mistra, de la Macédoine et du Mont Athos* (Paris, 1916), p. 20.

and it can be interpreted as one of the images predicting the Incarnation of the Logos, and therefore conveying a meaning close to the scenes placed on the northern side of the church related with the Nativity.<sup>77</sup>

The depictions of Theotokos appearing on the northern aisle, especially Maria Lactans (figs 11-15)<sup>78</sup>, play an equally crucial role as the image of Saint Anne discussed above. Scholars suggested their possible relation to the tensions between the Orthodoxy and the ideas of monophysitism, yet it seems that this question remains open for discussion.<sup>79</sup> Without a doubt, they contain a complex theological message and, according to the suggestion of Sabrina Higgins, despite the strong resemblance to breastfeeding Isis, these two compositions ought not to be directly compared.<sup>80</sup> Linking them ideologically with the Nativity depictions present in Faras seems substantial, though. According to Elizabeth S. Bolman, in the context of literary sources and theological concepts represented by, for instance, Clement of Alexandria, the meaning of the image of Maria Lactans should be contemplated against the meaning of the milk pouring from Her breast standing for the Divine nourishment, guaranteeing immortality to the faithful, that is, the Eucharist.<sup>81</sup> Representations of Maria Lactans are often found in men's convents which can undermine the assumption that they were exclusively dedicated to female worshippers.<sup>82</sup> One of the cathedral paintings, with traces of smoke underneath

<sup>77</sup> On Nativity in Nubian art, see Piotr O. Scholz, "Das nubische Christentum und seine Wandmalereien," in *Dongola-Studien. 35 Jahre polnischer Forschungen im Zentrum des makuritischen Reiches*, Stefan Jakobielski, Piotr O. Scholz, eds (Warsaw, 2001), pp. 216–220; see also Grzegorz Ochoła, "Kalendarz liturgiczny Kościoła nubijskiego w świetle zachowanych fragmentów nubijskich lekcjonarzy," *U schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze*, no. 12 (2013), p. 211.

<sup>78</sup> Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras*..., op. cit., p. 180, fig. 62; Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques*..., op. cit., p. 123, n° 64, fig. 58.

<sup>79</sup> Martin Krause, "Zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte Nubiens. Neue Quellen und Probleme," in *Kunst und Geschichte nubien*..., op. cit., pp. 81–82; Peter Paul V. van Moorsel, "Die stillende Gottesmutter und die Monophysiten," in *Kunst und Geschichte nubien*..., op. cit., pp. 281–88; see Gołgowski, *Malowidła z katedry w Faras*..., op. cit., p. 406; id., "Z problematyki ikonografii biskupów Pachoras," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Ann. 11 (1967), pp. 188–89; see also Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras*..., op. cit., pp. 140–159, 206–211; id., "Chrześcijaństwo nubijskie w świetle najnowszych badań," in Aziz S. Atiya, *Historia kościołów wschodnich*, tr. Stefan Jakobielski et al. (Warsaw, 1978), p. 390. During the conference "Chrześcijańskie malarstwo w Nubii" [Christian Painting in Nubia] held at the UKSW in Warsaw on 27 November 2015, Ewa Wipszycka appealed to scholars to revise their beliefs concerning the alleged relations between monophysitism and art. I am indebted to Professor Wipszycka for drawing my attention to Her book whose fragments discuss the relations between the Orthodox and Monophysite churches: Ewa Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church. People and Institutions* (Warsaw, 2015), pp. 415–38.

<sup>80</sup> Sabrina Higgins, *Embodying the Virgin: The Physical Materialization of The Cult of Mary in Late Antique Egypt (Fifth-Ninth Centuries CE)*, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa (Ottawa, 2015), pp. 104–6 [online], [retrieved: 12 November 2015], at: <<https://www.ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/31923>>.

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth S. Bolman, "The Coptic Galaktotrophousa Revisited," in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta. Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium, II. Proceedings of the Coptic Studies, Leiden 2000*, Matt Immerzeel, Jacques van der Vliet, eds (Leuven, 2004), pp. 1176–77; see also Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogos)* I, 6 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 [online], tr. By William Wilson, rev. and edited fr New Advent by Kevin Knight; Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds (Buffalo, NY, 1885), [retrieved: 28 June 2016], at: <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0209.htm>>. See also [Rev.] Jan Słomka, "Ciało i krew Jezusa jako pokarm. J 6, 48–58 w interpretacji Klemensa Aleksandryjskiego," *Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne*, vol. 37, p. 2 (2004), pp. 131–38.

<sup>82</sup> See Higgins, *Embodying the Virgin*..., op. cit., pp. 107–9; ead., "Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans-Iconography," *Journal of Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*, no. 3–4 (2012), pp. 76–78.

implying that candles had been burnt in front of it, features a double inscription on the two sides of the cross: supplications of Joseph, son of Mark, and of Mariame, daughter of Mariaty, to Christ and Mary (**fig. 13**).<sup>83</sup>

The meaning of the paintings and the way they were perceived by the congregation in the church's interior were greatly determined by their location in the church. The portrayal of Saint Anne (**figs 4, 5**), just like the painting of Virgin Mary with the Child on the eastern wall (**figs 2, 3**), were discovered 3 metres above the floor.<sup>84</sup> Other paintings like Maria Lactans were painted a little lower, 2 metres above the floor (**fig. 12**).<sup>85</sup> The height at which the depictions were placed should be taken into consideration in the analysis of their devotional function. Were the people in the church able to see images painted so high? Could they recognize the figures? It may seem improbable, yet religious practices related with the veneration of images show that the question of legibility of the message delivered by images, let alone the aesthetic side of the paintings, did not really have any significance for the worshippers.<sup>86</sup>

The walls of the northern cathedral were filled with images. In this group, a well-developed set of representations could be found, including images of Anne and Theotokos, Her depictions with the Child in their peculiar variation: Maria Lactans and the Nativity scene. Apart from the aforementioned, images of sainted apostles, bishops and warriors abound, which draws our attention to the aspect already discussed in the literature of the subject, among others by Claudia Rapp who explored the models of sanctity addressed to men and women. Her research on the lives of the saints functioning in various circles suggests that there was no plain attribution of particular men-saints to men and of women-saints to women.<sup>87</sup> On the contrary: numerous instances are known of the veneration of Mary and other women saints gaining great popularity in male cloistered communities which followed the rule of the complete exclusion of earthly women from their convents, as, once again, exemplified by the cloistered communities on Athos.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, if in Byzantium the status of the lives of women saints did not offer an analogy to the status of ordinary mortal women, the same can be said about their depictions, which were universally respected and appeared in both men's and women's communities. The depictions of women, including the scenes of giving birth or breastfeeding should not be taken literally or interpreted as images meant only for women and exclusively carrying simple messages related to their gender: they all allude to the subject of the Incarnation of Christ, the divine motherhood of an earthly woman, the identity of the Mother and Son and the theological relations between them.

Depictions of Mary, Saint Anne or the Nativity in Faras can be therefore interpreted in the light of the universal theme of divine motherhood, as well as of the Eucharist. It appears then that their location in the northern aisle only partially suggests that the aisle was used as a "women-only" area. The idea is much more certainly supported by the presence of votive

<sup>83</sup> Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras...*, op. cit., p. 180, no. 44, fig. 62; id., *Inskrypcje*, op. cit., no. 33, p. 301.

<sup>84</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., pp. 109, 110.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>86</sup> See Belting, *Likeness and Presence...*, op. cit., p. 135.

<sup>87</sup> Claudia Rapp, "Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and their Audience," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 50 (1996), p. 329.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

images: of a Christian woman protected by an angel (**fig. 6**)<sup>89</sup> which neighboured the portrayal of Saint Anne, the depiction of Queen Marta with Virgin Mary painted in the same place (**fig. 8**)<sup>90</sup> or the representation of a Nubian princess under Mary's protection on one of the eastern pillars (**fig. 9**).<sup>91</sup> Similarly as in the aforementioned Santa Maria Antiqua church in Rome, images of women on the church's walls reveal a considerable amount about their donors, both men and women,<sup>92</sup> and their expectations, confirmed by votive inscriptions on the walls in the northern aisle, the majority of which come from women.<sup>93</sup> Undoubtedly, the iconography of mortal women depicted in the company of transcendental beings representing the celestial sphere should become the subject of an in-depth study, focusing on the relation between the depictions of saints and the portraits of donors, as well as between saints and women whom they symbolically protect on images.

Translated by Karolina Koriat

<sup>89</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., figs 32, 34; Bożena Rostkowska, "Iconographie des personnages historiques sur les peintures de Faras," *Études et Travaux*, no. 6 (1972), fig. 15, p. 205.

<sup>90</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., fig. 77; Rostkowska, "Iconographie des personnages...", op. cit., fig. 2, pp. 19–199.

<sup>91</sup> Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale...*, op. cit., figs 94–95; Rostkowska, "Iconographie des personnages...", op. cit., fig. 4, p. 200.

<sup>92</sup> Lucey, "Art and Socio-Cultural Identity...", op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>93</sup> Jakobielski, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras...*, op. cit., p. 180; id., *Inskrypcje*, op. cit., pp. 300–1.