Wall Paintings in Churches with a Limited Christological Cycle

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Dedicated to Father Superior
Archimandrite Theofylon Bougiouleka

This paper deals with twelve small Cretan and Peloponnesian churches, painted in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. The iconographical program in these churches includes very limited christological cycles. On the contrary, the lives of the patron saints of the churches are illustrated extensively. This phenomenon is related to the growing importance of hagiology from the end of the 13th century onwards.

The message conveyed by the iconographic programme of the Byzantine church embodies two fundamental notions of the Christian faith. The first of these notions is the Incarnation of the Word of God and His actions on earth, that is to say His First Coming, which forms the necessary pre-condition for fulfillment of the divine economy’s plan, the aim of which is the salvation of man. The other notion is the Second Coming, which constitutes the completion of the entire divine plan. D. Mouriki mentions that the figurative rendering of these two fundamental principles, which define the iconographic programme of the churches, are differentiated to a greater or lesser degree according to the church’s consecration, its specific use, the role of the patrons, and the artists, and also according to the relative importance of the donors’ preferences, existing examples, and, of course, the dimensions of the buildings themselves.

The developed and defined iconographic programme since the eleventh century, however, was not fully applicable to churches that did not include a dome, examples of which constitute a fairly significant number. In them, the absence of the Pantokrator deprived the iconographic programme of an opportunity to give the church a clear symbolism representing “the universe in miniature”. In such cases, the centre of gravity is transferred to the most important architectural part of the church, which is the arch of the pulpit.

In Greece, we see many single-spaced, arched churches of small proportions, which due to the simplicity of their construction became an attractive choice as chapels or private chapels of prayer. Twelve single-spaced, arched and two groin-vaulted churches in Crete and the Peloponnese, dating from the second half of the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, present an interesting iconographic programme: according to the established rules, we would expect the arch to be decorated with scenes from the christological cycle, and if there was enough space remaining, with scenes from the cycles of the saints to whom the church was consecrated, or even the cycle of a secondary honoured saint. In these churches, by contrast, renderings of the christological cycle number but a few and only those deemed essential, while on the western section of the arch that corresponds to the nave and the cross arch of the groin vaults, the only depictions are those of the lives of the saints to whom the churches are consecrated. The iconographic programme of these churches will form the subject of the present study.

The majority of the twelve churches have been known to researchers for a long time. Three of them are consecrated to Saint Nicholas: the groin vaulted church in Klenia of Corinthia (1287), the one-spaced church in Neiata of Epidauros in Limira (second half of the thirteenth century), and the groin vaulted church in Mouri of Kismos (thirteenth century). In Klenia, six scenes from the saint’s life are placed on the cross arch (Fig. 1). In the Neiata church, twelve scenes from his life cover the two legs of the west section of the arch, while in Mouri, in Crete, renderings of the saint’s three miracles have survived on the cross arch (Fig. 2).

Furthermore, three churches are consecrated to the Archangels: the cavernous church of Saint John the Baptist (Archanjel) in Bassara of Laconia (last quarter of the thirteenth century).

2 V. Moufraka, op. cit. The iconographic programme of Byzantine churches, and especially the domes, manifests the cosmological symbolism of the church as the universe in miniature.
3 Ibid., 218. V. also M. Geroussis, Οι τοπογραφίες του Αγίου Αμαρίου στο Μακρυχώρι και της Κομμήτης της Θεοτόκου στον Οχυρό της Ευβοίας, Athens 1991, 192, where the relevant bibliography comes from.
4 Moufraka, op. cit., 218; Geroussis, op. cit., 162.
6 Α. Μπαντώ, Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του αρχον βήματος των μεσαίους εκκλησιών της Ελλάδος (1043–1204), Athens 2001, 58.
7 Their width varies between three and four metres and their corresponding length between approximately six and eight metres; v. N. Nikosdinos, Βυζαντινοί ναοί της Θεσσαλίας από τον 11ο αιώνα ως την κατάκτηση της περιοχής από τους Τούρκους το 1453, Athens 1979, 146.
8 Χ. και Α. Μπαντώ, Η ελλαδική ναοβιομορφή κατά τον 12ο αιώνα, Athens 2002, 344, where relevant examples and bibliography can be found.
9 In the nave there are depictions of the Nativity of Christ, the Transfiguration, Prophets and Martyrs. V. M. Aspöck-Breithaupt, Οι Τοπογραφίες του Αγίου Νικολάου στην Κλήνη Κορίνθου, Δίκτυα 4 (1986) 100–125, and 125–128 for the Saint Nicholas churches. V. also N. P. Ševčenko, The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art, Torino 1983, 39.
10 On the western wall of the nave may have been the Crucifixion and below, the Baptist. And for the scenes from Saint Nicholas’s life, v. N. Drakadákis, Σ. Καλοτσόπουλος, Έρωτας στην Επίδαυρο Αμαρία, Αθηναϊκά ΑΕ (1983 — Α') 221–231.
The miracles are: 1) The Synaxis of Archangels. 2) The miracle at Chonee, Β. Αρχιμανδρίτης, Τα Θαύματα-Εμπαθείς των Ἀγγέλων και Ἀρχαγγέλων στη Βυζαντινή Τέχνη των Βαλκανίων, Athens-Loussini 1989, 67.

12 On the southern wall of the nave there is a depiction of the Crucifixion and, below, of the Threnos, on the western and northern walls the Last Judgement, and on the supporting arch depictions of saints; Β. Αρχιμανδρίτης, op. cit., 75–76; A. Kastelăloć, O Naos του Αρχαγγέλου Μιχαήλ στις Αρχές Πραξικεπίδημος (1135/16) και η Μεταμετασχηματική στην Κρήτη στις αρχές του 14ου αιώνα, PhD dissertation, Ioannina 2003, 50–55.

13 On the western wall of the nave there is a depiction of the Crucifixion, V. Ν. Δρεσκόνης, Ε. Δαρδή, Σ. Καλαπάκης, Μ. Παπαγιάννης, Έρευνα στη Νέα ΠΑΕ 1978, 155; Κουκάκης, Τα Θαύματα, 81–82.

14 M. Μπαρμπράκης, Η Βυζαντινή Τέχνη της Πρώτης Βενετοκρατίας στην Κρήτη Ιστορία και Πολιτισμός II, Crete 1988, 51–1.

15 Spatharakis, Dated Byzantine Wall-Paintings of Crete, Leiden 2001, 53–55, where scenes from the cycle of Saint George are numbered and commented upon, while on the western wall of the nave is a depiction of the Crucifixion.


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The Church of St. George is one of the most important and well-preserved buildings in Mani. The church was consecrated in 1315, and it is believed to have been built on the foundations of a Byzantine church. The church consists of a nave and two aisles, with a domed apse at the east end. The church is notable for its rich and diverse iconography, which includes depictions of the Virgin, Archangels, saints, and scenes from the life of Christ. The iconography is spread across the walls and ceiling of the church, with the icons placed in a way that is easy to follow and understand. The church is also noteworthy for its well-preserved frescoes, which have been the subject of extensive research and study.
there are depictions from the cycle placed on parts of the arch, and others placed on the north and south walls (Fig. 5).^17 Almost the same iconographic programme was applied later by Georgios Provatopoulos, who decorated the churches of Saint George in Koustogerakó (beginning of 1494) (Fig. 6) and Kato Flória of Selínos (28th July, 1497) (Fig. 7).^18

Finally, in some other churches, we find cycles from the lives of saints not commonly depicted in Byzantine art.\(^19\) In Saint John the Baptist’s church at the village of Agios Vassileios of the province of Pedias, Créte (1291), five scenes from the Baptist’s life are placed on the arch of the nave.\(^20\) In the church of Saint Paraskeve in Pediado (Fifteenth century), the western part of the arch is occupied by twenty scenes from the cycle of the venerated saint in two successive rows.\(^21\) Even in the church of Saint Anne in Kantanos of Selínos (Annisarakí), also in Créte (1457), seven scenes from the life cycle of the mother of Theotokos are found on the western part of the arch.\(^22\)

We have seen that the twelve aforementioned churches with limited christological cycles are situated in Créte and the Peloponnese. In these churches we see figural representations of only the fundamental creeds of the Orthodox Church, that is, the Incarnation of the Divine Word with the earliest and last events of His earthly life. The iconography of the eastern section that corresponds with the space of the altar does not deviate from the established iconographic programme.\(^23\) On the quadrant of the arch, according to the established norms, there is a depiction of the Platytera who projects the doctrine of the Incarnation,\(^24\) or the incarnated Word of God and, slightly further below, the co-officiating Hierarchs.\(^25\) In all depictions there is a rendering of the Annunciation, in other words the scene of the Incarnation’s origin. The Annunciation’s established position is on the uppermost part of both sides of the arch.\(^26\) The Incarnation could also be represented by other scenes, such as the Nativity of Christ, found in two churches, although in the nave rather than by the altar, the Holy Mandylion,\(^27\) found in three churches, the Hospital-

1. The Hospitality of Abraham
2. The Annunciation
3. St. Nicholas appears to the Emperor Constantine
4. St. Nicholas appears to Ablabious
5. Sea story
6. The Annunciation to Anne

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 111–114, Í. 134. V. also Spathamakis, op. cit., 217–218.

\(^{18}\) Anagnostis, op. cit., 191; Spathamakis, op. cit., 217–218.

\(^{19}\) This phenomenon continued in the post-Byzantine era too in two churches in Mavronounio, Saint George in Sthí and Saint Paraskeve in Mrkovi at the end of the 17th century, which were painted by Dimitrios Daskal. In the Sthí church there are depictions only of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and fourteen scenes from Saint George’s cycle. In the Mrkovi church the renderings consist of the Annunciation, the Resurrection of Lazarus, the Pentecost, and seventeen scenes from Saint Paraskeve’s cycle. Cf. P. Mikov, Sokotorska silbarska škola XVII–XIX vijeka i zagon Đakovića Dimitrije, Titograd 1960, 17–22, 22–31.

\(^{20}\) The Nativity of Christ is depicted on the southern wall, while the Crucifixion and the Last Judgement are depicted on the western wall, v. Anagnostis, op. cit., 77, Í. 489; Mavromautakos, op. cit., 57–58.


\(^{22}\) On the western wall of the nave as well as on parts of the northern and southern walls there are depictions of the Last Judgment, v. Anagnostis, op. cit., 78, Í. 499; Mavromautakos, op. cit., 52. For scenes taken from the saint’s cycle v. Archimandrite S. Koutoufs, O Kólos ton Bivn ton Agias Paraskeves tis Romias kai tis el Ikonon sthn Eristanikí Tēchnti, Athens 1994, 58–62.

\(^{23}\) Anagnostis, op. cit., 38–39, Í. 147; K. Kalokýrnis, Iakónoi, Pagaménai, o Byzantiniós Zografos tou 15a aións, Krithiká Xroniká 12 (1958) 354; Spathamakis, op. cit., 207–210, where additional bibliography and scenes from Saint Anne’s cycle can be found.

\(^{24}\) Mavromautakos, op. cit., 33.

\(^{25}\) Mavromautakos, op. cit., 57–59, where the relevant bibliography can be found.

\(^{26}\) X. Kavantantinidh, O Mélanios, PhD dissertation, Athens 1990.


and tenth centuries, where a more developed cycle of scenes, taken from the saint’s life to whom the chapel was consecrated, has survived. In these chapels, subject of a remarkable study by G. Babić, holy relics or miraculous icons of the venerated saints were kept. It was not until later that tombs of patrons, donors, priests or people of particular importance were placed in these chapels. It is known that in such chapels services like celebrations for the saint’s day, or memorial services for the patrons, donors, monks etc., were held. The body of the dead would also be placed in the chapel for the last respects, or for the funeral liturgy to be sung. Furthermore, in the church of Saint Sophia, in Kiev (1037–1045), built by the Great Duke Jaroslav, we see that there are three chapels decorated with scenes from the lives of the saints. In Serbia, from the time of Saint Sava (thirteenth century) until today, several chapels attached to churches were founded and decorated by members of the ruling class or magnates of the area, who would dedicate them to the patron saints of their dynasty or family. Babić interpreted the iconographic programme of the churches’ side chapels based on written sources, that is, based on the typika of various monasteries, the typikon of the Great Church, the Constantinople synaxarion, and other ecclesiastical sources, as well as on historical data from each period.

The churches that form the subject of this study, however, are not side chapels but small, independent churches. Their humble proportions, the impromptu building materials, the great number of patrons mentioned on the donor inscriptions, and the number of donors inscribed on the majority of these churches all indicate that the specific churches were private, belonging to a family or to a group of fellow-countrymen. Furthermore, their iconographic programme, for which, naturally, the first word belonged to the patrons and donors, seems to be dictated by the same concern, that is, the promotion of their patron saint’s life. What were the reasons

Fig. 3. Aps Anes, Crete, church of the Archangel Michael (1315–1316), naos, the northern half of the barrel vault, scenes from the cycle of the Archangel Michael

Fig. 4. Aps Anes, Crete, church of the Archangel Michael (1315–1316), naos, the southern half of the barrel vault, scenes from the cycle of the Archangel Michael

ity of Abraham in five churches, and Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac, in two churches. This last scene is considered a prefiguration of the Incarnate Word’s Crucifixion.

The end of Christ’s life on earth is presented in the iconographic programme of the aforementioned churches with depictions of the Crucifixion, in eight churches, and of the Ascension, which occupies the eastern part of the arches corresponding to the altar in all of these churches. This scene is given an eschatological context and is related to the reference to the Ascension that takes place in the Liturgy. In the nave, the Orthodox Church’s eschatological teachings are represented by scenes of the Last Judgement, depicting in only three of the aforementioned churches. Other scenes from the christological cycle, such as the Transfiguration, the Baptism, or the Tithes, have survived only once respectively.

The phenomenon of depicting scenes from the lives of the saints has a long tradition in Christian art, making its appearance quite early, in the “Martyrdoms”, and continues, especially in chapels attached to important churches such as Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome (751–752). However, it appears principally in certain Cappadocian chapels of the ninth

28 Koas, A. Μ. G., Τα Θεάτρια, Τα Σκηνοθεσία, 106–111; Maniū, op. cit., 180–189, with bibliography.
30 Προς Αθηναίαν Αντρακομαχία, Αμφιολόγιον, Τα Θαυματουργία, εις την Ελληνικήν, Πάτρα, 1750.
31 Τα Ημέρες της Κυναι Μονής, Έμπορις, Σταδία, Θεσσαλονίκη 1975, Κ. Κοκκινίδης, op. cit., 52–64.
32 Μαντόνα, op. cit., 197.
33 Δ. Ξωτάκης, Η Ηλεία Εις την Αγίαντα, Εις την Αγία Μονή Μονήριον, ΑΕ 1958, 184–198.
36 Ibid, 83–84.
37 Ibid., 175.
38 Ibid., 175.
39 Ibid., 84, 175.
40 Ibid., 105, 107.
41 Ibid., 129–158. The churches that the text refers to are the ones of Milděs (before 1228), coxanarch of Studenica (1233/1234), Monon (1253), Sopočani (1263–1286), Ariele (1296), and Zita (1309–1316).
42 Ibid., 5–61.
44 Two donors are depicted in Apsan, two in Veliana, two in Antipepe, seven in Komitades, and the whole Florita family in Kato Florita.
45 For such indications, see N. Β. Διαγνετζής, Ο Τιμωρητής του Αγίου Νικολάου στον Άγιο Νικολάο Μοναστήρι, ΑΧΑΠ 9 (1979) 38; Archimandrite S. Koas, Η ημέρα του Ευαγγελίου δια την εικονογραφία. Πρόγραμμα του Βυζαντινού Ναού (τεχνικές αρχαίας, Κλασικοθέα 22 (1990) 105–120.
Fig. 5. Komitades, Crete, church of St. George (1313/1314), painting arrangement

1. The hospitality of Abraham  
2. St. Stephen  
3. St. Blassios  
4. St. Titus  
5. Unknown bishop  
6. Unknown bishop  
7. The Ascension of Christ  
8. The Nativity of Christ  
9. The Baptism of Christ  
10. St. George thrown into the lime pit  
11. St. George on the wheel  
12. The Empty Tomb  
13. Harrowing of Hell  
14. Entry into Jerusalem  
15. The Beheading of St. George  
16. St. George burned by torches  
17. Drakontoktonia  
18. St. George thrown in the cauldron  
19. The Crucifixion

Fig. 6. Koustogerako, Crete, church of St. George (1494), painting arrangement

1. St. George thrown in the cauldron  
2. The Beheading of St. George  
3. The Transfiguration  
4. St. George wearing heated books  
5. Drakontoktonia  
6. Scraping of St. George  
7. The breaking the wheel of St. George  
8. Unknown saint  
9. The Ascension of Christ  
10. The Annunciation  
11. St. Symeon holding the Christ-child  
12. The Baptism of Christ  
13. The Nativity of Christ  
14. Prophets  
15. Christ the Pantokrator  
16. The hospitality of Abraham  
17. The Annunciation  
18. The Crucifixion

sons, though, that made patrons order the iconographers on the one hand to restrict the christological cycle’s scenes to only the necessary, to those illustrative of the Orthodox Church’s basic doctrines, and on the other to fill the part of the arch that relates to the nave with incidents from the venerated saint’s life?

This characteristic of the iconographic programme in the majority of the aforementioned small churches, and especially those in Crete, has already been highlighted by research.45 We believe, however, that the interpretation of the fresco decorations in these churches should not be sought generally in the liturgical typika, or on surviving monastic typika. On the contrary, the iconographers must have based their depictions, following their patrons’ suggestions, on hagiological texts, which constituted readings favoured by the patrons.

45 Μπαζέρακης, op. cit., 51–53; Μαδέρακης, op. cit., 30–33; Κατσιλάκης, op. cit., 315.
themselves. Especially from the late thirteenth century and on to the present, a period that covers the building of the churches in this study, there is an exceptional flourishing of hagiography, and great ecclesiastical authors devote themselves to it, such as the Patriarch Gregorios Kypriotis, Theodore Metochites, Constantine Acropolites, Theodore Pediasimos, Theoktistos Stoudites, the monks Chariton, Gregorios, Nephon, Makarios, Anthimos of Crete, Philotheos Kokkinos, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and many others. It is also a known fact that hagiology reaches a new height with the movement of the Hesychasts, starting in the early fourteenth century.

It is also a well-documented fact that from the late thirteenth century, approximately one quarter of the surviving encomiums and orations dedicated to the Archangels and their miracles have been written, and one third of the orations/encomiums for Saint John the Baptist. From the twenty-five surviving panegyrics for Saint Nicholas, nine were written during these centuries. Constantine Acropolites (died c. 1321) wrote an oration for Saint Paraskeve, whereas the unsigned orations concerning her martyrdom survive in manuscript form from the Palaeologean period. To the same era belong several orations about Saint George, from the surviving nineteen of known author, while the orator Georgios wrote an panegyric for the foremother Anne in the fourteenth century. The special honour that was paid, and continues to be paid, by the Orthodox Church and laitymen to the above saints, is confirmed also by the fact that, as Symeon of Thessalonica (died 1430) mentions, each day of the week was dedicated to them: Monday to the Archangels, Tuesday to Saint John the Baptist, Thursday to the Apostles and Saint Nicholas, Friday to the Holy Cross, while Saturday was dedicated to All Saints and the dead.

It is likely that during the fourteenth century, the Hesychast movement contributed to the reinforcement and expansion of the honour and veneration of the saints, and consequently to the spread of hagiographical texts. The religiousity that resulted from within this movement not only encouraged the faithful to struggle for their sanctification by the grace of God, using as a starting point the sacrament of the Eucharist, it also projected the ideal of the godly man. It was, that is to say, the time of the promotion a righteous humanism, which found its figurative expression in the aforementioned churches, through the depiction of scenes from the venerated saint’s life, scenes that showed the way in which the saint reached for personal sanctification.

We believe that this characteristic will be better understood once our attention focuses on the ecclesiastical and, especially, the political situation of the areas where these churches are situated, in Crete and in the Peloponnese. In Crete, during the time of the Venetian occupation (1211–1669), the Orthodox bishops were banished and replaced by members of the Roman clergy. There were no Orthodox hierarchs to ordain

1. Christ the Pantokrator
2. The hospitality of Abraham
3. The Ascension
4. Unidentified scene
5. Unidentified scene
6. The Annunciation
7. The Nativity of Christ
8. Ruined fresco
9. The Transfiguration
10. St. George in the cauldron
11. St. George on the wheel
12. The Raising of Lazarus
13. The Beheading of St. George
14. Unknown saint
15. Dragontokia
16. The Dormition
17. The Crucifixion

Fig. 7. Kato Floria, Selinos, Crete, church of St. George (1497), painting arrangement
priests and, while the Roman clergy strive to convert the Orthodox people of Crete, clergy and laymen alike reacted with fanaticism. The political situation on the island was equally grim: the repeated revolts against the Venetians testify to the hostile attitude the local inhabitants held towards the conquerors. Similar, although not as severe, was the ecclesiastical situation in certain areas of the Peloponnese, where clergy and laymen reacted with perseverance against the foreign conquerors.

Taking the ecclesiastical and political situation from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century in Crete and the Peloponnese into consideration, we can clearly understand the reasons that contributed to the patrons’ preference for depictions of extended cycles from the lives of the saints in the chapels they founded. The cycles of the Archangels that survive in the three aforementioned churches, those consecrated to the Archangels and the Tzimarchis, include depictions of city liberations, punishment of the impious, and the protection/salvation of people and churches. The cycle of Saint George that survives in the churches consecrated to the Tropoioforos includes, almost exclusively, renderings of torture and confession in front of rulers/judges. In addition, in the cycle of Saint Paraskevi at Episkopi in Pedias, Crete, the depicted executioners/torturers wear the dress of Latin conquerors (Figs. 8–10). Finally, in three of the aforementioned churches dedicated to Saint Nicholas, scenes of ships being rescued and the salvation of prisoners and the wrongly condemned are included in the saint’s cycle.

In conclusion, I believe, to state that the general ecclesiastical situation in Crete and the Peloponnese during the post-Byzantine period, is reflected in the iconographic programme of single-spaced and cross-vaulted churches of small proportion and limited ambition, that are sit-
uated in these areas. It was exactly this situation that served as the foundation on which the artists and donors figuratively expressed their desires. In these churches, the depictions of the christological cycle were significantly restricted while at the same time extended cycles of the venerated saints were developed. It seems that the patrons, because of their devotion to certain saints, compelled the commissioned iconographers to draw from the lives of the saints and choose those scenes that would fortify patience and perseverance for them and their families against the sufferings they had to endure from their foreign oppressors. It cannot be accidental that at the same period a great deal of orations and encomiums were written by great ecclesiastical authors to honour the saints to whom the aforementioned churches were consecrated.

Зднне слике у црквама са ограниченим христолошким циклусом

Силас Кукиарис

Двацест малих цркава које су изабране за ово истраживање налазе се на Криту и Пелопонезу, а живописане су од XIII до XV века. У оквиру христолошког циклуса у њима су представљени само основни хришћански догмати, то јест онова поношење Бога Логоса с првим и последњим догађајима његовог овогемаљског живота. Само у три храма приказан је учење Цркве о есхатолошким догађајима Другог Христовог доласка.

Имајући у виду сазветост христолошког циклуса, јасно је да је киторе процелаваних храмова више занимало представљање сцене из живота светих којима су храмови посвећени. Разложен који су водили томе да се сводови храмова испуне сценама из живота светих могу се пронаћи у загон развоју хазио- логије од краја XIII века. Врхунц тог развоја достигнут је током XIV века, нарочито у време светања исихастичког покрета.

Будући да су процелавани мали приватни храмови на Криту и Пелопонезу, а с обзиром на политичке и црквени прилике на том окупираним просторима, може се помишљати на још један разлог који је опредељивао киторе храмова да поручују опширне циклусе посвећене животима светица. Ти циклуси углавном садрже сцене мучеништва, али и сцене спасавања градова и личности од различитих невоља. One најчешће на метафоричан начин указују на збивања у познатим областима у време када су се они налазили под разним освајачима. Неке сцене истовремено изражавају идеу поручилаца да ће се њихова отаџбини избавити.