Death – (Re)Birth, Image – Setting:
Symbiotic Relationships in a Byzantine Rock-Cut Church

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Abstract: Dated to the late ninth century, the rock-cut church Yılanlı Kilise is considered by scholars an idiosyncratic outlier, representative of non-Byzantine influence within Byzantine Cappadocia. Scholars, however, have overemphasized Yılanlı’s oddities while neglecting the complexity of the programmatic and liturgical conception behind Yılanlı and its relation to eleventh-century, Constantinopolitan-influenced Cappadocian churches. This essay presents a case study centered on the interaction between the Koimesis of the Theotokos and a carved water basin that demonstrates that the church’s furniture and images constitute a symbiotic relationship that amplifies and extends their function and meaning. The Yılanlı Koimesis notably includes the Jew Jephonias. Located below the Theotokos’s bed, Jephonias raises arms with severed hands in an orant-like gesture while his body breaches the image border to touch the water basin below. By representing Jephonias without hands, the Yılanlı program purposefully displays the moment after Jephonias is punished for attempting to upset the bier of the Theotokos but before the subsequent recovery of his hands and “rebirth” as a Christian. The presence of Jephonias both creates a narrative image with a supersessionist conversion message and identifies the basin’s baptismal function; simultaneously, the completion of the Jephonias episode is only activated due to his proximity to the baptismal basin.

Key words: Byzantine, Cappadocia, Koimesis, Yılanlı

The single greatest source of painting from the Middle Byzantine period (843–1204) is found in the ancient region of Kapadokya (“Cappadocia”) in modern-day central Türkiye [Figure 1a]. Between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, Cappadocia was a strategic province along the eastern margins of the Byzantine Empire, bordered by the neighboring powers of Georgia, Armenia, and the Islamic Caliphates. The Byzantine defeat by the ascendant Seljuq Turks at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 marked the permanent loss of the province and a period of upheaval through the following twelfth century. The instability of this period, however, gave way to remarkable prosperity and cultural development under Seljuq rule in the thirteenth century. The history of Cappadocia is spectacularly preserved in the more than seven hundred extant spaces cut from the soft volcanic stone of the Anatolian plateau. Secular settlements and religious sites alike dot the rocky landscape; today, roughly three hundred of these spaces—many of which can be identified as churches—retain painted decoration.¹

No textual evidence connected with any individual site or group of the rock-cut churches survives to help explain their original function or meaning. Only a limited number possess dedicatory inscriptions that record valuable information regarding donors or dates. Around these few, art historians have created a

relative chronology of the churches, one based primarily on stylistic and iconographic analysis. These rock-cut spaces—their forms and visual programs—are therefore critical evidence for the study of Anatolian and Byzantine history, and are our primary means of understanding the creation, function, and meaning of the churches themselves as well as the construction and maintenance of Byzantine identity in a province outside of the capital, Constantinople.

The majority of the rock-cut churches are found in three valleys across Cappadocia at Göreme, Soğanlı, and Ihlara. Located in the southwest of the region at the foot of the double-peaked volcano Hasan Dağı near ancient Koloniea (modern Aksaray), the lush canyon of the Ihlara Valley is host to over one hundred rock-cut structures, sixteen of which are open to the public (Figure 1b). The churches of this valley are divided into two stylistic, and roughly geographic, groups: the first, located around the villages of Belisirma and Selime, exhibits a more identifiably conventional—or Constantinopolitan and elite—Byzantine style, while the second—a cluster of five churches near the village of Ihlara collectively known as the “Ihlara Group”—is known for its distinctive “eastern” style and iconographic peculiarities. This article, based on my dissertation, re-examines one of the churches from this second group known by its modern Turkish name as the Yılanlı Kilise, or “Snake Church.”

The small opening in the cliff-face which marks the entrance to Yılanlı belies the openness of the multi-room space and the expansiveness of its painted program. One enters the church through an exonarthex into a tall, barrel-vaulted narthex; turning right leads through an archway into the naos set on the eastern end of the narthex; or, heading straight leads into a funerary chamber furnished with its own apse connected to the north end of the narthex (Figure 2). The size of the monument and presence of two altars indicates that this was an active, congregational church; the number of burials (two arcosolia and five floor graves total across the exonarthex and burial chamber) adds a funerary function—a use reflected in the decorative scheme, which features powerful intercessors and themes of judgment, death, and salvation.

Yılanlı is best known for its distinctive afterlife imagery that expands across its narthex, including the Weighing of Souls and Punishments of Hell on the lower part of the narthex west wall, with the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste and the Twenty-Four Elders of the Apocalypse looming above on the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Two critical intertwined issues affect scholarship on Yılanlı. First, it is frequently cited as secondary evidence within topic studies that narrowly focus on a single element (most often the afterlife imagery), yet

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3 The “Ihlara Group” churches are Yılanlı, Ağac altn, Pürenli seki, Kokar, and Eğri taş. Nicole and Michel Thierry first set the stage for grouping several of the churches located near the village of Ihlara on the basis of style and iconography in 1960, linking together Yılanlı, Pürenli seki, and Kokar. Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne is the first to formally associate all five of the churches; the Thierrys simultaneously comment on characteristics shared by these churches but, though they do not draw all five together explicitly at any point, refer to them as “the Ihlara group.” Marcell Restle further entrenches the group status using the metaphor of familial relationships.


often neglect to contextualize that element within its immediate and programmatic context. Second, Yilanli is repeatedly characterized as an outlier in Byzantine Cappadocia due to its style and idiosyncratic iconographies, both of which are cited as evidence of foreign, non-Byzantine influence, such as Syriac and Coptic, or Armenian. As a result, the church is inconsistently dated, with dates ranging from the late ninth century to the late eleventh, and presented as an exceptional case of provincial iconographies. The surface treatments and the academic othering of Yilanli—and the Ihlara Group as a whole—occlude the ways in which the church reflects a Byzantine cultural and Orthodox religious identity particular to its Cappadocian context at the nexus of Byzantium and neighboring cultures of the eastern medieval world. When Yilanli's idiosyncrasies are instead judged as purposeful variables on a “standard,” a new range of meaning and constellation of interconnections become possible.

The core of the church, its naos, compelliingly articulates the value of using the notions of “standards and variables” and “interconnections” as guiding principles to better understand this monument both as an individual entity and within the cultural landscape of Byzantine Cappadocia. This short case study focuses on the south wall of the Yilanli naos, with specific consideration given to the Koimesis (or Dormitio Mariae, that is, Death of the Virgin) which has received only limited attention. Following a formalist methodology, I first argue that the south wall acts as a self-contained programmatic unit which hinges on a symbiotic interaction between the wall paintings and carved furniture that amplifies and extends their individual functions and meanings. An iconographic approach to the Koimesis then raises new suggestions as to Yilanli’s possible interconnections across the eastern medieval world and how this image complicates the church’s current positioning within Byzantine Cappadocia and Byzantine art history, especially regarding its dating.

Painted decoration covers all three walls and the ceiling of the free-cross form naos: a carved cross adorns the flat ceiling; and standing saints and archangels fill the spandrels and soffits of the arches on each cross arm. The north and south walls feature large figural scenes and carved niches [Figure 3]. A knotted circle-in-square design decorates the peak of the south arch soffit, with the archangel Michael and Saint Nicholas on the east side and Gabriel and Saint Athenogenes to the west. The wall is divided into three painted zones via thick painted borders: the top two registers are figural, while the lowest is comprised of painted green, white, and yellow curtains [Figure 4].

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6 The Thierrys propose a Syriac influence from refugees fleeing the Arab invasions of the 7th century and settling in Cappadocia; Lafontaine-Dosogne and Restle support an Armenian connection. A notable aspect of the Yilanli historiography is the citational practices of scholars dealing indirectly with Yilanli. Often enough only the Thierrys or Restle is cited thus influencing the given date for the church in the study; most scholarship tends to follow the Thierrys and the earlier, 9th and 10th century date range. Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises; Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles notes;” Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting.

7 The Thierrys, M. Yanagi, and Ousterhout suggest a date in the second half or end of the 9th century; Nicole Thierry now draws the line at c. 900. Catherine Jolivet- Lévy and, most recently, Niamh Bhalla prefer a 10th century date, while Lafontaine-Dosogne and Restle prefer a later dating to the 10th-11th century. Dating is one of the core questions of my forthcoming dissertation. I do not offer a more specific dating here other than to affirm Yilanli’s date within the Middle Byzantine period (periodized as following the end of Iconoclasm in 843 and the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204) simply because, as I argue in my dissertation, a date for the monument cannot be based on a single iconography or partial segment of the church’s visual program. For a succinct list of proposed dates see: Jolivet- Lévy, Les églises byzantines, 310. For the sources proper see: Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises; Thierry, La Cappadoce, carte 32; M. Yanagi and Yasushi Nagatsuka, Toroku Chusei Hekiga-ten [Turkey Paintings Exhibition in the Middle Ages] (Tokyo: Otsuka-kogeisha, 1971); Ousterhout, Visualizing Community, 213; Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles notes”; Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting, vol. 3, LVII; Bhalla, Experiencing the Last Judgment, 80.

8 For plans and line drawings of the church see: Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting, vol. 3, LVII; Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises, 90 (reproduced below, Figure 2).
In the upper, lunette-shaped register, Saints Constantine and Helena reach toward a jeweled cross placed above the carved window that pierces the center of the register. The Koimesis occupies the middle register. In the lowest register, in line with the window above, a carved niche decorated with a lobed cross and wheels interrupts the row of fictive curtains.

Natalia Teteriatnikov valuably identifies the carved niche as a water basin and determines a reciprocal relationship between the basin and painted images citing the compositional and thematic relationship of the basin cross with the True Cross held by Constantine and Helena above.\(^9\) In Teteriatnikov’s reading, the image of Constantine and Helena relates to both the discovery of the True Cross by Helena and to the Baptism of Constantine; the Yılanlı True Cross imagery and the basin’s cross are further linked to the rite of the benediction of the water on the feast of the Epiphany, in which the ceremony itself symbolically recalls the Baptism of Christ.\(^10\) The Yılanlı basin’s use then is limited to the ablution role of Byzantine phiale rather than a baptismal font, as Teteriatnikov notes that the small size of the Yılanlı basin precludes a baptismal function.\(^11\) However, at no point does Teteriatnikov address the Koimesis, which is formally the center of the wall and, I argue, central to the creation of the self-contained programmatic unit.\(^12\)

The Koimesis (κοίμησις), or “falling asleep,” of the Theotokos—the Virgin Mary—is an apocryphal story not recorded in the Gospels or any canonical historical account of the final days of the Theotokos’s life. Narrative traditions of this event appear as early as the late fifth century; by the seventh, it is an official celebration in the Empire, celebrated every August fifteenth as one of the twelve Great Feasts (dodekaorton) of the Byzantine Orthodox liturgical calendar. Stephen J. Shoemaker identifies three main “textual families” of the legend, which include the so-called “Palm of the Tree of Life” redactions, the distinguishing characteristic of which is an emphasis on a mystical palm; the “Bethlehem” group which locates events in Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem; a “Coptic” family; as well as several “atypical” versions.\(^13\) Here I provide a simplified narrative.

The final days of the Theotokos’s life begin with the appearance of an angel who informs her that she will soon die. At this annunciation, the angel gifts her with mystical things, including a palm from the Tree of Life in Paradise. She returns home to tell friends and family of her imminent death, and the apostles are miraculously transported from the ends of the earth to attend her. The Theotokos prepares for death; the next day the group is witness to Christ descending with a company of angels to receive his mother’s soul, which he entrusts to an angel. A funeral procession then begins, the sights and sounds of which draws the ire of the Jews in the city, who plot to destroy the Theotokos’s body. The Jews are struck with divine punishment for their disbelief; one has the gall to carry out his attack. The moment he touches the funerary bier, an angel cuts his hands off in divine retribution. Only by an acknowledgment of the power of the Theotokos and his conversion to Christianity are his hands restored. This healed Jew then re-enters the city and heals others willing to convert. Once the apostles place the Theotokos’s body in her tomb, they await

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\(^12\) This paper focuses its analysis on the lower half of the Yılanlı naos south wall. Teteriatnikov’s conclusions regarding the connection between the basin cross and Constantine and Helena with the True Cross above are valid and I leave further consideration of that imagery as beyond the scope of this paper. My dissertation includes an in-depth discussion of the lunette register and the window, following Lynn Jones’s argument that the iconography conveys specifically the visionary True Cross rather than the historical True Cross. I then consider the implications of this iconography as it interacts with the rest of the south wall program and other naos elements, specifically the carved ceiling cross. Lynn Jones, “Deconstructing an Iconography: depictions of Constantine and Helena in Middle Byzantine Cappadocia,” *Valoria* (forthcoming).

the return of Christ. Christ later reappears to take his mother’s body to Paradise, where the Theotokos’s soul and body are rejoined.14

The earliest surviving visual representation of the Koimesis is found on a sixth-century eulogia, or pilgrim’s token (“Token H”), recovered from Bet She’an, the capital of the Byzantine province Palaestina Secunda, which displays a succinct composition of the apostles gathered at the Theotokos’s death bed; examples from the period following this are rare.15 Long considered to be the first depictions of the Koimesis, a group of Constantinopolitan ivories from the tenth century present the “standard” Byzantine iconography already fully developed [Figure 5].16 The basic visual structure of the Koimesis is remarkably consistent, with only minor variations. Christ stands in the middle, attending his mother who lies on the bed that forms the horizontal axis of the image, and holds her nimbed and swaddled, child-like soul, while an angel or two swoop down from above to receive it. The apostles stand in two groups to either side; Peter, sometimes swinging a censer, and John stand toward the Theotokos’s head, while Paul leans forward at the foot of the bed.17

Elaborations on this base formula, usually associated with later compositions of the eleventh-twelfth centuries and into the Late and post-Byzantine periods, add bishops, an increasing number of attendant angels, buildings with mourning women, the apostles’ miraculous arrival on clouds, and the Jew and punishing angel, as at the Mavriotissa Monastery in Kastoria, Greece [Figure 6]. In monumental art, by the twelfth century at least, the Koimesis takes a conventional placement within Byzantine church programs on the west wall of the church narthex, often above a doorway, and usually paired as an antithesis with the Nativity or the Theotokos and Child on the eastern end in the apse.18

The Yılanlı composition differs fundamentally from conventional Byzantine iconography.19 Instead of a vertical emphasis, the Yılanlı Koimesis reflects the horizontal shape of the register. Against a backdrop of blue sky and yellow ground at the far right of the image field, a large angel—labeled ΑΝΓΕΛΟΣ ΚΥ (aggelos kyrion, “Angel of the Lord”)—holds a scepter in their left hand, while reaching to cover their mouth with the right and bowing their head toward Christ and the Theotokos. The angel’s right wing stretches out to cover Christ as he grasps the small, nimbed, and naked soul of his mother.20 The Theotokos’s funerary bier, around which the apostles gather in mourning, fills the remaining two-thirds of the register. Though damaged due to rainwater from the window, the outline of the Theotokos’s yellow halo and the lines of her face are visible against the red patterned backdrop of the large rectangular bed. The apostles John and

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14 Some Koimesis narratives, such as those from the Palm of Life family, conclude with an apocalyptic tour through Paradise and Hell. Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions, 33–46.
19 I have digitally edited the photograph of the Yılanlı south wall by increasing the clarity and saturation in order to aid legibility of the fresco, especially in areas damaged by water or by post-Byzantine graffiti. All the visual elements discussed in this paper are still visible in-person but can be difficult to see in un-edited photographs.
20 Multiple scholars note that an exceptional element of the Yılanlı Koimesis is the manner in which the Theotokos’s soul is rendered as nude, rather than swaddled. The nudity of the Theotokos’s soul is indisputable and will be examined further in the dissertation. The Theotokos’s halo, noted as missing in early scholarship, is present, but difficult to see.
Paul, recognizable by their beardlessness and receding hairline, respectively, stand at the foot, while the other nine line the back side. Unlike the rest of the yellow background, the background to the bed is green, thereby offsetting this part of the composition. Though the gold background appears again on the far left behind Paul, this shift to green creates a clear demarcation between this side of the image field and that with Christ and the great angel, implying a combination of earthly and heavenly settings. This color shift also highlights the final figure in the composition, located below the bed at the lower edge of the register, dressed in yellow, and noticeably smaller than the rest of the figures. This is the disbelieving Jew, the one punished for daring to attack the Theotokos; in Yılanlı, the absence of hands removed at the wrists makes his identity apparent. For the sake of clarity, I refer to this figure throughout the rest of this article as Jephonias, though he is not always so named in the narrative accounts.

It is Jephonias that I propose is the key to the self-contained program of the naos south wall [Figure 7].

A major theme of the Koimesis story is the Jewish hatred of all things Christian; nevertheless, it allows that Jews are capable of conversion, and so also of salvation. In her study on the image of the Jew in Byzantine art, Elisabeth Revel-Neher notes that, in the development of the Jephonias theme, these images emphasize either Jephonias’s attempted desecration or his punishment, but never the third stage of the story: his repentance and conversion. Consequently, Jephonias images are a clear negative invocation of the disbelieving Jew. I agree with Revel-Neher, to an extent; the Yılanlı Koimesis is focused on the violent bodily harm done to Jephonias, as he raises arms missing severed hands in a disfigured orant-like gesture. Exceptionally, however, the Yılanlı Koimesis does, in fact, also tell the third stage of the story by omitting the figure of the punishing angel and via the interaction of image and liturgical furniture.

In Yılanlı, Jephonias’s lower body breaks through not only the thick red border line of the register, but also the braided-rope motif that creates an additional boundary between the curtains below. Crucially, his iden8ty apparent. For the sake of clarity, I refer to this figure throughout the rest of this article as Jephonias, though he is not always so named in the narrative accounts. It is Jephonias that I propose is the key to the self-contained program of the naos south wall [Figure 7].

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24 Jephonias’s particular posture –arms raised upwards rather than outstretched in front of his body as they are in many other instances such as the Kirk dam altı or the St. Nicholas in Başköy Koimesis– is partly a function of image clarity; composition-wise, he is centered directly below the funerary bed rather than off to a side, and his yellow sleeves and stumps of his arms are further emphasized against the green background. I suggest that Jephonias’s posture is also meant to evoke that of an orant. Jephonias is, however, meant more specifically to be an antithesis of an orant in which his bodily disfigurement inverts the sacrality conveyed by the gesture and acts as another visual indicator of his heresy. The viewer is subtly prepared to understand this inversion by interacting with another –proper– orant earlier in their path through Yilanlı.

Three standing, frontal female figures fill the right wall of the short passageway between the Yilanlı exonarthex and narthex. The middle figure, haloed, dressed in pink, and visibly larger than the two haloed women in green flanking her, holds her arms upwards in the classic orant gesture of prayer. Her hands are a focal point of the composition: they are proportionate but large, offset against a similarly colored background by a black outline. Jephonias iconography generally includes the punishing angel and the severed hands, showing them clinging to the Theotokos’s bed, following the textual traditions in which it is noted that Jephonias’s hands are “left hanging…in the air at the sides of the coffin;” the streamlined iconography of the Yilanlı Koimesis jettisons the angel as well as, seemingly, Jephonias’s hands. The absence of the hands aids the comparative understanding of Jephonias as an anti-orant. With this position I diverge marginally from Revel-Neher’s conclusion that Byzantine art does not visually identify Jephonias (and in other cases, Judas and Caiaphas) as a specific negative Jewish figure through “moralistically-motivated caricature,” in this case physical deformity. However, the deformity in Yilanlı is purposefully temporary; a heresy and moral transgression cleansed by the sanctified waters from the basin below. The interaction between Jephonias and the water basin cues the eventuality that Jephonias will have his hands restored –thus making him a proper orant like the female one in the Yilanlı doorway– an interaction explored in the following section of this article. Revel-Neher, The Image of the Jew, 83.
Jephonias’s legs touch the top edge of the water basin below, breaking the otherwise neatly maintained separation between registers seen throughout the church. What has gone unremarked is the significance of this compositional choice, which must be contextualized within the larger Jephonias narrative and the immediate church space. This compositional transgression reflects the social transgression of Jephonias and directs the viewer beyond the image proper to the water basin, expanding the narrative and symbolic potential of the Yılanlı Koimesis.

The small size of the Yılanlı basin has been used to argue against a baptismal function, but Jephonias serves as a visual indication of just such a function. If taken alone, the Koimesis register, like other Koimesis images, emphasizes the narrative moment after Jephonias is punished but before the subsequent recovery of his hands, his conversion, and “rebirth” as a Christian. Unlike other Byzantine images, though, the Yılanlı composition clearly signals that it is inclusive of more than the image alone, for it also necessitates the basin below, creating not just a reciprocal relationship between carved furniture and image but a symbiotic one. The explicit, formal connection between the Koimesis and water basin created by Jephonias’s body confirms the cleansing symbolism of the ablution water and the basin cross, extending that function to also encompass a baptismal use. Simultaneously, the completion of the Jephonias episode is only activated due to his proximity to the basin; the basin thus not only amplifies the power of the cross conveyed by the rest of the naos south wall program, as argued by Teteriatnikov, but also completes the story with its Christian supersessionist conversion message.

The variable nature of the Yılanlı Koimesis as compared to other Byzantine images is therefore purposeful; it is designed to fit the spatial requirements of the horizontal register and is part of a self-contained programmatic unit. The overarching meaning of the miniature program of the naos south wall is one of salvation, entirely appropriate within the larger funerary function of the church itself.

In what follows, I suggest ways in which to advance the iconographic reading of Jephonias in the Yılanlı Koimesis. Though this section ultimately raises more questions than it answers, these questions provide potentially meaningful points of interconnection between Yılanlı and the wider eastern Christian world.

Some scholars point to Yılanlı’s idiosyncrasies as evidence of iconographic prototypes that indicate that the church should thus be dated to an earlier period. The narratively significant figure of the disbelieving Jew appears in the earliest Koimesis literary traditions. Revel-Neher finds that the earliest Byzantine visual depictions of the Jephonias episode appear around the ninth-tenth century in Cappadocia. Following the earliest dates for Yılanlı to the same period, then the earliest Koimesis–Jephonias occurrence would be Yılanlı. Subsequent examples are dated much later to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the late eleventh–early twelfth century–Mavriotissa Monastery Koimesis marks the only other pre-twelfth century depiction of Jephonias (Figure 6).

In his “Epistle to Titus,” Paul describes the Mystery of Baptism as a “cleansing water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (Tit. 3:5)


However, she mistakenly describes the Yılanlı Koimesis, stating that the angel appears on the left holding a raised sword. The aggelos kyriou in the Yılanlı Koimesis does hold a silver staff of some type close to their body, but this object should not be interpreted as the sword, nor should this angel be understood as the punishing angel. Revel-Neher, The Image of the Jew, 81 and note 131.

Revel-Neher, The Image of the Jew, 81–82.
earliest artistic representations of Jephonias hail from Cappadocia. Twenty-six Koimesis representations are documented across the region. Raw data on these sites reveals no telling patterns. They range in date from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries, with an expected break in the twelfth century, and are geographically rather evenly dispersed. There is no consistent association between the Koimesis and funerary spaces, or funerary elements, such as an arcosolium burial. The Cappadocian programs generally follow the wider Byzantine trend of placing the Koimesis on the west wall and/or in relation to the Nativity or the Theotokos and Child, though this relationship is not established in six of the overall twenty-six occurrences.

Iconographically, the Cappadocian rock-cut churches trend toward Byzantine convention for the Koimesis, as at Ayvalı Kilise, dated between 913–920, which shares a basic composition with the Constantinopolitan ivories of splitting the apostles into two groups, with a centered Christ and angel over the Theotokos’s bed. The clearest variables upon the Constantinopolitan “standard” then are Yılanlı and Ağaç altı, another member of the so-called “Ihlara Group,” whose distinctive two-part continuous narrative Koimesis shows Christ twice, seemingly moving in reverse as he collects his mother’s soul, and which lacks the apostles except John. The most potentially consequential iconographic observation, however, is that of the twenty-six images only three include Jephonias: Yılanlı and Kirk dam altı Kilise in the Ihlara Valley, and St. Nicholas (“Çukur Kilise”) in Başköy, south of Ürgüp. This data point—albeit limited—reveals two further patterns regarding the Jephonias episode in Cappadocia. Like the Koimesis without Jephonias, these images occur across the region. Regarding dating, Kirk dam altı, grouped with the more stylistically “Byzantine” churches located at the other end of the Ihlara Valley from Yılanlı, is securely dated by dedicatory


31 Though no additional interpretative statements can be deduced at this point, it is interesting to note that the single largest geographic concentration occurs in the Ihlara Valley span, with six total (see note above).

32 See Ferda Barut’s dissertation on Koimesis imagery in Byzantine Cappadocia. Barut, “Bizans Dönemi Kapadokya;” Maguire, Art and eloquence, 59–68. The Yılanlı Koimesis is not directly related to the Theotokos and Child, located in the apse, though they are not far from one another. The positioning of the Koimesis in Yılanlı should not be taken as possible ignorance of this established antithetical relationship in Byzantine church programs but rather instead a preference for a different stress on the meaning of the Koimesis that serves the salvific and funerary needs of Yılanlı.

33 For images of the Ayvalı and Ağaç altı Koimesis, see Takeda, “On the compositions,” figures 11.1 and 12.6; on the Ağaç altı Koimesis, see Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises, 79.

34 Catherine Jolivet-Lévy and Tolga Uyar, “Peintures de XIIIe siècle en Cappadoce: Saint-Nicolas de Başköy,” DXAE 27 (2006): 152. For images of the Kirk dam altı Koimesis, see Takeda, “On the compositions,” figure 11.12. While the painting is heavily damaged and overrun with graffiti, Jephonias and the angel are still visible directly below the Theotokos’s horizontal bed; Jephonias is located immediately to the left of the large hole in the wall.

35 As with the Koimesis more generally, it is notable that a cluster of Jephonias-Koimesis images is found in the immediate area of the Ihlara Valley (see note 31).
inscription to the period between 1282–1328. St. Nicholas in Başköy is similarly dated to the thirteenth century by style and iconography. With the exception of Yılanlı, then, the conventional association of Jephonias with later Byzantine art would hold true for Cappadocia. While a single iconography is inconclusive dating evidence, it certainly recommends a re-examination of the church’s date, which could be significantly later than the ninth or tenth century as is commonly stated.

Turning to the literary traditions of the Koimesis may provide clues as to the wider cultural connections of Yılanlı and further prompt a reevaluation of the church’s date.

The iconography of the Yılanlı Koimesis points to a certain affinity with the “Palm of the Tree of Life” literary family. The use of a palm branch from Paradise is a prominent feature throughout these redactions: first, with the delivery of the palm to Mary by an angel, then gifted to John along with other secret things, followed by an appearance in the funerary procession and its use by Jephonias to heal the Jews who agree to convert. Scholarship has yet to comment on the object between Christ and the aggelos kyriou in Yılanlı. It is the palm. A formal comparison with painted and carved palms from other Cappadocian rock-cut churches would seem to confirm this. The inclusion of the palm deepens the salvific and mystical power of both the Koimesis and south wall program and, with its specific paradisical connotations, fits within the overall funerary function of the church and its emphasis on salvific and afterlife imagery.

The net around a specific literary tradition may be drawn even tighter. Some early scholarship on Yılanlı, including the seminal publication on churches of the Ihlara Valley by Nicole and Michel Thierry, noted that the Koimesis was missing the body of the Theotokos, a theory long since disproven because this was caused by environmental damage to the paint. Scholars advanced this supposed iconographic feature in two distinct directions—Syriac or Armenian—based on their rationale for the supposedly non-Byzantine stylistic and cultural influence on Yılanlı.

It is the Armenian connection that is most intriguing. Textual accounts do place Armenians in Cappadocia from at least the eleventh century. This century saw three instances of dispossessed Armenian

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36 Jolivet-Lévy and Uyar, “Peintures de Xlle siècle en Cappadoce,” 147–158.
38 The question of the aggelos kyriou—its identity, the meaning of its gesture, and its role in the narrative action of the Yılanlı Koimesis—is more involved than the space in this article allows. The aggelos kyriou is a complicated figure, occurring three times throughout Yılanlı: twice in the naos, in the Koimesis and directly across on the naos north wall as part of the Last Supper, and as part of the afterlife imagery on the western wall of the church’s narthex in the Weighing of Souls. See Mathiesen, “Yılanlı Kilise,” for discussion of the aggelos kyriou.
39 Palms that exhibit a similar umbrella-like branch structure are prominent on the ceiling of Üç Haçlı Kilise (“Three Crosses Church,” also known as Gülü dere Chapel 3), in which they appear under the horizontal arms of two of the three eponymous carved ceiling crosses. They also appear in St. Sergios Chapel near Göreme, in the Church at Durmuş, and in Balkan Deresi no. 3. Both the Thierrys and Jolivet-Lévy tentatively suggest that the “curious instrument” by John in the Ağaça altı Koimesis is the palm; I think it can be more confidently identified as such. The occurrence of similar umbrella-like objects and the additional shared connections between Yılanlı and Ağaça altı as members of the “Ihlara Group” suggest that Jolivet-Lévy is correct. This would mark the occurrence of two Koimesis images with iconographic connections to the Palm of the Tree of Life literary family in churches closely related by style, iconography, and geography. Alice Lynn McMichael, “Rising Above the Faithful: Monumental Ceiling Crosses in Byzantine Cappadocia” (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), 2018), 323 and fig. 4.12; Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting, vol. 3, XXVII, vol 3., XXVII; Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, La Cappadoce médiévale: images et spiritualité (Saint-Léger-Vauban: Zodiacque, 2001), 306, plate 97; Thierry, La Cappadoce, 96; Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises, 79.
41 Thierry and Thierry, Nouvelles églises ; Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles Notes Cappadociennes.”
princes ceding control of their Armenian territories to Byzantium; in return, they were gifted land in Cappadocia. First, in 1021–1022, the last ruler of Vaspurakan, Senek’erim Artsruni, exchanged his kingdom to the Byzantine emperor Basil II in return for the city of Sebasteia (modern Sivas). Additional land and population exchanges between the Byzantines and Armenians occurred in 1045, under Gagik II, ruler of Ani, and in 1063, under Gagik-Abbas of Kars.42

Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne proposes a connection between the Yilanlı Koimesis and the earliest Koimesis narrative composed in Armenian as it is preserved in a series of manuscripts from the twelfth-nineteenth centuries.43 This account, the so-called “Armenian Transitus,” recounts that the Theotokos’s body “made itself impossible to see and dazzled [the Jews]” who sought to steal it.44 While Lafontaine-Dosogne’s point of connection between image and text erroneously hinges on the “missing body” theory, the Armenian legend as a potential source, or shared tradition, deserves further consideration. The Armenian Transitus appears to be a very heavily revised version of the early Palm of the Tree of Life traditions, the same narrative branch to which I have suggested the Yilanlı Koimesis belongs, and is best understood as an original Armenian composition rather than a translation from Greek or Syriac.45 This Transitus is attributed alternately to the sixth century or as a “legend” originating in the Middle Ages; in any case, it is datable prior to the early twelfth century and likely to have emerged at least by the ninth, placing it solidly within the range of possible dates both for Yilanlı and for the known presence of Armenian settlements in the region.46 The compelling iconographic connection is found at the conclusion: “the company of apostles and the believers who were with them established prayer, and then they baptized the healed man.”47 This is, to my knowledge, the only redaction outside of the West to explicitly mention baptism.48 Following the Palm of the Tree of Life narrative structure, the healed man should be identified with Jephonias—a textual implication made visually overt in Yilanlı.

The Yilanlı Koimesis is an idiosyncratic image to be sure, but it becomes less eccentric once it is contextualized within the rest of its environment on the naos south wall. The interconnections between painted images and carved furniture inform and amplify each other; each can be understood individually but become more meaningful when combined. So too is the self-contained program of the naos south wall, which is informed by, and then in turn amplifies, the funerary nature of Yilanlı. Previous studies on the church draw attention to it as a significant site for Cappadocian and Byzantine art history; however, many are limited in their scope, focusing on pieces alone. This case study demonstrates the necessity for careful scrutiny of individual Cappadocian rock-cut churches in their entirety and to fully contextualize each church within its environment. Just as the Koimesis is to the naos south wall, and the naos south wall is to the entirety of Yilanlı, each rock-cut church can be seen as a dynamic self-contained—but by no means isolated—unit within the larger cultural landscape of Byzantine Cappadocia. Yilanlı may be transgressive, but an implied aspect of a transgression is also an understanding of the supposed “standard.” Yilanlı may draw on visual and textual traditions from outside of Byzantium to create its image, but it is an image that

43 Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles Notes Cappadoiciennes,” 164.
44 Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles Notes Cappadoiciennes,” 164.
nevertheless operates within a Byzantine Orthodox setting, expressing and maintaining such an identity. As Kathleen Corrigan argues in connection with the Byzantine marginal psalters produced in the period following Iconoclasm, the polemical images are not simply anti-Iconoclast but defend against many different opponents of Orthodoxy, including Muslims and Jews.49 The Yılanlı Koimesis is similarly an evocative statement of Orthodoxy and Orthodox identity. Yılanlı as a whole, then, is both a sophisticated expression of the flexibility of Byzantine Orthodox art in which variables are significant carriers of meaning and is an important testament to visualized identity as formed in a complex border region.

Bibliography


Figure 1a. Map of Cappadocia, Asia Minor, modern-day central Türkiye. After Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor.
Figure 1b. Map of Ihlara Valley in the southwestern part of the region of Cappadocia, with location of Yılanlı Kilise marked. After Thierry and Thierry, *Nouvelles églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, 32, fig. 6.
Figure 2. Plan of Yılanlı Kilise. Red outline indicates location of Koimesis and water basin on the south wall of the free-cross form naos. After Thierry and Thierry, *Nouvelles églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, 90.
Figure 3. View of Yılanlı naos, facing east. Straight ahead is the apse and altar; above on the ceiling of the naos is a carved cross. The north wall, to the left, features the highly damaged Crucifixion, with the Last Supper and a carved niche with a painted cross in the middle of the wall above the register of painted curtains. To the right is the south wall, with saints Constantine and Helena with the True Cross around the carved window, and the Koimesis and water basin directly below. Photo credit: author.
Figure 4. The south arm of the Yılanlı free-cross form naos. In the arch of the south arm, starting at the bottom and moving to the top of the arch, left to right, are saint Nicholas and the archangel Michael, and saint Athenogenes and the archangel Gabriel; a circle-in-square design sits at the apex of the south arm arch. The south wall is composed of three registers. From bottom to top: painted curtains interrupted by a carved water basin; in the middle, the Koimesis; and in the lunette-shaped register at the top, a carved window topped by a painted cross and flanked by saints Helena and Constantine. Photo credit: author.
Figure 5. The fully developed “standard” Byzantine Koimesis as represented by a group of 10th century ivory icons. *Icon with the Koimesis*, likely made in Constantinople, late 900s, ivory, overall: 7 5/16 x 5 13/16 x 7/16 in. (18.6 x 14.8 x 1.1 cm). Public domain; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, www.metmuseum.org.
Figure 6. Koimesis iconography with additional attendant angels, buildings with mourning women, and the Jew and punishing angel. Detail inset: the angel has cut the Jew’s hands from his body, which remain stuck to the lower edge of the Theotokos’s funerary bed. Koimesis of the Panagia Mavriotissa Monastery, Kastoria, Greece, 11th century, fresco. Source: public domain – Wikipedia.
Figure 7. Yılanlı Koimesis. Detail outline in red: the disbelieving Jew, with raised arms and missing hands, at the register border, Yılanlı Kilise, naos south wall, fresco. Image edited with Photoshop to increase clarity. Photo credit: author.