

RECONSIDERING THE FRESCOES IN THE CHURCH IN VIEUX POUZAUGES (BAS-POITOU, FRANCE)

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The church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Fig. 1) today has a single nave Latin cross shape and fragments of frescoes are visible on the counter-façade and parts of an entire cycle on the northern wall of the nave.¹ Its construction began in the 11th century: there is no scholarly consensus on the exact chronology of the phases, but three main ones can be detected.

A first phase dating back to the 11th century saw the construction of the church, ending with a semicircular apse and with a simple wooden trussed roof. In the second phase in the mid-12th century, structural modifications were made: the nave was enlarged and vaulted, the transept and a bell tower were built, giving the church a Latin-cross shape. It is during this period that the church's walls were painted. Finally, in the 14th century the apse was restored, the choir was lengthened, and a chevet with Gothic windows was built.² Other modifications are documented in later centuries. However, the complex events that marked the life of the church, including the devastation brought about by the 16th-century Wars of Religion, make the reconstruction of the original internal decorations difficult.³ The building was added to the Historical Monument List of France on 7 March 1939.

¹ The church is in Vieux Pouzauges, a small village halfway between Nantes and Poitiers, in the Vendée Department. The village of Pouzauges, whose first settlement dates to Celtic and then Roman times, developed during the Middle Ages. The first nucleus of the village developed in the area where Notre Dame church is located and today is known as the "old" (Vieux) Pouzauges. The small village later extended towards the hill, where the remains of a fortification were found, probably dating back to the settlement first by Zacharie of Pouzauges in 1050, and then by the Viscount of Thouars in the 12th century. The construction of the castle, located 245 metres above sea level, led the population to settle the hillside and then to build a second church, dedicated to St James, in the centre of the new village. The settlement also houses the Prieuré de Saint Jean de l'Aumonerie, whose foundation, dated 1212, is attested by a Latin charter (preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) at the behest of Guillaume de Chantemerle, lord of Paredes, who dedicated the new foundation to the sheltering of the poor and sick. The castle was one of the most important in the Bas-Poitou. In the first years of 13th century, the castle passed to Guillaume de Chantemerle, and his daughter passed it to her husband Guy de Thouars in 1239; the castle remained in the possession of the Thouars family until the mid-15th century. Cf. BAUDRY 2001, p. 324.

² For a different interpretation of the construction phases, see DILLANGE 1976, pp. 26–27; DAVY 1993, pp. 93–94.

³ Between 1047 and 1066 the church was allocated to the abbey of Saint Nicolas d'Angers by Zacharie de Pouzauges,



1. Exterior, view from north-west side, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)

The northern-wall frescoes were discovered by the historians and scholars François Charnard and Jean Challet in 1948.⁴ After that, the restorations began, revealing other fragments on the western wall. The surveys carried out between 1991 and 1992 revealed the existence of several pictorial campaigns extending over the walls of the nave and the choir.⁵ Today, two layers of painting can be detected: an older layer dating to the end of the 12th century on the western wall, and a second layer dating between 1210 and 1225 on the western and northern walls. The dates suggested by the scholars are based on the writing and the style of the costumes represented.⁶

The western wall is divided vertically by the portal and a window, along with rectangular frames containing scenes from the Old Testament. Starting from the top left, we can see the

with the support of the bishop of Poitiers, Isambert II. The donation was long disputed by Maurice, Zacharie's son, and the dispute ended in 1118. In the end, the church and other estates returned to the abbey. The church had an internal and external cemetery (used until 1856), evidenced by the presence of innumerable burial stones with sculpted figures revealing the social status of the dead. The church was looted by the Protestants in 1568, during the Wars of Religion. The church building was bought in 1799 by Houdet-Dugravie, who sold it the following year to four people of the Bulteau, Souchet and Proust families. The building has been classified thanks to the efforts of the general secretary of the department who used a state-subsidy to repair the frame. The clearing of the earth, which had risen to a height of more than two metres along the north wall, was undertaken at the same time. However, following a request for a subsidy to repair the roof, the church of Notre-Dame was downgraded on 13th September 1872, due to the supposed minimal artistic interest of the building. In 1919, the church became a parish church in its own right after a century of dependence on Saint-Jacques de Pouzauges. See DAVY 1993, p. 93.

⁴ DILLANGE 1976, pp. 26–27; DAVY 1993, p. 94.

⁵ THIBOUT 1950, pp. 185–186; DAVY 1993, p. 94.

⁶ FERRARO 2012, p. 193. For a stylistic discussion, see also DAVY 1993, pp. 98–99.



2. *Murder of Abel by Cain and Samson's Fight with the Lion of Thamma, western façade, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)*



3. *Sacrifice of Isaac, Banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and Rejection of Joachim's Offering, western façade, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)*

representation of the *Murder of Abel by Cain* (Gen. 4:8).⁷ Below this scene we have the *Fight of Samson with the Lion of Thamma* (Judg. 14:5–6) (Fig. 2).⁸ To the right, we can see the *Banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden* (Gen. 3:11–19). Above this scene there is another, the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Gen. 22:10–12; Fig. 3) a pendant to the *Murder of Abel*.⁹

The cycle on the northern wall begins in the lower register on the western façade. A narrative scene and a piece of a frieze are recognizable. We can also see a small part of the frieze near the south wall: it can be supposed that the southern wall also used to host a narrative cycle starting in the lower register on the western wall. Returning to the surviving cycle, the wall is divided into a sequence of registers of unequal heights.

⁷ Davy transcribed the inscription of the scene: CAIM Q[u]I OC[cidit] ABEL; see DAVY 1993, p. 94.

⁸ Another of Davy's transcriptions: [v]IRTUS SA[n]/SON[is]; see DAVY 1993, p. 95.

⁹ The scene is almost illegible and has been identified by Christian Davy; see DAVY 1993, pp. 94–95.



4. *Rejection of Joachim's Offering, west façade, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges*
(Photo: Sara Salvadori)

The narrative section, containing scenes of particularly interesting iconography, depicts the story of the Virgin Mary. The first is the *Rejection of Joachim's Offering* – part of which was removed and transferred elsewhere¹⁰ – and it is the only one depicted on the western wall (Fig. 4). Starting from the right, we can recognize an altar surmounted by a canopy and covered by a white tablecloth whose folds are dashed in red. In front of the altar there is a figure wearing a white robe, the priest. Of the person making the offering – Joachim – only the feet remain. The procession following him is composed of female and male characters, with the city in the background acting as a frame whose presence will function as a motif throughout the course of the narrated story.

¹⁰ Pseudo-Matthew 2:1; *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae* 2:1.



5. *Apparition of the angel to Joachim, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges* (Photo: Sara Salvadori)

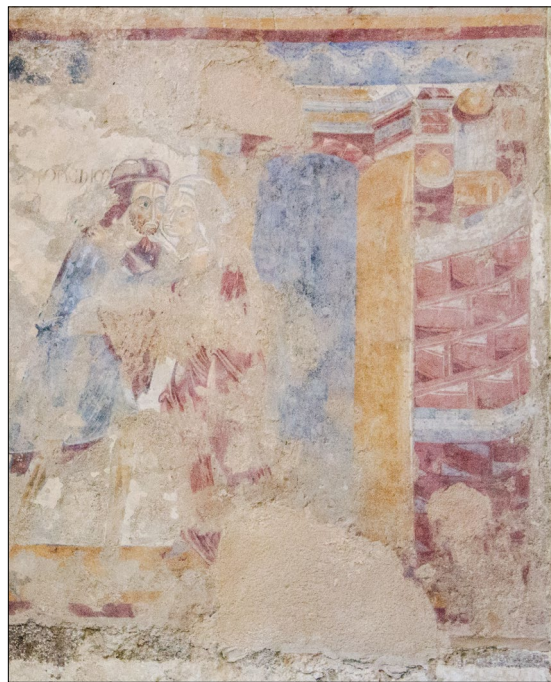
The second is the *Apparition of the angel to Joachim* (Fig. 5).¹¹ The scene is inscribed within two trees and a blue band with white waves, located in the upper area, outlining the sky. The ground plane is indicated by horizontal bands of different shades of ochre brown. Starting from the left there is a sheep (or goat) feeding on the tree. The rest of the cattle are grazing at Joachim's feet, who is facing upwards and listening to the angel of the Lord, who is emerging from the coloured bands of the sky. Joachim is dressed in a red cloak, a green-blue tunic, and tight trousers which cover his legs. He is wearing a Phrygian cap, a detail that suggests his retreat to the mountains with other shepherds, following the refusal of his offerings because of the infertility affecting him and Anne.¹² Two other shepherds, playing instruments and dancing, accompany Joachim. They, too, are wearing a cloak with a headdress, a tunic of different colours and tight trousers.

¹¹ Pseudo-Matthew 3:1–3; *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae* 2:2.

¹² Pseudo-Matthew 2:1.



6. Meeting at the Golden Gate, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)



7. Meeting at the Golden Gate, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)

The third scene is the *Meeting of Anne and Joachim at the Golden Gate* (Figs. 6–7).¹³ As already mentioned, the scene is separated from the previous one by a tree: we are in front of the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, highlighted by a wall within which a series of buildings, which are also present in other scenes, are painted. The presence of vaulted yellow buildings is noteworthy and is perhaps a suggestion of the existing buildings of the Holy City. Anne, dressed in a red cloak and a white veil, awaits Joachim, whose name is still legible: his headdress is changed, indicating his change in status. The two characters embrace: both have their hands encircling each other's necks and their cheeks touch, suggesting a kiss.

The fourth scene is the *Presentation of Mary in the Temple*, which follows the interruption due to the presence of a window (Fig. 8).¹⁴ The scenic space of this section is divided in two by three columns that delimit it and seem to support the frame or entablature that represents Jerusalem.

¹³ Pseudo-Matthew 2:5; *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae* 3:1, 4. In the Protoevangelium of James the place indicated is generically referred to as “Porta Aurea”, while only in the *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae* is the location of this gate indicated: Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Pseudo-Matthew 4:1.



8. *Presentation of Mary in the Temple, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges*
(Photo: Sara Salvadori)

Starting from the left, we find the procession accompanying the Virgin to the Temple, an event that occurred when Mary was three years old. Along with Joachim and Anne, two other male characters participate in the procession. In front of them is the child Mary, whose young age would be indicated by her white dress and red-brown hair, ready to climb the first step of the staircase placed in front of her. The Temple is suggested by the two columns and bricks that form a staircase made up of four steps.¹⁵ We then find Mary on the last step, facing the altar: she is older, with golden hair and a halo around her head. The altar is identical to the one depicted in the scene of *Joachim's Offerings*. The absence of the priest in the scene agrees with the description in the text of the Pseudo-Matthew. The repetition of the figure of Mary makes it possible to represent not only her entrance into the Temple, but also constitutes a kind of anticipation of her behaviour and life in the Temple.

¹⁵ For a description of the temple architecture, see FERRARO 2012, pp. 195, 213.



9. *Mary fed by an angel, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)*

Nevertheless, the presence of the little girl led some scholars to formulate other hypotheses: either that she was one of the other virgins who would live with Mary in the Temple or that she was the sister of Mary, the second child Anne conceived with Joachim after the birth of Mary.¹⁶ My suggestion is that we can lean towards a condensing of different episodes within the life of the Virgin in the same stage space, as in fact also happens in other sections. Further, the staircase strongly links the two figures: the child is about to enter it, while Mary is about to leave it. Therefore, the Temple may indicate a change in the status of the Virgin, with this scene acquiring a

¹⁶ This hypothesis was proposed by LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 165–166.

(new) symbolic dimension. This reading is also proposed by Séverine Ferraro.¹⁷ She also underlines the rarity of the images of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple where Mary is shown alone in front of the sanctuary, even though the presence of the priest is not mentioned in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Three examples of this iconographic motif have already been listed and all belong to the French cultural area, with the example in Vieux-Pouzauges being the oldest one; the other two murals are housed in the Notre-Dame church in Kernascléden (Morbihan) and in the Notre-Dame chapel in Châteaumeillant (Cher).¹⁸ It can also be noted that this iconography may closely relate to the narrative given by the *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae* 6:1, 2: here, while the parents accompany the Virgin child, she reaches the altar without the need for a guide – the absence of the priest in the episode is noteworthy.

A real column, painted with fake marble veins, interrupts the cycle. Unfortunately, the last surviving scenes are of doubtful interpretation. After a tree we see Mary, indicated by the titulus, dressed in royal robes: her head is surrounded by a crown resting on a white veil that hides her hair, while she wears a purple cloak with white embroidery and a green tunic with a golden hem. Again, the Virgin's change of dress could symbolize a change in her status. She is kneeling on a natural protuberance and turns with folded hands towards the angel, who appears from heaven. The scene takes place outside and is separated by a small column supporting an entablature/city that frames the next scene, the subject of which unfortunately has not yet been identified (Fig. 9).

Scholars have proposed different interpretations of the surviving scene. While Crozet and Thibout proposed to read it as *Mary fed by an angel*,¹⁹ Lafontaine-Dosogne envisaged the Second Annunciation.²⁰ Davy identified the Annunciation of the Virgin's Death, which he inferred from the palm of paradise as a token of Mary's imminent assumption into heaven.²¹ The iconographic scheme, along with what remains legible of the missing part, seems comparable to that used in the altarpiece of the Madonna di San Martino (1281–1295), kept in the National Museum of San Matteo in Pisa, even if the latter represents a different part of the story. Perhaps, in the case of Vieux-Pouzauges the two scenes could refer to chapter IV of Pseudo-Matthew Gospel, which describes the life of the Virgin in the Temple: her maturity made her look like an adult, she dedicated herself to weaving and prayers and received nourishment directly from the hand of an angel.

¹⁷ FERRARO 2012, pp. 193–194. For other reflection on the two figures, see DAVY 1993, pp. 96–97, 100 (n. 27).

¹⁸ FERRARO 2012, p. 203 (n. 107). Ferraro says that Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne attributes this iconographic detail to the Western art – except for Italy, a place where the ancient and byzantine traditions were spread and interrelated.

¹⁹ THIBOUT 1950, p. 183; DAVY 1993, p. 100 (n. 28).

²⁰ LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 128–134.

²¹ DAVY 1993, p. 97.



10. Frames with Months and fishes, northern wall,
church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)

Above the narrative section, there is a continuous strip (interrupted only by the column leaning against the nave, but not by the window) with a meandering ornamental decoration with alternating swastikas and figured panels between two red-and-yellow ochre bands. The first one consists of a human-like torso and a fish-like lower part, possibly holding a horn. The second features the same figure with slightly different details and holding different objects. The first two figures are mirrored and separated by a swastika. The third is a fish very similar to the zodiac sign (Fig. 10).

In the window's sector there is a figure consisting of a gorgon head with a headdress flanked by wings, and the second is a naked human figure riding a dragon (Figs. 11–12).²² It continues with a figure riding a dragon, two faced harpies and then another pair of faced harpies (whose heads are unfortunately detached). In the last surviving part are a sleeping dog, a shepherd, and a sheep (Figs. 13–14).

²² A mandorla (whose figure is not possible to identify) is painted in the pointed arch of the first window. It is interesting to note that there are also refined imitations of marble: the veins of the marble in the capital of the column show different faces on each side.



11. Frames with Months and creatures, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)



12. Window sector, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)



13. Frames with Months, creatures and Holy City, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)



14. Frames with Months, a shepherd, a dog and the flock, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)



15. *May and June, northern wall, church of Notre-Dame in Vieux Pouzauges (Photo: Sara Salvadori)*

In the uppermost frieze, the representations of the Months inscribed in circular medallions are clearly recognizable. March is signalled by the pruning, April is depicted as a young man with a branch (or perhaps a sceptre) (Fig. 10), May as a knight next to his grazing horse and in front of a lady handing him an object, June is depicted by means of mowing (Fig. 15), July and August are represented respectively as the harvest and its end (Fig. 14).²³

Angelique Ferrand has suggested a connection between the meander frieze and the Months cycle: she thought that certain zodiac signs might have been evoked in the median frieze, where geometric patterns (a Greek-type frieze) and small quadrangular panels alternate.²⁴ However, the fact that just the sign of Pisces has been recognized so far and also the non-correspondence between the medallions and the squares do not allow us to confirm this hypothesis, in particular considering the incomplete legibility of the cycle.

The Months cycle relates to the idea of Time, while the representation of human activities is connected to the idea of freedom: work frees us from the needs to which our body is subjected following the Fall. The Zodiac and the Occupations of the Months constitute mediators between the terrestrial and celestial spheres, crossing different temporalities while falling within different spatial

²³ For more details on the month of May and its iconography in the Vieux-Pouzauges cycle, see D'ONOFRIO 2007, pp. 267–277. In Vieux-Pouzauges for the first time a woman appears together with the knight.

²⁴ FERRAND 2017, p. 191 (n. 815).

scales. The inclusion of the Zodiac signs within the church's monumental decoration during the 11th century seems to have preceded the insertion of the Occupations of the Months, which often took precedence during the 12th century to the point of being more frequently represented without their celestial counterpart. The tension between the Occupations of the Months and the Zodiac signs is thus crystallized chronologically in the first half of the 12th century as a pivot in the development of these two iconographic themes, and topographically in the relationship between exterior and interior. Essentially linked to agricultural work with references to courtly life (particularly in May), the scenes of the Occupations of the Months, inscribed in the ecclesial place and associated with the Zodiac signs, reflect the intertwining of social rhythms in the time of the Church – the liturgy – and the order of Creation – whose “formula” is codified through the Zodiac signs.²⁵

The narrative cycle represents scenes taken from the Life of the Virgin and her parents, an apocryphal subject not that common in Western mural painting before the 13th century (except for some Italian mural paintings: in Santa Maria de Gradellis in the end of 9th century, San Giovanni in Porta Latina at the end of 12th century and in Santa Maria *foris portas* in Castelseprio, even though this can be considered as an oriental cycle).²⁶ The surviving scenes seem to agree perfectly with Western texts, especially with the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew. The text appeared in the early 9th century in a form that suggests an 8th-century original, as a “Latin” version of the oriental Protoevangelium of James (written around the middle of the 2nd century),²⁷ and with another Latin version of the *Libellus de nativitate Sanctae Mariae*, which is a kind of synthesis of legendary history with Carolingian theological reflection (dating to around the year 1000, according to recent studies).²⁸

The 10th and 11th centuries witnessed the transformation of Carolingian liturgical materials through the creation of substantial numbers of new elements for Mass and the Divine Office. In France, the homilies of Fulbert of Chartres played an important role in the diffusion of the cult of the Virgin Mary both in liturgy and popular veneration.²⁹ Indeed, towards the end of the 12th century, vernacular poetic compositions on the life of the Virgin multiplied, based on the stories handed down by the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae*. They gained momentum in the liturgical sphere from the 13th century onwards. The cult of Saint

²⁵ For a complete discussion of the topic, see FERRAND 2017.

²⁶ LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 23–25; LEVETO 1990.

²⁷ FERRARO 2012, pp. 147–152; FASSLER 2000, p. 397; VILLANO 2020, pp. 87–93.

²⁸ We know that from the Carolingian Period, several theologians frequently made reference to the figure of the Virgin, for example Alcuin (735–804), Hymo of Halberstadt (778–853) and Hincmar, archbishop of Reims (845–882), who between 845 and 849 commissioned the *Libellus de ortu sanctae Mariae*, a text in-between the Gospel of Nativity and the Pseudo-Matthew. See LEVETO 1990, p. 406; FASSLER 2000, pp. 400–402; FERRARO 2012, pp. 147–152; VILLANO 2020, pp. 93–94.

²⁹ LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 16–21; LEVETO 1990, p. 406.

Anne, the mother of Mary, also developed in this period, especially in Chartres:³⁰ the genealogy of Mary acquired great importance and started to be visually represented.

Given the provenance and diffusion of key textual sources of Life of the Virgin in Chartres, it is pertinent to study possible visual references to them in religious art in the area and to investigate in particular possible connections to the sculptural cycles of the cathedrals of Chartres and Notre-Dame de Paris as well as to the stained-glass windows in Chartres. The frieze of the Royal Portal in Chartres hosts a representation of the Life of the Virgin and her parents,³¹ inspired by the text of Fulbert:³² it is the most ancient narrative cycle of the theme north of the Alps.³³ However, the iconographic details present in the capitals and in the later-executed stained-glass windows show a strong adherence to Byzantine models, whose narration follows the Protoevangelium of James.³⁴ Equally, a direct connection to the Parisian sculpture must be excluded, as it is dependent on the sculptural apparatus of Chartres Cathedral.³⁵

The second category of artifacts of interest for the present research comes from English manuscripts. The first is the Winchester Psalter (London, BL, Cotton Nero C.IV), executed between 1145 and 1155.³⁶ The folio 8r contains some interesting scenes: the *Annunciation to Anne*, the

³⁰ The cult of the Virgin and St Anne in Chartres would have been boosted by the acquisition of the relics by Louis, Count of Blois. For more details, see FASSLER 2010, pp. 323–346.

³¹ The Portal Royal was made between 1145 and 1155 and it hosts: *Rejection of Joachim's and Anne's Offerings; Joachim and Anne turn back in distress; Joachim sitting with his flock is approached by an angel announcing that Anne will give birth to a daughter; Joachim and Anne embracing, seated on a bench; the Bath of the Virgin; a group of two seated figures conversing; Anne and Mary walking to the Temple*, and scenes of *Mary and Joseph*. In the choir window (1215) the following scenes are depicted among others: *Refusal of Joachim's gifts, the Annunciation to Joachim, the Annunciation to Anne, the Meeting at the Golden Gate, the Nativity, the Bath of the Virgin* and other episodes about the education of the Virgin and her marriage with Joseph. See LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 35–46; HEIMANN 1968.

³² Fulbert was bishop of Chartres from 1006 until his death in 1028. The church was burnt down on the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin and the relic – the Virgin's birthing robe – was associated in Chartres with miraculous powers, able to save the town from war and destruction. Fulbert worked hard to promote the cult of the Virgin in Chartres, enhancing the very feast at which the church was destroyed. He wrote several sermons and songs which became known throughout Europe. Fulbert tried to dispel the early problems relating to the legends of the feast he was working to promote. His focus on the ideas of the birth and the relative transformation of time through Mary's birth added emphasis not only to the feast of Mary's Nativity, but also to the cult of her robe. The liturgical renewals of the 10th and 11th centuries were again transformed by the religious reformers of the late 11th and early 12th centuries: they wished to explain the sacraments, comment on liturgical action, and find new ways of translating and proclaiming the sacred mysteries and their complex modes of exegesis. See FASSLER 2000.

³³ LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 35–46.

³⁴ See HEIMANN 1968 for a complete analysis of the visual sources of the Chartres's Capital Frieze.

³⁵ In the Saint Anne Portal in Notre Dame in Paris there are: the *Rejection of Anna and Joachim's Offerings, Joachim prepares to leave with his companions, Joachim in the desert and the annunciation to him, the Meeting at the Golden Gate, the Annunciation to Anne, the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, and the *Marriage episode*. Also, in Saint Lazare cathedral in Autun there are scenes in the capital of Gislebertus (1130 ca): the *Annunciation to Anne, Joachim retreats to the desert, the Annunciation to Joachim*. See LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 35–46.

³⁶ The private devotional psalter includes canticles and prayers to Christ and the Virgin with numerous miniatures

Meeting at the Golden Gate, the *Nativity of Mary*, and the *Presentation in the Temple*. However, because of iconographical differences it is evident that these scenes do not match our frescoes: the presence of the *Annunciation to Anne* (not attested or not surviving in our frescoes), the different interpretation of the *Meeting* (they are in front of each other and there is no trace of the kiss described in the Pouzauges frescoes), the presence of the *Nativity of Mary*. However, the *Presentation in the Temple* has details in common: Joachim and Anne accompany Mary, who stands alone before the altar.

A second manuscript is the Book of Hours (British Library Add MS 4999) composed by William de Brailes in 1240, therefore a little later than our frescoes.³⁷ The manuscript has historiated capitals which portray a greater number of scenes. In folia 1v, 3v, 5v and 9r, certain scenes could be found to share some iconographic motifs with the frescoes: the presence of the accompanying procession to the *Offering scene*, the two shepherds and the position of the angel in the *Announcement to Joachim*, the hug, and the representation of the kiss in the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* (even if the position of the two is reversed). Nonetheless, the manuscript offers a divergent interpretation of the *Presentation in the Temple*.

The final comparison is with the Wernherlied von der Magd manuscript (Jagellonian Library, Kraków, Ms. Germ Oct. 109), an illuminated version of the Pseudo-Matthew, executed around 1225 and therefore contemporary to the frescoes analysed here.³⁸ The frescoes differ stylistically from the miniatures of this codex, which includes a greater and more complete number of scenes. However, the scene of *Mary being fed by the angel* appears separately from the scene of the *Presentation in the Temple*, an element that could help us to better understand the scene of Mary and the angel. There are further points of comparison in the scene of the *Presentation in the Temple* in the absence of the priest, the presence of a companion with the parents of the Virgin, and in the *Rejection of the Offering*.

The iconographic combinations proposed here confirm that the textual source used are Latin texts, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae*, while the comparison with contemporary miniatures suggests some point of contact, despite differing from each other. The textual sources thus show evolving iconographic solutions with details that change over time. In a period of textual re-elaboration of the lives of the saints such as the 13th century, when different texts drawing together and synthesizing traditions were produced – such as the Golden

with scenes from the Old and New Testament. There is an emphasis on the life of the Virgin and close connections with Byzantine culture for the iconographic choices can be observed. See WEYL CARR 1997, pp. 474–475 (n. 312).

³⁷ The manuscript is one of the earliest known Books of Hours to survive and it was produced c. 1240 in Oxford. It is a small portable manuscript and contains the signature of William De Brailes, a painter active in England between 1230 and 1260. For more information, see https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_49999.

³⁸ <https://jbc.bj.uj.edu.pl/dlibra/publication/167687/edition/159362/content>.

Legend of Jacobus de Voragine (later than our frescoes) or the *Speculum maius* of Vincenzo di Beauvais (1190 ca–1264),³⁹ and a vernacular poem of Robert Wace (1115–1183)⁴⁰ – we can see a similar process occurring in artistic production. In fact, in the 13th century, various artifacts were produced with a strong focus on the childhood stories of the Virgin and her parents. Each of these has its own peculiarities and this allows us to see the Pouzauges cycle not as a simple isolated case, but as one of the first examples of this new phase of experimentation. On the other hand, the loss of most of the frescoes means that it is not possible to offer a complete reading of the cycle. The question therefore remains: what was depicted on the north wall? Was there a representation of the “missing” scenes from the life of the Virgin or the childhood stories of Christ?⁴¹

The second conclusion concerns the unity of the ideation underlying the pictorial cycle: the scenes drawn from the Old Testament reveal themselves to be complementary to the various levels of symbolic meaning attached to the Marian cycle as well as to the infancy of Christ. We can suppose a sort of correspondence and contrast in the figures represented: the disobedience of Eve was countered by the obedience of Mary, so the result of the former’s disbelief was “resolved” by the latter’s faith.⁴² This can be seen also in the representation of the figure of Cain, a bad example in clear contrast to the figure of Christ, prefigured in Samson overcoming death.⁴³ Read through this lens, Abel’s death prefigures the Passion of Christ: Abel is comparable to Jesus, since Cain represented the ancient people of God as Adam’s firstborn. So, the themes could be sin (Eve, Cain), sacrifice (Abraham, Joachim), redemption (Mary and Christ) and prefiguration (Samson). The possible chronological distance between the cycles proposed by some scholars due to their stylistic differences does not exclude *a priori* a unified conception, which certainly took place after the first renovation of the church.

Finally, we can also envisage a unique element underlying the conception of this cycle, which was completed in a period characterized by a renewed and complex political (and ideological) relationship with the Holy Land. The representation of the Holy City in the frames and the evident desire to represent the parents of the Virgin could be related to the Crusades. The explicit reference to Jerusalem is evident in the insistence in depicting the city which acts as a background for the story. That presence could be more than a simple iconographic reference. Many questions

³⁹ The third part of the *Speculum maius*, the *Speculum Historiale*, relates to the world and Christian history and includes parts of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the *Libellus de Nativitate Sanctae Mariae*; see MÂLE 1986, pp. 228–230.

⁴⁰ *The Conception Notre Dame*, a vernacular poem in old French, is divided into three distinct parts: the first focuses on a legend that is said to be the origin of the establishment of the feast of the Conception of the Virgin, the second recounts the youth of Mary and the episodes relating to the Incarnation of Christ, while the last is devoted to the death and glorification of Mary. See FERRARO 2012, p. 157.

⁴¹ The hypothesis about a Mariological theme was proposed by LAFONTAINE-DOSOGNE 1965, pp. 35–46.

⁴² TRAVAINI 1997; cf. KESSLER 2023, pp. 111–116.

⁴³ DAVY 1993, p. 35.

remain open, however: who is the patron behind the cycle? Who developed the compositional scheme?

Iconographic references to the Holy Land are not an exceptional case in French territory. An interesting case is undoubtedly that of the chapel of Saint Jean in Liget, where many scenes relating to the life of the Virgin appear, such as the *Dormitio Virginis*; moreover, we see the same city-frame as that used in the Pouzauges cycle (another detail used in French territory and in contemporary examples).⁴⁴ However, a lack of a close correspondence of the scenes does not allow us to establish a direct connection between the Liget and Pouzauges cycles, but it is still an interesting suggestion which also helps to better contextualize our frescoes, capturing their exceptional nature without treating them in complete isolation. In conclusion, the peculiarities of the pictorial cycle make the church of Notre Dame in Vieux Pouzauges a stimulating case-study that deserves to be considered a major artistic contribution in the cultural context of the time.

⁴⁴ Saint Jean in Liget is a circular chapel and contains mural paintings of particular interest. They include: the *Nativity of Christ*, the *Presentation in the Temple*, the *Descent from the Cross*, the *Virgins at the sepulchre*, the *Death of the Virgin* and the *Jesse's Tree*. See PICHARD 1966, pp. 168–169; LELONG 1977, pp. 255–267.

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**VNOVIČEN RAZMISLEK O FRESKAH V CERKVI
V VIEUX POUZAUGESU (BAS-POITOU, FRANCIJA)**

Povzetek

V cerkvi Naše Gospe v Vieux Pouzaugesu so ohranjeni pomembni fragmenti slikarskega cikla, datiranega v čas med koncem 12. in prvo četrtino 13. stoletja. Cikel velja za posebej zanimivega, saj prikazuje prizore iz Marijinega otroštva. Gre za najzgodnejši primer širjenja te ikonografije na Zahodu izven Italije. Po kratki razpravi o stanju ohranjenosti cerkve in njenega slikarskega cikla članek opisuje stenske poslikave, pri čemer se osredotoča zlasti na njihovo ikonografijo. Poslikava je ohranjena na zahodni in severni steni ladje. Poleg prizorov iz Stare zaveze so tu tudi prizori, ki prikazujejo zgodbo Marijinih staršev in njeno otroštvo po apokrifnih evangelijih. Pripovedni cikel je obdan z bogato paleto figuralnih in ornamentalnih motivov. Na enem od treh frizov je upodobljena mestna pokrajina Jeruzalema, na drugem je meander, ki ga prekinjajo kvadrati z upodobitvami fantastičnih bitij, na tretjem pa so v seriji medaljonov naslikane personifikacije mesecev. Kljub svoji edinstvenosti in dejstvu, da so freske verjetno najstarejše upodobitve iz apokrifnih evangelijev na ozemlju današnje Francije, je cikel doslej pritegnil le malo znanstvene pozornosti. Članek se osredotoča na identifikacijo pisnih in vizualnih virov za ta cikel in analizira ikonografske vzore za posamezne prizore. Prinaša tudi razmislek o položaju te poslikave v okviru širjenja marijanske ikonografije med lokalnimi kulti in njihovi povezavi s Sveto deželo. Ta razmišljanja odpirajo pot za nadaljnje raziskave.