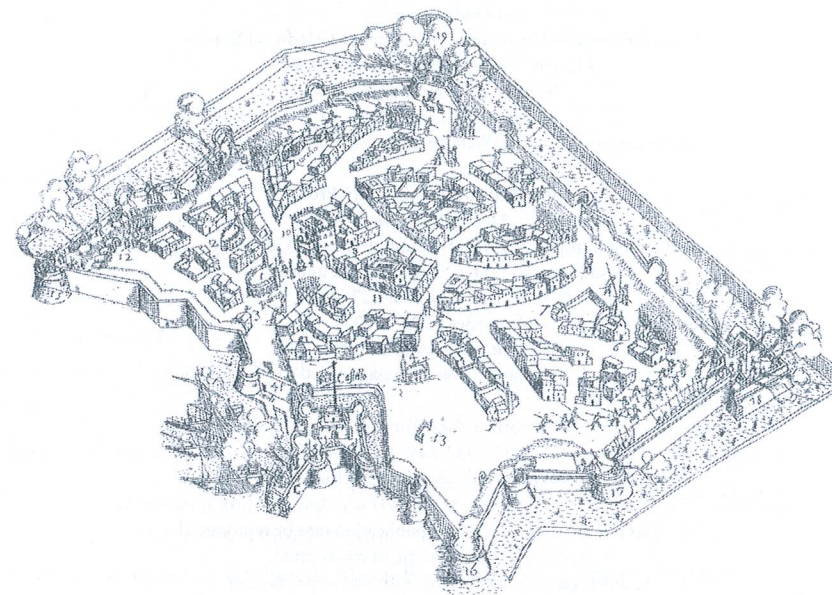


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The Harbour of all this Sea and Realm

Crusader to Venetian Famagusta



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IDENTITY MARKERS IN THE ART OF FOURTEENTH-CENTURY FAMAGUSTA

Michele Bacci

The monuments of Famagusta have received much more attention in recent years than in the entire century separating us from Camille Enlart's pioneering work on *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, published in 1899.¹ In my opinion, the slow formation of an art-historical debate in and about Cyprus in general and the practical difficulties connected to the awkward political situation on the island does not sufficiently explain this long-standing lack of interest.² Indeed, Famagusta was well known and acknowledged as a necessary stop for tourists at least until the dramatic events of 1963 and 1974: the *Guide Bleu de la Méditerranée orientale*, for example, recommended in 1953 a visit to the town because of its impressive Gothic cathedral and the "curious" mural paintings preserved in its churches.³ In this way, cultured travellers going on a Mediterranean cruise were encouraged to view this town as a strange outpost of Western Europe in the picturesque Levant. This attitude can be interpreted as a direct corollary of Count Mas Latrie's and Enlart's reading of Famagustan art as an unquestionable testimony to the fixity of French culture in this part of the world.⁴

¹ C. Enlart, *L'art gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899); idem, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, transl. D. Hunt (London: Trigraph, 1987). The most recent surveys of Famagustan monuments include: A. G. Marangou, *Ammochostos, he historia tes poles* (Nicosia: Imprinta, 2005); J.-B. de Vaivre and Ph. Plagnieux, eds., *L'art gothique en Chypre* (Paris: De Boccard, 2006), 218–96; M. Bacci, "La concepción del espacio sagrado en la Famagusta medieval", *Studium Medievale* 3 (2010), 79–101; *Medieval and Renaissance Famagusta: Studies in Architecture, Art and History*, ed. M. Walsh, P. W. Edbury and N. S. H. Coureas (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

² On the material vicissitudes of Famagustan monuments and their painted decorations in the 20th century see especially M. Walsh, "What Lies Beneath: A Contemporary Survey of the Surviving Frescoes of the Churches in the Syrian Quarter of Famagusta", in *Medieval and Renaissance Famagusta*, ed. Walsh, Edbury and Coureas (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 199–215.

³ *Les Guides Bleus. Méditerranée orientale* (Paris: Hachette, 1953), 256–7.

⁴ On such leitmotifs of early literature on Famagusta and Cyprus, see M. Bacci, "L'arte delle società miste del Levante medievale: tradizioni storiografiche a confronto", in *Medioevo: arte e storia*, ed. A. C. Quintavalle, Proceedings of the international symposium, Parma, 18–22 September 2007 (Milan, 2008), 339–54.

Architectural evidence functioned as the major argument to confirm the theory of Famagusta's "Frenchness". The imposing appearance of the town cathedral of Saint Nicholas was considered a self-evident demonstration of this assumption. The presence of murals was undoubtedly more controversial, especially because contemporary scholarship was accustomed to think that French Gothic churches were not decorated with frescoes—essentially because only a few remnants had survived the sixteenth-century religious wars, the Counterreformation, and the destruction caused by the French Revolution. Given the lack of useful *comparanda* from France it was safer to link such frescoes with Italy, where mural painting was much more widespread: this enabled Enlart and his readers to rule out any possible association with the Byzantine tradition, which would have been interpreted as an unnatural hybridization. For Enlart was convinced that styles, perceived as integral manifestations of a people's innate spirit, could not combine with each other, except in moments of irreversible cultural decadence. Any such phenomena were not worthy of consideration, given that they constituted proof of the passive imitation of both old-fashioned models and other peoples' forms. The outcome was the making of absurd and "bastardized" works, unworthy of scientific attention.⁵

Notwithstanding Enlart's arguments, it was evident that the Famagustan murals could hardly be interpreted in traditional stylistic terms. Greek scholars occasionally made efforts to claim them as belonging to the Byzantine artistic tradition by singling out the works displaying the most easily recognizable Palaiologan elements: Georgios Sotiriou published a detail from the Passion cycle in Saint George of the Greeks, labelled in the corresponding caption as a "typical" example of fourteenth-century Byzantine painting, although with some Italian influence,⁶ while Athanasios Papa-georgiou laid special emphasis on the "Byzantineness" of the Gospel scenes decorating the upper walls of Saint Anne's, without commenting, however, on the peculiar choice of saints in the lower portions of the same walls.⁷

Contemporary scholars, including myself, have become accustomed to mistrusting stylistic analysis because of its subjective, often naïve character, which has been the object of much criticism in the last two decades. We have basically shifted our focus from the intrinsic, "epiphenomenal" peculiarities of artworks, and more specifically of images, to their functions, symbolic and material power, and visual efficaciousness. In addition, we have frequently renounced the concept of examination of style as a valid artistic medium, capable of transmitting meaning and mediating the beholders' emotional and visual response. Indeed, the use of style by artists and their patrons in such a composite and multilayered context as Famagusta should not be regarded as mere visual

⁵ Enlart, *Gothic Art*, 69, 509.

⁶ G. Sotiriou, *Ta byzantina mnemeia tes Kyprou. A. Leukoma* (Athens: Akademia Athenon, 1935), pl. 98.

⁷ A. Papa-georgiou, "L'art byzantin de Chypre et l'art des croisés. Influences réciproques", *Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus* (1982), 217–226.

evidence mirroring the cultural attitudes of specific artists or donors, but rather as a communication strategy, aiming at satisfying the visual needs of different human groups and at conveying associations with symbolic patterns of self-representation not only in religious-cultural, but also in social terms to a considerable extent.

To state things plainly, art historians have frequently tended to project their own visual repertory of forms onto the extant wall decorations of Famagusta and to look at them as single imports from a variety of different artistic traditions, without working out a more global, and dynamic, vision of the very particular cultural context serving as a background to their invention and shaping. I myself had a somewhat similar experience upon my first encounter with the enigmatic fresco depicting Mary Magdalene and an angel holding the mantle of a now vanished figure in the so-called Nestorian church, known in Greek as Agios Georgios Exorinos (Fig. 1). This mural was quoted by Enlart as one of the most evident examples of fourteenth-century Gothic painting in Cyprus, being best paralleled, in his view, by contemporary Sienese frescoes, including those decorating the palace of the Popes in Avignon. It was the only painting in the church to be sketched in colour by the French scholar and to be reproduced in his 1899 book.⁸

The deep blue or ultramarine background, the compositional structure as a tripartite mural retable, the frame inhabited by vegetal ornaments and quadrilobes including coats-of-arms, as well as the iconography (Mary's long, unveiled hair, the angel holding the mantle, etc.) are indeed much in keeping with fourteenth-century Italian art, to such an extent that one could easily attribute the authorship to an immigrant painter from the Italian peninsula. This was the view that I expressed with some reservations in my preliminary study of the Nestorian church in 2006, arguing that the work corresponded rather strictly to central Italian patterns of mural decoration during the first half of the *Trecento*.⁹

But my view was to some extent too categorical. There were in fact some Morellian features (minimal details in the rendering of body-parts and physiognomic devices) which could be interpreted in somewhat contrary ways, depending on whether they were perceived from an Italian or a Byzantine viewpoint. The rendering of the round-shaped earlobes, so evident in the figure of Mary Magdalene (Fig. 2), is usually interpreted in Italian scholarship as a clue to an early date within the 14th century, given that it is associated with formulas commonplace in the thirteenth-century "maniera greca", an artistic trend characterised by the imitation of Byzantine models. Since it is traditionally assumed that *Trecento* art, inaugurated by Giotto's innovations, must be

⁸ Enlart, *Gothic Art*, 69, 285. His coloured sketch is reproduced in *Monuments médiévaux de Chypre. Photographies de la mission de Camille Enlart en 1896*, ed. J.-B. de Vaivre and Ph. Plagnieux (Paris, 2012), p. 141.

⁹ M. Bacci, "Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals in the 'Nestorian' Church of Famagusta", *Deltion tes christianikes archaeologikes hetairias*, ser. IV, 27 (2006), 207–220.

read in evolutionary terms as a progressive abandoning of all persisting Byzantinizing elements, the presence of Mary's peculiarly rendered earlobe in the Famagusta fresco should be interpreted as a hint to its early date, let us say in the 1310s or 1320s at the very latest.

This, however, is in contradiction with another and much more fundamental iconographic issue. Mary Magdalene's long and uncovered hair is a rare scheme occurring only sporadically in some later works, such as Paolo Veneziano's mid-fifteenth-century polyptych in Piran and Cecco di Pietro's late fourteenth-century altarpiece in Pisa—where, incidentally, it should be observed that both the latter works were produced in very specific contexts, where connections with the Byzantine tradition were much more evident than elsewhere in contemporary Italy.¹⁰ One may add that the most evident Gothic features in this image apparently point to a later date: the intensity of the ultramarine blue, the use of soft colour tones in the vestments, and the delicate pose of the mantle-holding angel are much more in keeping with the artistic trends of the second half of the 14th century. And yet there are some other details which prove to be rather at odds with Italian practice of the same period. The ornamental frame (Fig. 4), perceived in Italy as a fundamental component of church décor, is here rather inaccurately rendered: the painter did not really take the trouble to outline the quadrilobes according to precise geometric patterns, nor did he pay particular attention to the shape of the foliate motifs.

Indeed, the work looks "Italianate" only if we look at it superficially and by separating it from its material context. The mural takes up a large portion of the wall surface in the first bay of the right aisle, in a very prominent position between the two lower windows. Both bays were originally densely covered with frescoes, as is indicated by the many remnants of painting scattered everywhere in this part of the church. Above the Gothic mural, in the upper portion of the wall, a Passion cycle was probably represented: in the upper row to the right it is still possible to discern the dynamic pose of a flagellator from the Flagellation scene (Fig. 5). The presence of this motif makes it plausible to assume that such scenes as, for instance, the Way to Calvary, the Crucifixion and the Lamentation were displayed nearby. Below the Flagellation is represented a monumental figure of Saint Michael: it is a well-known fact that such colossal representations of the *archestrategos* of the celestial army were usually located in Byzantine churches close to doors for apotropaic reasons. This is also the case here, even if the archangel is separated from the entrance on the western side by a small portion of wall decorated with two saints: a holy monk and the Egyptian martyr Menas, represented according to Byzantine conventions in orans pose with the bust of the *Pantokrator* included in a medallion on his chest (Fig. 6).

¹⁰ F. Pedrocco, *Paolo Veneziano* (Milan: A. Maioli, 2003), pp. 196–197; E. Carli, *Pittura pisana del Trecento. La seconda metà del secolo* (Milan: Martello, 1961), p. 88, Fig. 156.

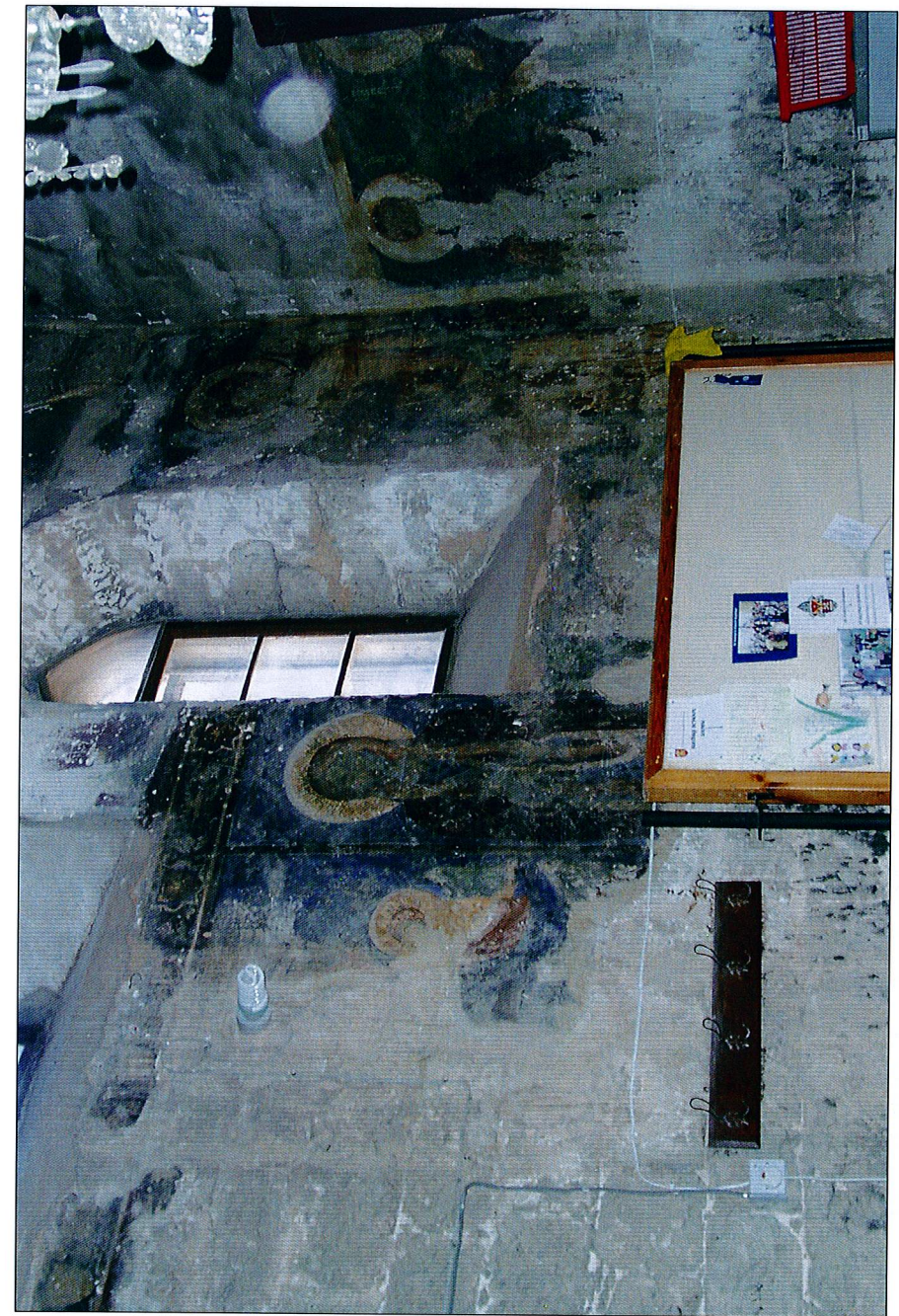


Figure 1. Remnants of Murals in the South Aisle – Michele Bacci



Figure 2. Mary Magdalene – Michele Bacci



Figure 3. Angel Holding the Edge of a Mantle – Michele Bacci



Figure 4. Frame with Foliate Motifs, Quadrilobes and Coats of Arms of the Embriaco-Gibelet Family – Michele Bacci



Figure 5. Flagellator, Remnant of a Flagellation Scene – Michele Bacci



Figure 6. Saint Menas and a Holy Monk – Michele Bacci

Figure 7. Two
Unidentified
Female Saints,
Saints Nuhra,
Paraskeve, and
an Unidentified
Holy Monk
– Michele Bacci

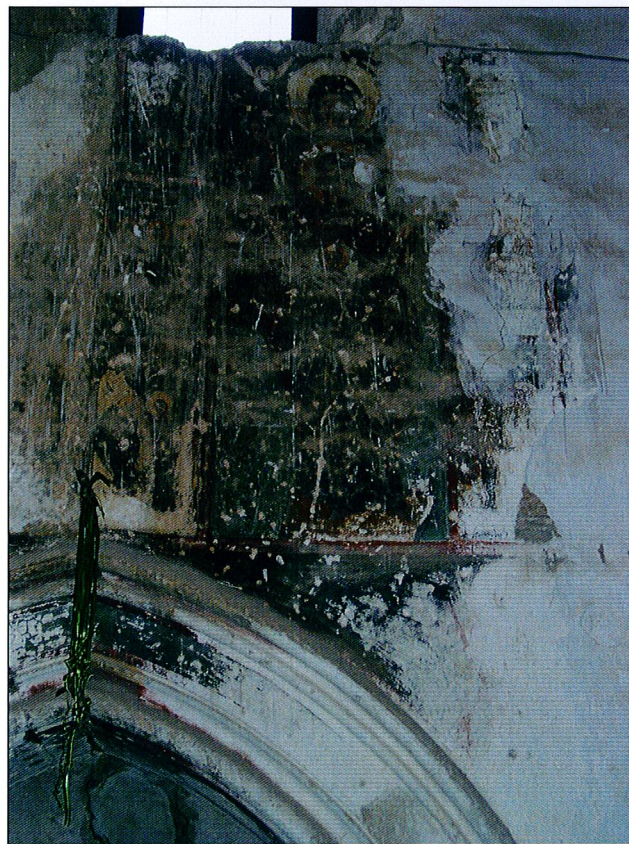


Figure 8. St Anne
Selbdritt and Scenes of
the Virgin's Infancy
– Michele Bacci

Figure 9.
The Gothic
Arcosolium in the
Church Narthex,
c. 1360–80
– Michele Bacci

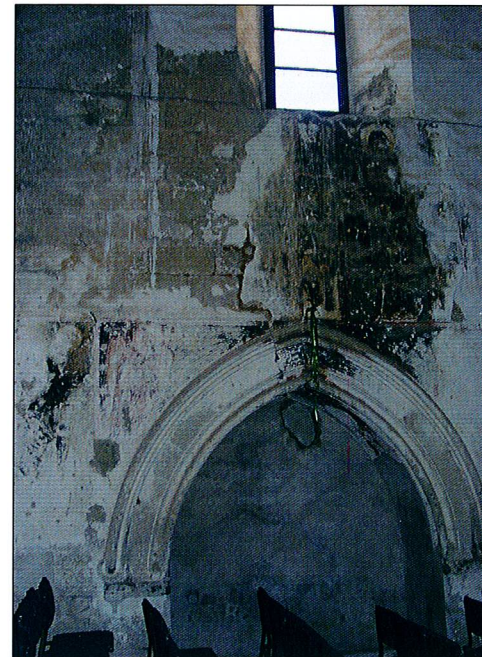


Figure 10. Holy
King (David?),
Mural Painting in
the Intrados of the
Arcosolium
– Michele Bacci

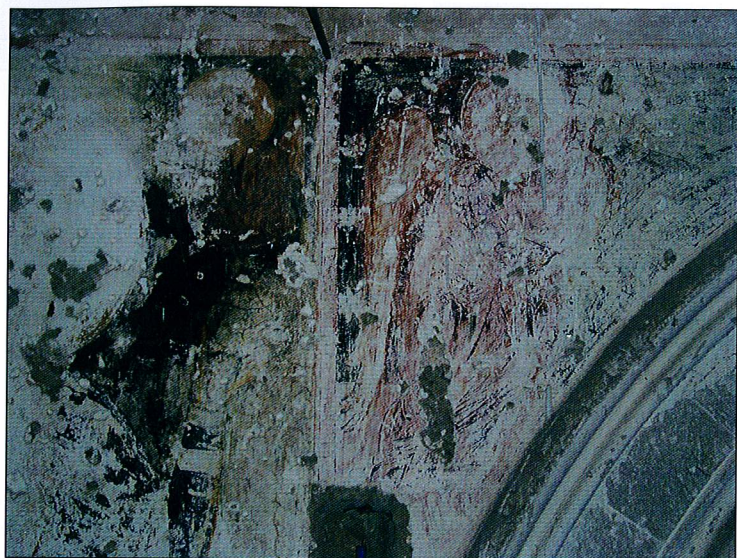


Figure 11. The Archangel Gabriel, Remnant of an Annunciation – Michele Bacci



Figure 12. Virgin Orans – Michele Bacci

The appearance of this latter figure, with its thin body and rounded head, its delicate colouring, soft modelling and physiognomic accuracy, betrays a very close knowledge of contemporary Palaiologan painting. Scholars have observed that the Palaiologan trends were first introduced into Latin-ruled Cyprus during the 1360s,¹¹ but the technical skills of the author of this image are unparalleled in the island. Much the same quality can be detected in some extant frescoes in the Carmelite church (cf. the outstanding figure of Saint Nicholas in Latin garb on the north wall) and even more in the nearby Benedictine church of Saint Anne's.¹² The best *comparanda* to the Menas figure in the Nestorian church are encountered in some mural decorations from the 1380s and 1390s from the southern Balkans, where a number of artists from Thessaloniki gave shape to a most distinctive classicizing trend, known in scholarship as the "Morava" school. A comparison with the image of Saint Theodore *Stratilates* in the frescoes of Metropolitan Jovan in Saint Andrew's church on the river Treska near Skopje, dating from ca. 1380, bears witness to such connections: we can recognize analogous bodily proportions, a similar palette, a comparable treatment of the hair and facial features, as well as the same modelling effects, obtained by the broad application of greenish shades on a light ochre preparatory surface.¹³

If one now scrutinizes the image of Mary Magdalene (Fig. 2) on the nearby wall with some attention, it is not difficult to observe that, notwithstanding its iconographic peculiarities, its technical and stylistic qualities are in keeping with the nearby Palaiologan frescoes. Not unlike Menas and the archangel Michael, Mary is characterized by fleshy lips, prominent cheekbones, hair rendered by means of thin brushstrokes (alternating dark brown, light brown and white tones), and a definitely round-shaped head. Moreover, the overall greenish appearance of her face indicates that painters made use of the same modelling technique, consisting—unlike the Italian *chiaroscuro*—of light green shades applied on an ochre *proplasmos*. Finally, it must be emphasized that no break is detectable in the pictorial surface between the border of the mural panel with Mary Magdalene and the nearby green-painted plaster separating it from the image of the archangel Michael. All these clues make it more than plausible that the author was the same very qualified and skilful Palaiologan painter who was responsible

¹¹ A. Weyl Carr, "Art", in *Cyprus: Society and Culture 1191–1374*, ed. A. Nicolaou-Konnari and Chr. Schabel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 285–328, esp. 318–319. In any case J. T. Wollesen, *Patrons and Painters on Cyprus: The Frescoes in the Royal Chapel at Pyrga* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), 77 and 109 implies a date already in the first half of the 14th century for the Palaiologan murals of the Royal Chapel at Pyrga.

¹² M. Bacci, "Pratica artistica e scambi culturali nel Levante dopo le crociate", in *Medioevo: le officine*, ed. A. C. Quintavalle (Milan: Electa, 2010), 494–510, esp. 503–506. Cf. also J. M. Andrews, "Gothic and Byzantine in the Monumental Arts of Famagusta: Diversity, Permeability and Power", in *Medieval and Renaissance Famagusta*, ed. Walsh, Edbury and Coureas, 147–166, esp. 159–164.

¹³ VJ. Djurić, *Byzantinische Fresken in Jugoslawien* (Munich: Pawlak, 1976), 129–131; S. Korunovski and E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2006), 206–10.

not only for all other extant murals in the south nave but for many more frescoes in other town churches.

It is worth stressing that the work was initially meant to decorate a church officiated by a Syriac-rite group in Famagusta. We know that many Arab Christians had fled their native towns in the wake of the Mamluke conquest of the last Latin strongholds on the Lebanese coast in the 1280s and 1290s. In my previous work on the church I pointed out that the iconographic themes selected to embellish the building rule out any possibility of Nestorian affiliation: the visual evocation of the Immaculate Conception through a rather unique image of Saint Anne *Selbdritt* on the north wall of the narthex makes this possibility thoroughly unrealistic.¹⁴ The theological principle underlying this unique representation, displaying both Mary and her mother standing in the orans pose, with Christ in a medallion on the Virgin's chest, would be clearly at odds with Nestorian Mariology and would also hardly be acceptable for either Orthodox or Miaphysite viewers. At the same time, the association with a Syriac-rite community is obviously pointed to by the elaborate *tituli* in vertical *Estrangela* writing accompanying the representations of the saints. Writing was used in the painted decorations of Famagustan churches to publicly manifest the liturgical characteristics of the community officiating in each building: accordingly, we find Greek in the Metropolitan church of Saint George, Latin in Saint Anne's and Our Lady of Carmel, Armenian in the tiny church close to the Carmelite one, and Syriac in St George Exorinos.

A number of clues enable us to gain a sense of the original denomination of the latter church. Style certainly contributes to our appreciation of the community's association with the Syro-Lebanese coast, which constituted an autonomous political entity under Crusader rule—known as the County of Tripoli—between 1109 and 1289. In the south-west corner of the narthex, a mural panel displaying two female saints and a row of another three figures accompanied by *Estrangela* inscriptions (Fig. 7) displays the strongly linear rendering of facial features and folds that is typical of Arab Christian painting in the County of Tripoli and can be compared more specifically to the mid-thirteenth-century cycles in Mar Tadros at Bahdeidat and Mar Charbel in Ma'ad.¹⁵ The Lebanese connection seems to be confirmed by the presence of architectural features (such as the originally single-nave plan with simple groined vaults, elbow-columns, and alternately red and white limestone used to create chromatic effects) paralleled in buildings of the Crusader era in the same area.¹⁶ In any case, the pictorial style is all the more important for its implications: firstly, the Famagustan fresco represents the latest testimony to this specifically Arab Christian trend, which disappears in the Lebanon

¹⁴ Bacci, "Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals," 212–214.

¹⁵ Bacci, "Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals," 210–212; M. Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles: Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 122–124.

¹⁶ Bacci, "Syrian, Palaiologan, and Gothic Murals," 208–210.

after the Mamluke conquest of the last Latin strongholds in the 1280s and the final fall of Acre in 1291.¹⁷ Secondly, this feature makes it plausible that its author was a refugee from the Syrian coast, working around 1300 for a Syriac-rite community that had recently settled in Famagusta. This is a meaningful testimony to the activity of immigrant artists in Cyprus and can be associated with the spreading of "Syriac" formulas in late 13th century artistic styles, known in scholarship as the "maniera cypria".¹⁸

Iconography seems to corroborate this hypothesis. One of the three figures on the east wall, holding a medallion with the crucified Christ, is easily recognizable as Paraskeve, the female martyr personifying the Holy Friday; the Syriac inscription *rwḇ[t']*, "Friday", confirms this identification. Paraskeve's worship was deeply rooted in the traditions of the local Greek population, but her cult was also appropriated by the other communities settled on the island, including the Latins: her figure, holding an icon of the *Akra Tapeinosis*, was once visible in a now vanished fourteenth-century mural in the Carmelite church, documented by one of Enlart's photographs.¹⁹ Conversely, the bearded monk represented on her left was otherwise quite unknown in Cyprus. The *Estrangela* inscription accompanying this figure reveals his identity as "Mar Nuhra", an obscure early Christian martyr said to be of Persian origins and worshipped exclusively in the predominantly Maronite districts of Jubail and Batroun, in present-day Lebanon.²⁰ Nuhra or Nohra is the Syriac term for "light", and it is hardly surprising that this figure is still worshipped to this day as the particular protector against eye diseases. An old church, which includes remains of a Roman temple and medieval structures, in the village of Smar Jubail near Batroun is said to mark the place where he was beheaded, and a water drawn from a nearby well is said to have healing power.²¹ A number of churches dedicated to him are scattered in the same area, including some within the town of Jubail. Even if his worship seems to have been shared across various Christian

¹⁷ For general assessments of medieval Lebanese mural painting cf. E. Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval Painting in the Lebanon* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004); N. Hélou, *La fresque (I) dans les anciennes églises du Liban. Régions de Jubail et Batroun* (Mansourie: Alpha, 2007); Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*.

¹⁸ For a new assessment of this stylistic connection see A. Weyl Carr, "Iconography and Identity: Syrian Elements in the Art of Crusader Cyprus", in *Religious Origins of Nations? The Christian Communities of the Middle East*, ed. R. B. ter Haar Romeny (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 127–151; idem, "Thirteenth-Century Cyprus: Questions of Style", in *Orient et Occident méditerranéens au XIII^e siècle. Les programmes picturaux*, ed. J.-P. Cailliet and F. Joubert (Paris: Picard, 2012), 65–86. Cf. also the critical remarks by D. Kotoula, "'Maniera cypria' and Thirteenth-Century Icon Production on Cyprus: A Critical Approach", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 28 (2004), 89–100.

¹⁹ de Vaivre, *Monuments médiévaux*, 154. On the cult in Cyprus cf. D. Mouriki, "The Cult of Cypriot Saints in Medieval Cyprus as Attested by Church Decorations and Icon Painting", in *"The Sweet Land of Cyprus": Papers Given at the Twenty-Fifth Jubilee Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1991*, ed. A. A. M. Bryer and G. S. Georgiades (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Center, 1993), 237–277, esp. 253–254.

²⁰ I am indebted to Prof. Sebastian Brock (Oxford) for deciphering the *Estrangela* inscription.

²¹ Y. Moubarac, *Pentalogie antiochienne. Domaine maronite* (Beirut: Cénacle libanais, 1984), vol. II/2, 722; E. Renan, *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1864), 247–248.

offices for the spiritual well-being of the dead.³¹ The two orans Mothers are flanked by six scenes belonging to the cycle of the Infancy of the Mother of God, and ending with the Presentation of Mary to the Temple in the last panel to the right. Similar programs occur in both Byzantine and Italian *Vita*-icons and triptychs, in association with the Madonna and Child but never with Saint Anne.³² The Virgin's Presentation, both as an iconographic theme and a liturgical celebration, was well rooted in Byzantine tradition and had been appropriated by the Latin church of Cyprus: in 1372–3 Philippe de Mézières tried to convince the Papal court to institutionalize this solemnity in the whole Western church and composed a specific liturgical drama, possibly inspired by analogous usages witnessed in the island.³³

The mural retable was integrated into a wider program associated with the decoration of the underneath *arcosolium*, a Gothicizing structure which must have been added to the original narthex in the 1360s or 1370s, when the church was enlarged (Fig. 9).³⁴ The decoration, which involved the burial niche as well as the nearby portions of wall, must have been carried out somewhat later. A crowned figure, possibly King David (Fig. 10), appears on the intrados of the *arcosolium*, the sculpted frame of which was painted with blue and red bands to an equal amount. Above, the spandrels were decorated with a representation of the Annunciation, whose left element, the archangel Gabriel, is still visible (Fig. 11). Further to the left, the wall was occupied by a large image of the Virgin Orans holding Christ at her breast, flanked by half-length angels (Fig. 12). The Palaiologan elements still detectable in these badly preserved murals and their chromatic palette make it plausible that they were executed by the same hand as that responsible for the paintings in the south aisle.³⁵

³¹ On this point, see M. Bacci, "Side Altars and 'Pro Anima' Chapels in the Medieval Mediterranean: Evidence from Cyprus", in *The Altar and Its Environment 1150–1400*, ed. J. E. A. Kroesen and V. M. Schmidt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 11–30.

³² Cf. an early 13th century Byzantine triptych on Mount Sinai: D. Mouriki, "Eikones apo ton 12^o os ton 15^o aiona", in *Sina, Hoi thesouroi tes Hieras Mones Hagias Aikaterinis*, ed. K. A. Manafis, (Athens, 1990), 101–125, esp. 112. An outstanding Italian example is the majestic panel from the church of San Martino in Pisa, dating from ca. 1270: see M. Burresi and A. Caleca, eds., *Cimabue a Pisa. La pittura pisana del Duecento da Giunta a Giotto*, exhibition catalogue, Pisa, Museo nazionale di San Matteo (Pisa, 2005), 157–159 no. 31.

³³ *Philippe de Mézières' Campaign for the Feast of Mary's Presentation*, ed. W. Coleman (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1981).

³⁴ Cf. the date around 1360 proposed for the wall niche by Ph. Plagnieux and Th. Soulard, "L'église des Nestoriens", in Vaire and Plagnieux, eds., *L'art gothique en Chypre*, 266–70.

³⁵ A much later date (end of the 15th or beginning of the 16th century) has been proposed by I. A. Eliades, "Cypriot Painting and Its Affinity with Italian Art during the Frankish and Venetian Rule: 1191–1571", in *Theotokos/Madonna*, exhibition catalogue, Hellenic Bank, Nicosia, 1–31 July 2005 (Nicosia: Pierides Foundation, 2005), 24–37. This author seems to advocate that the St Anne *Selbdritt*, interpreted as a distinctively Italianate theme, must have reached Cyprus during the Venetian period, even if the rendition of the iconographic theme can hardly be said to mirror Italian conventions (according to which Anne is regularly shown enthroned, holding Mary on her lap).

Arcosolia and *pro anima* chapels in Famagusta tended frequently to be decorated with murals. Besides the already mentioned case of the image of Saint Catherine in Our Lady of Carmel, one can cite the wall niche in Saint Anne's, where the embellishment with an Ascension scene clearly manifests its dead donor's belief in Christ's Resurrection as a preliminary condition to each rightful believer's access to Paradise.³⁶ In both Saint Anne's and the Carmelite church such wall niches associated with the burial of their patrons and/or the performance of votive masses and anniversaries for their soul's sake were built into the westernmost part of the nave, according to Latin patterns of church decoration. In St George Exorinos an analogous structure (yet somewhat lower) was included in the narthex, i.e. in the antechamber located before the *naos*. Burial within the church is a practice rarely found in Eastern Christianity, but a notable exception is represented by a relatively well-documented Maronite building, the church of Mar Charbel at Ma'ad, near Jubail. In the narthex of this building a marble structure is still preserved which may have originally been the tomb of a Frankish donor who, according to one source, was a baker (or perhaps bore the French name "Boulangier") and gave his money for the refurbishment of the church roof. This monument evidently served as the burial site for the whole family, given that the same text explains that it was used also for his daughter Anna.³⁷

We can imagine that something similar occurred in the case of St George Exorinos. A private donor obtained a privileged burial site in the porch for his/her family in exchange for his/her charity and concessions to the church clergy; this might have taken the form of some financial support of the new architectural works. The figurative program around the tomb, including three Marian themes (Virgin Orans, Annunciation, and St Anne *Selbdritt* or Immaculate Conception) indicates that this donor was a devout worshipper of the Virgin Mary and that he/she shared in contemporary Latin devotional trends, even if this does not actually imply that he/she was a Westerner by birth and culture. Yet, the odd juxtaposition of semantically close images in a limited space can be explained only as the outcome of a private donor's specific religious orientations, rather than as an autonomous choice of the priests who administered the church.

In comparison with the relatively coherent programs decorating the Greek Orthodox churches of Cyprus, the rather chaotic sequences of iconic and narrative frescoes on the walls of St George Exorinos is much more in keeping with the almost spontaneous and incongruent votive and *pro anima* murals characterizing many contemporary Latin churches. Not unlike the erection of side-altars and tombs in church interiors, the making of isolated images of saints was perceived by the laypeople as a powerful means both to manifest one's dedication to God and to keep the officiating clergy mindful of their liturgical obligations to perform masses for the sake of the indi-

³⁶ Bacci, "Pratica artistica", 504.

³⁷ Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, 105–108.

viduals' souls. Regardless of confessional distinctions, Latins were not averse to making gifts to non-Latin ecclesiastical institutions if the latter enjoyed a widespread reputation of sanctity: such practice is well documented in both the County of Tripoli and Cyprus. Most frequently, a number of visual indicators of the donors' corporate or individual identity (such as portraits, inscriptions or coats-of-arms) were included in the painted ornaments and publicly exhibited as integral part of the church décor.³⁸ This leads us back to our starting point, the mysterious mural triptych with Mary Magdalene.

As already mentioned, the upper frame of this image displays foliate motifs and quadrilobes including coats-of-arms (Fig. 4), an Italianate set of themes which must have been widespread in Famagusta, given that it was also reproduced in the abovementioned image of the Baptist within the Armenian church. It was originally meant to display the insignia (an eight-pointed star) borne by members of the Embriaco-Gibelet family, the former Genoese lords of Jubail, who emigrated to Cyprus after the final fall of their fief between 1289 and 1299 and survived on their Cypriot properties until 1570. A number of Arab Christians fled to the island with them and maintained close relations with their former lords: this enabled them to claim Genoese nationality and consequently to enjoy a number of fiscal and juridical advantages. Because of this special status they were called "White Genoese", so as not to be confused with *stricto sensu* Genoese citizens.³⁹ The unusual mural in the south aisle (Figs 1–4) bears witness to these ongoing connections and implies that the decoration of the whole room, made by sophisticated Palaiologan masters, was financially supported by members of the Gibelet family, who wanted their charitable act to be publicly commemorated by the integration of a votive mural in the sequence of saintly figures occupying the lower portion of the walls.

In order to manifest their devotional orientations the members of the family asked Byzantine artists to imitate the compositional, iconographic and stylistic characteristics of a contemporary Italian "pro anima" fresco, possibly one which was to be seen in one of Famagusta's Latin churches. The very peculiar context in which the image was displayed prevents us from imagining that the reproduction of such "epiphenomenal" elements were intended as the overt visual manifestation of the Gibelets' sense of belonging to Italian culture and tradition. Rather, what we are faced with here is a very special case: such "Italianate" forms are being selected as they are felt to give expression to individual devotion in more familiar and efficacious terms than would have been

³⁸ Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, 161–169; A. Stylianou and J. Stylianou, "Donors and Dedicatory Inscriptions, Supplicants and Supplications in the Painted Churches of Cyprus", *Jahrbuch der österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 9 (1960), 97–128; M. Bacci, "Images 'votives' et portraits de donateurs au Levant au Moyen Âge tardif", in J.-M. Spieser and É. Yota, eds., *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin*, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 293–308.

³⁹ D. Jacoby, "Citoyens, sujets et protégés de Venise et de Gênes en Chypre du XIII^e au XV^e siècle", *Byzantinische Forschungen* 5 (1977): 159–188, esp. 162–163.

possible by relying on the traditional Byzantine repertory. The Latins had no difficulties in employing the latter conventions when it came to illustrating the Gospel narratives, as is demonstrated by the Flagellation fragment (Fig. 5) and even more by the cycle in Saint Anne's sponsored in the same period by the Genoese Corrado Tarigo—which is probably another work of the same Palaiologan artists.⁴⁰

In St George Exorinos the Latin patrons aimed at displaying themes strongly associated with contemporary Italian patterns of devotion. Representing Mary Magdalene with long, uncovered hair (Fig. 2) added dramatic intensity to a figure who in Eastern Christian art was never represented alone: it hinted most clearly at her role as a former prostitute and penitent (due to the Western conflation of the identities of Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethania, and the anonymous woman of *Luke* 7:36–50) and functioned as a reminder of the redemption which could be attained by all sinners. She was, however, a side-figure, her function being to reinforce the devotional meaning of the central composition, which is now represented only by a small, and definitely Gothicizing angel holding the edge of a mantle (Fig. 3). Such a detail was usually associated in Italian art with representations of the so-called Virgin of Mercy, in which the Madonna is displayed extending her mantle over a more or less wide group or community.⁴¹ This theme was especially widespread in Venetian art and by the late 14th century had reached Venetian-ruled Crete, as is revealed by a stylistically mixed mural painting in the church at Sklaverochori.⁴² It became especially successful as it was regarded as an efficacious visual means to manifest a whole community's act of self-dedication to Mary during especially dangerous or calamitous times, such as sieges and pestilences. It is therefore hardly surprising to find that the worship of the Virgin of Mercy is first witnessed in Famagusta in 1348, the year of the terrible Black Death: a document states that a church dedicated to her was erected outside the town walls during the Plague, and another specifies that it was erected in just one day, as was usual with votive churches. Furthermore, there is archival evidence that the church was perceived in the following years as shrine available to be shared by a range of different confessional groups. It received many testamentary bequests, and in 1363, when a new wave of pestilence struck the whole Mediterranean area, it was concurrently officiated by both Latin and Greek priests. It housed an icon which was most clearly perceived as a kind of palladium or common symbol, worshipped by all the Famagustan communities in situations of extraordinary peril: Pietro Valderio recounts how the image of the Virgin of Mercy

⁴⁰ Bacci, "Pratica artistica", p. 503.

⁴¹ The fundamental study is that of Chr. Belting-Ihm, *Sub matris tutela. Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte der Schutzmantelmadonna* (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1976).

⁴² M. Borboudakis, "Paratereseis ste zografike tou Sklaverochoriou", in *Euphrosynon. Apheroma ston Manoli Xatzedaki*, ed. E. Kypraiou (Athens: Tameio Archaologikōn Porōn kai Apallōtriaseōn, 1991), I, 375–398, esp. 391.

was carried in procession during the terrible Ottoman siege of 1570–1.⁴³ It can be reasonably argued that, given the widespread worship for this miraculous icon, the theme of the Virgin of Mercy was familiar to all Christian denominations living in Famagusta. Its reproduction in the Gibelet family's "pro anima" mural in St George Exorinos makes plausible the idea that its patrons aimed at publicly manifesting their devotion or even their peculiar gratitude to the miracle-working Madonna. Likely enough, both the former lords and their former Arab Christian subjects attributed their survival during the different waves of pestilence to her heavenly mediation.

To sum up, the images painted in the Syriac church of Famagusta can hardly be interpreted as expressions of a sharply defined collective identity. They certainly bear witness to the Maronite community's tendency to lay visual emphasis on their liturgical tradition by displaying elaborate inscriptions in vertical *Estrangela* writing and by including in this case at least one saint exclusive to their place of origin. The odd St Anne *Selbdritt* may have been adopted as a way to manifest the Maronites' appropriation of distinctively Latin patterns of devotion, even if the choice of this theme was probably due to the initiative of the private donors buried in the *arcosolium* underneath. These private donors were perhaps the same members of the Gibelet family responsible for the murals in the south aisle. Political affiliation with powerful lords seems to have played a much more decisive role in the artistic expression of group-identity: the private financing of portions of mural decoration enabled them to embellish their church and at the same time to promulgate their social prestige within the multilayered society of Famagusta. In this respect, style was not perceived as indissolubly bound to specific communities: the early fourteenth-century mural with Paraskeve and Nuhra was made by an immigrant artist whose style evidently did not find any continuator, given that artists trained in the Byzantine tradition were charged with the making of the later layers of frescoes. Besides, Palaiologan painting could be reasonably perceived as a kind of luxury ornament, which was used by Greeks, Latins and Eastern Christians in Famagusta to visually promote their wellness and social prominence. On their part, Byzantine masters did not really worry about working for non-Orthodox patrons and made all possible efforts to accommodate the visual needs of the latter, even when they were requested to give shape to unusual themes and compositions, such as the uncommon mural triptych in St George Exorinos.

⁴³ See the documents collected in C. Otten-Froux, "Un notaire vénitien à Famagouste au XIV^e siècle. Les actes de Simeone, prêtre de San Giacomo dell'Orto (1362–1371)", *Thesaurismata* 33 (2003): 15–149, nos. 9, 175, 185, and *Bullarium Cyprium Vol. III. Lettres papales relatives à Chypre 1316–1378*, ed. Ch. Perrat, J. Richard and Chr. Schabel (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 2012), 243 no. t-329, 378 no. v-44, 405 no. v-159, as well as Pietro Valderio, *La guerra di Cipro*, ed. G. Grivaud and N. Patapiou (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 1996), 41–42.