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San Giovannino:
The Boy Baptist in Quattrocento Italian Art

Georgina Sybella Macneil, 28 August 2013
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Abstract

This thesis explores the imagery of the young John the Baptist in Renaissance art. The phenomenon of John’s juvenescence has been noted but insufficiently explored by previous scholarship. The present study reassesses the figure of the youthful Baptist by means of rigorous theological exegesis of biblical, apocryphal and late medieval textual sources and a thorough investigation of the visual corpus. Beginning with the mosaics of the Florentine Baptistery, a handful of narrative cycles locate the onset of John’s prophetic career in the desert at an ever-earlier point in his life. However, it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the boy John was released from the confines of his own narrative to become an independent figure in devotional imagery. Innovative altarpieces by Filippo Lippi commissioned by the Medici family in the late 1450s and 60s are shown to be crucial in promoting and disseminating this new vision of Florence’s beloved patron saint. The thesis demonstrates the enormous popularity of the youthful Baptist in the following decades, first in Florence and subsequently elsewhere in Italy, and interrogates the significance of his presence as infant, boy and adolescent across a wide range of pictorial and sculptural representations. One of the most famous examples of the child John, Leonardo da Vinci’s Virgin of the Rocks, is recontextualised within this existing pictorial current, to show that this masterpiece is at once more traditional and more innovative in its treatment of subject matter than has hitherto been recognised. Key narrative moments, such as a meeting between Christ and John, and new ways of visualising the intimate bond between the two children formulated towards the end of the fifteenth century, including physical embraces and shared exposure of vulnerable infant flesh, are also investigated. Through such investigations, the thesis aims to advance understanding of the multiple and intersecting roles played by the boy Baptist in Renaissance art and devotion.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the significance of the figure of the youthful John the Baptist in Italian art in the second half of the fifteenth century. In the Bible, the Baptist’s role and appearance are quite clear. In the narrative of the New Testament, he functions as a herald of Christ and performs the rite of baptism to his followers and to Christ. In a structural sense, John prefigures Christ at every juncture – from annunciation, to birth and death – and acts as a point of connection between the prophecies of the Old Testament and the fulfilment of the covenant in the New Testament. In the Bible, as in apocryphal literature and the visual arts from the Early Christian period to the Middle Ages, the Baptist’s characterisation remains fairly standard, as a gaunt, bearded adult figure, in the guise of desert prophets such as Elijah. However, in fifteenth-century Florence, there occurred a seemingly sudden and rapid growth in the popularity of the youthful Baptist as an independent figure. Removed from his narrative or historical context, the child Baptist became the constant youthful playmate and companion of the infant Christ. As the patron saint of Florence since roughly the twelfth century, John naturally had a great presence in the art and visual culture of the city. What is unique in the fifteenth century, however, is his youth and his inclusion in previously unprecedented compositions.

As I will argue, a key trigger for the popularity of the young John in Renaissance art is the altarpiece of the Medici chapel, painted by Fra Filippo Lippi in 1459. In the following decades, Florence was to witness a rapid proliferation of compositions featuring the boyish Baptist, most often in combination with representations of the Virgin kneeling in adoration of the Christ child. The majority of these were destined for Florentine households, where
they served as the focus of personal and familial devotion. Because the vast majority of Quattrocento representations of the young Baptist were made in Florence, my study concentrates primarily on the city and its patrons and artists. However, as I will show, during the 1480s, the popularity of compositions featuring the young John and the Madonna spread beyond Florence in a significant way. This is due in large part to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, the first version of which was begun in Milan c. 1482. Despite the chequered history of the altarpiece for the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, Leonardo’s painting was extremely influential, with parts of the composition copied and reused throughout Italy. Taken up beyond the sphere of Florence and her protectorates, the figure of the boy John inevitably loses his patronal specificity as the city’s most potent and beloved protector, and begins to take on other compatible but not mutually exclusive resonances.

In this thesis, I examine how the boy Baptist retains aspects of the older, desert-prophet Baptist’s character and yet is simultaneously inscribed with the Florentine republic’s idealised rhetoric regarding boys and young men. As scholars have noted, representations of John as a youth first appear in medieval narrative cycles, which show him entering the desert – and thus embracing his prophetic destiny – as a youth or even as a boy. However, it is my argument that the change in age for the Baptist is not merely happenstance and is not only related to a shift in focus to a different moment of his narrative. Rather, the young Baptist is a particular, distinct figure, related to but not interchangeable with the older, bearded version of the saint. The significance of John’s juvenescence is a complex issue that is addressed throughout this thesis. In this context, it is important to note that John was not the only holy figure subject to rejuvenation in Renaissance art. In Florence, the most celebrated instances of such revisioning of mature, older sacred figures are represented by civic hero David and the warrior saint George.

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1 Victor Schmidt conducts an excellent dissection of the term “private” devotion in this context, eventually settling on the phrase “personal” devotion as the more appropriate for the sort of prayer conducted in the home, without the physical presence of the clergy. V. M. Schmidt, *Painted Piety: Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250-1400*, trans. J. Harvey, Florence: Centro Di, 2005, esp. 81-86 and 90-94, for the purposes of this thesis.

2 This term, meaning the young (little) John, was first used to refer to the young Baptist as a new subject in Italian Renaissance art and devotion by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, in her key 1955 article on the topic, which will be discussed in further detail below.

Yet the parallels are not exact and the differences are equally significant. Most tellingly, neither prophet nor saintly knight were ever visualised as infants or very young boys. With few exceptions – of which the most celebrated is undoubtedly Donatello’s adolescent bronze David – the “youthening” of these saints was not pushed further than early manhood. As young men empowered by God, these saints remain virile and potent, their holiness and virtuous actions giving the lie to the inherent instability and violence which contemporaries saw as a characteristic of young males. Hence the need to keep a tight control on the social groups of youths in general, through means which often combined both secular and religious concerns. Historians such as Richard Trexler and others have drawn attention to Renaissance interest in the period of “childhood” as an important phase in the process of becoming an adult, as well as a fascination with the youth, beauty, grace and potential of the adolescent male. As John was depicted younger and younger, so too was Florentine society increasingly engaged in the social, ethical and religious development of its youth, as testified to by the growing importance and prevalence in public life of youth confraternities. My aim is to consider the purpose of patrons and artists in including a youthful representation of John the Baptist in their compositions, rather than the adult who


6 See Trexler (1993) 1: 54-112. These will be elaborated on further in chapter 4 of this thesis.
had been the norm since the Early Christian period, and to explore the implications of the young Baptist as a distinct, defined figure in Renaissance art.

Precisely because John’s juvenation does not exactly match that of other saints in Renaissance art, questions of definition need to be raised. As will be seen, what I deem the “young” Baptist comprises several age ranges, each with its own physical and symbolic characteristics. Each is chiefly distinguishable by virtue of its difference to the adult, bearded figure of the saint. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, the young Baptist is variably depicted as an infant, child or adolescent. Although it is impossible to delineate exact ages for each of these, they nevertheless represent three distinct stages of juvenile existence that I contend are knowingly deployed by Renaissance artists and patrons. The child Baptist appears first, outside narrative life cycles, in the form of a young boy, as seen in the Adoration altarpieces of Fra Filippo Lippi. The boy Baptist is a child of roughly school age, from about the ages of 7 to 12. As will be demonstrated, it is this version of the young Baptist which was to be the most widely adopted: the boy Baptist is the canonic youthful John. Yet it is noteworthy that both younger and slightly older variants were also envisaged, although both are much more uncommon in Renaissance art.

The marker at the older end of this short spectrum is puberty; when all of the child’s rounded softness has fallen away and his limbs have begun to take on musculature, then he is no longer a boy but an adolescent. This is a difficult boundary to define, but I believe important to register. As will become evident, the main marker I use to distinguish the teenage or adolescent version of the saint from the adult Baptist is facial hair, which curiously enough, the Baptist does not appear capable of growing until he begins baptizing the multitudes. Of course, this definitive outward expression of inner maturity is closely linked to the significance of the saint’s activities. As will be seen, John’s physical maturity is related to his place in his shared narrative with Christ. Besides the beard, or lack of it, the adolescent John is distinguishable from the older child John by his musculature, his more active posture, and his deliberate, measured gestures. At the younger end, the boundary between infant and boy is harder to define, but I have mostly registered it through John’s similarity or difference to the infant Christ. If the Child is characterised with a rounded head, full cheeks and dimpled limbs and the Baptist is not, then I judge the saint to have been aged a few years into childhood rather than infancy. Throughout the thesis I have commented upon, defined or given reasons for what I judge to be the Baptist’s age in a work, and in
many cases, argued that it is tied to a symbolic function which will be explained at the relevant junctures. Accordingly, I have tried to use the most accurate word possible for each example, be it infant, child or adolescent. Although at times this may make the phrases by which I refer to the saint somewhat laboured, I believe that such specificity is nevertheless necessary and significant in registering the differing valencies thereby conveyed.

Despite the seeming ubiquity of the boy Baptist figure in Renaissance art, very little concerted scholarly attention has been devoted to him. The motif of the young John the Baptist as an independent figure was first commented upon in modern art historical scholarship by Bernard Berenson, in the second of his *Three Essays on Method*, published in 1927. In this work, Berenson framed his identification and discussion of the figure in the service of his attributional argument, which was dedicated to removing a particular painting (*Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, location unknown) from the oeuvre of the Sicilian artist Antonello da Messina. Berenson identifies several variations on the figure of the youthful Baptist observing or interacting with Christ as an infant playmate, noting the time and place where he believes each variation to have originated, so that he may rule out the “possible” Antonello work on the basis of the version of John which it contains.

However, Berenson’s method for deducing the origins of this motif is fairly haphazard. The origin of the youthful version of the saint is attributed to Donatello without further argument beyond his known innovative status (“one would expect Donatello/him, the fount and origin of most things in modern art, to have invented it”). He concludes by apportioning the largest part of influence for the spread of the motif beyond Florence to Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. The ways in which Leonardo’s famous altarpiece draws on and departs from earlier representations of the youthful Baptist will be discussed in chapter 5. While significant for drawing attention to the unusual character of the subject matter, Berenson’s account was nevertheless quite cursory and omitted large numbers of works to be discussed in this thesis. He also proposed relatively strict demarcations of time and place within which such representations of the child John were to be found. As I will show, these are not supported by the available evidence that exists in the form of hundreds of works.

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8 Berenson (1927), fig. 100.
9 Berenson (1927), 102.
from throughout Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century. Such boundaries of time, place and influence turn out to be far more fluid than Berenson had imagined.

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin’s 1955 study of the young Baptist in Renaissance art is to date the most complete and influential investigation into the subject. Lavin’s study is widely known and is to be credited with bringing the figure of the young Baptist to modern scholarly attention. Her primary aim was to trace the origins of this new iconography, to which she gave the influential, if to my mind insufficiently precise, epithet of Giovannino, or little John. Her study comprises an impressive wealth of primary research into Eastern textural sources and figural prototypes. In 1961, she published a short supplement to the original article, which refined and restated her position and addressed the possible misattribution of a significant text in the first article (a text that will be discussed in chapter 2). However, I believe that further investigation is not only overdue, but also necessary due to certain problems in the original investigation. Above all, Aronberg Lavin examines the phenomenon of Giovannino in Italian art from a distinctly textual bias, which leads her to argue for the source of this imagery in Eastern apocryphal texts. My research differs in that I do not seek to tie visual representations of the saint to any one particular written source and do not presume to insist upon a singular originary text. Instead, I examine a range of texts which I contend could have contributed to shaping new conceptions of the Baptist. My investigation also examines a broader range of visual imagery, in a more systematic fashion, and as such has led to somewhat different conclusions.

The structure of the thesis tracks the development of attitudes towards John, with a particular focus on interest in the saint’s childhood and youth, and the genesis, refinement and variations of the imagery of the young Baptist. The first two chapters establish the textual and historical basis for depictions of the saint as a youth. Chapter 1 examines the earliest primary source material for the Baptist, that is, the Bible and the extra-Biblical texts of the New Testament Apocrypha. While the circulation and readership of other texts may be difficult to trace and even harder to prove, the currency of the Bible and its position as the basis for both liturgical and private devotional texts ensures its primacy here as a possible source. I examine the Biblical John the Baptist: his history, his character and his structural uses. The strongest themes that are associated with John in the Bible are those of entry into

the church and the concept of the “wilderness” – be it geographic or metaphoric – from whence John appears and preaches. It will be shown that both of these concepts are important aspects of the role the youthful John is to play in Florentine paintings of the fifteenth century. This chapter also examines various apocryphal texts that have been suggested by Lavin and others as possible source material for specific fifteenth-century depictions of the youthful Baptist. I discuss the plausibility of such claims and argue both for a wider range of possible influences, which would recognise both the Bible, and a number of later medieval devotional texts, as well as the influence of earlier visual representations of the saint. This discussion of textual sources establishes the basis for the subsequent discussion of visual imagery, providing a clear understanding of the theological and devotional themes that might coalesce in the figure of the Baptist.

Chapter 2 focuses on the significance of John the Baptist in late medieval Italy, concentrating in particular on his status as patron saint of Florence. A key question, which many scholars have attempted to answer but which remains unresolved, concerns the origins of John’s cult as Florence’s chief saintly protector. While a number of early dates and landmarks may be pointed to as evidence of his growing cult in the city, a definitive resolution of this problem is beyond the scope of this thesis, although I will make some suggestions. A number of late medieval texts that include some embellishment of the childhood of John will be examined here, as contemporary textual sources which date to the same period as the most significant growth of the saint’s veneration in Florence. These include the hagiographic collection known as Golden Legend (c. 1260), the Franciscan-authored devotional handbook, the Meditations on the Life of Christ (c. 1300), and a fourteenth-century retelling of John’s life as a desert saint known as the Vite dei Santi Padri which Aronerg Lavin has identified as the textual source for all later Renaissance depictions of san Giovannino.

Also examined here are some of the visual precedents suggested by scholars, including the two narrative cycles of the Florentine Baptistery and the early fifteenth-century fresco cycle in Urbino. Such an analysis of both literary and visual sources demonstrates their parallel convergence on John’s childhood and adolescence. From the Baptistery mosaics, laid in the second half of the thirteenth century, to the Salimbeni frescoes painted at Urbino in 1416, evocations of the young saint increased markedly. Such interest in the boy Baptist sets
the stage for the appearance of the young saint as an independent narrative figure c. 1459, in Fra Filippo’s altarpiece for the Palazzo Medici chapel.

Chapter 3 focuses largely on the artistic patronage of the Medici family and the innovative imagery of Filippo Lippi, who produced the Wilderness Adorations which introduced the boy Baptist motif as an independent figure. Of these, the most consequential for my purposes is the 1459 altarpiece of the chapel in Cosimo de’ Medici’s newly erected Medici palace. The significance of this painting for its introduction of the boy Baptist into the repertoire for Florentine devotional painting has been largely overshadowed by other considerations, including examinations of the Medici family’s program of artistic patronage and of the picture’s place in Fra Filippo’s oeuvre. My analysis explores the significance of the youthful John within Medicean artistic patronage and representational strategies, both in the chapel altarpiece and in a subsequent variant by the same artist, once again a commission by the Medici, for the hermitage at Camaldoli. This chapter includes an examination of the issue of Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s possible patronage of either one or both of these works, which has long been debated by scholars.

Chapter 4 follows the popularity of the figure of the young Baptist, whether as boy or infant, over the decades 1460-1500. For this chapter I have undertaken a thorough examination of a large corpus of examples (some 395 works), with the aim of identifying more securely key trends and patterns. As would be expected, by far the overwhelming majority of works featuring the child Baptist originated in Florence. Nevertheless, my researches have also demonstrated that the popularity of the boy John was not restricted to the city on the Arno. The spread of the young saint’s popularity beyond Florence before the end of the fifteenth century has to date not been examined in detail. In addition to a consideration of geographical and chronological issues, I examine key questions of age and appearance, discovering the distinguishing characteristics of the youthful John in this period, for which a number of reasons may be advanced. I identify and interrogate the main iconographic features with which the young Baptist is associated, including symbols of the Passion and of Christ’s humanity. By analysing the rejuvenated Baptist’s role within a composition and his interactions with the audience and with other figures, this chapter seeks to highlight the variety of roles Giovannino performs. Understanding the Baptist’s mode of representation and his significance to the composition and to the intended audience can then assist in an examination of his popularity and significance for Renaissance worshippers.
Subsequent chapters are devoted to in-depth studies of individual motifs or image-types. This allows for a more detailed analysis of certain distinctive and highly influential compositions and the Baptist’s role in their iconographic programs. Chapter 5 turns to one of the most famous of all representations of the young Baptist, that found in the two versions of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. This chapter will consider briefly the almost immediate influence of the composition on contemporary artists and patrons. It was Leonardo’s compact yet emotive pyramidal compositions of the Virgin, Child and young St John that largely popularised the format with artists and patrons removed from the Florentine art world. Despite the apparent mystique and complexity of Leonardo’s work, I argue for a greater recognition of the ways in which the composition is recontextualised within the existing pictorial current of youthful Baptist imagery, to show that this masterpiece is at once more traditional and more innovative in its treatment of subject matter than has hitherto been recognised.

Chapter 6 focuses on the role of the young Baptist in compositions featuring the naked infant Christ and, most particularly, on the implications and significance of the exposed body of the infant Baptist. Though this chapter will draw on Leo Steinberg’s pioneering work on the appearance of the Christ Child’s naked body, it will consider the implications of that body within a particular iconographic program – that is, one which also includes the infant Baptist. Again, the concurrent nudity of the Baptist is a phenomenon that has not yet been much remarked on, except as a product of “naturalism”. As I will show, such a decision is as deliberate an iconographic choice as the unveiling of the infant Christ’s own body. This chapter will examine a number of works originating outside Florence, which will expand the area of discussion of this thesis to consider how the Baptist was partially extricated from his role as patron saint of the city of Florence, to become a potent object of devotion for viewers elsewhere in Italy.

Chapter 7 investigates one of the most complex and fascinating permutations of the youthful Baptist, when the boy or adolescent is shown encountering a similarly youthful Christ. Though not numerous, sufficient examples exist to warrant a more extended examination than has been conducted to date. Such a meeting can be found in a limited number of textual sources, including apocryphal and medieval hagiographic texts. The

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encounter between the two youths was first included in a larger work featuring other scenes from the life of Christ in the early fifteenth century. Spinning off from the specifically narrative evocation, the meeting of John and his kinsman was soon isolated from its historic moment and increasingly used as an opportunity to explore the intimacy of Christ and John’s relationship. In the course of this analysis I reevaluate the significance of a presumed-lost Leonardo composition of the two children embracing, whose existence has been reconstructed from an extant studio drawing now in Windsor Castle and a number of paintings from Flanders, chiefly from the circle of Joos van Cleve. Such imagery of the affectionate intimacy and love between Christ and his prophet provides some of the most emotive examples of the young Baptist figure.

To conclude, in this thesis I hope to restate the importance of theological scholarship in the study of art history, particularly in understanding those Biblical figures whose depiction seems almost too commonplace to question. My investigations highlight one protagonist from amongst the panoply of sacred figures who populate the visual art of the Renaissance, in order to show his universal appeal to patrons and artists alike. The polysemy of the child Baptist is key to his popularity and utility, with compositions invoking the multiple referents and themes the young figure, as distinct from his older self, can signify. This thesis seeks to offer a serious reappraisal of a motif given insufficient consideration in scholarship to date.
CHAPTER 1
JOHN THE BAPTIST IN THE BIBLE AND IN NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA

In this chapter I will examine the role of the Baptist in the Bible and in a number of apocryphal texts. A full exploration of John’s role in religious literature is necessary in order to understand his importance to pious fifteenth-century patrons, artists and Florentines. Discussion of the theological role and importance of the Baptist in the Bible has been insufficient by art historians. A number of texts have been suggested by scholars as possible sources for the representation of the young John the Baptist, however I believe thus far a thorough examination of the Baptist as a biblical saint has been lacking, and is an important component of my study of the saint. In order to address this, I will examine the narrative and linguistic features of the Bible that are used to set up a strong parallel between John and his kinsman Jesus, and the way in

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2 There have been several projects that have done so, in varying levels of detail. See for example H. J. Hornik and M. C. Parsons, “Luke and Pontormo: The Visitation in the Third Gospel and at SS. Annunziata” in Interpreting Christian Art, H. J. Hornik and M. C. Parsons (eds), Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003, 139-167. As the title of their study suggests, they focus on depictions of the Visitation passage from Luke, so their work does not necessarily contribute directly to the present study, but provides a good example of how theological and art historical concerns can be combined.
which John both foreshadows and supports Jesus. With a view to the examination of representations of an infant or youthful Baptist that will occur in the rest of this thesis, here I will also be putting a particular emphasis on discerning whether these textual sources relate the actions and relationships of the young Baptist. This chapter will give a thorough grounding in the textual sources that shaped the fifteenth-century understanding and conception of the saint, to be followed in the next chapter by an examination of visual and cultural influences.

The Baptist is referred to in Old Testament prophecies, and plays an important role in each of the four Gospels – though, it is important to note, this role is different for each Gospel writer, as each Gospel serves a slightly different role itself in the dogma of the Christian church. This leads to an examination of the development of John’s specific ministry within the early church as depicted in the Bible; that is, ministration of the rite of Baptism to the uninitiated and agent of epiphanic realisation. My particular focus here will be on the character of John as he is portrayed in each Gospel, and especially on the infancy narratives of the Gospel of Luke, as these are the passages most relevant to the works of art studied in this thesis. Furthermore, the most well-known texts that circulated in Italy during the flowering of the cult of the Baptist in Florence will be examined along with the relevant biblical passages. Much like the Bible, only a small proportion of these texts is devoted to infancy narratives for the Baptist, so an examination of his overall character, as it emerges from these texts, must be included. This provides the foundation for the next section of this thesis, which is an examination of the cult of the Baptist in Florence.

First, it is necessary to comment on how applicable secondary theological sources are for the study of Renaissance art. There are three chief types of modern theological or biblical scholarship. First, there are exegeses of biblical texts that address the effect of the stories, images and figures on a Christian’s personal faith. For the purposes of this thesis, these may be discounted immediately, as they relate more to the reader’s personal experience of Christianity than to those (biblical) works as necessarily

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4 The classifications I use here are based both on my own reading in the area, and on John P. Meier’s summary of scholarship on John the Baptist (see n. 17 below). One also sees a chronological distinction between different types of theological writing. Before the twentieth century, much scholarship on biblical figures seems to be directed towards developing one’s own personal faith, whereas modern scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century largely focuses on archaeological and historical discoveries, such as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi papyri in 1945, and the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1957-1956.
theological sources. The second type relates to the search, within and outside biblical sources, for the real historical figures of Christianity, and epistemological issues such as the original authors and order of the Synoptic Gospels. This scholarship involves a mixture of theology, history, linguistics and archaeology. As a tool for the Renaissance art historian, it must be used carefully. This is a modern interest and a recent pursuit, and as such the discoveries made by twentieth-century scholars cannot be applied to the understanding of the Bible held by fifteenth-century society, and particularly to the lay patrons and creators of the works that will be examined in this thesis. However, much of this rigorous field begins with a careful examination of the Bible and its sources, and the purpose of various books of the Bible as addressed to specific groups of readers, and thus can be of assistance in reading and understanding the Bible. Third, and of most use for this thesis, are more specific commentaries on the books of the Bible and biblical figures, written specifically as textual analyses. These are of great assistance in understanding the figure of the Baptist that emerges from the Old Testament and the Gospels. The focus of this thesis must be on the form and content of the Bible and associated texts themselves, rather than looking beyond them to historical or linguistic issues.

In order to achieve some similarity to Renaissance biblical scholarship, I will be using commentaries that look to Greek and Latin versions of the text as their source, rather than those that delve further into Hebrew versions or beyond. Jerry Bentley, in his book on New Testament scholarship in the Renaissance, examines the methods of


several important biblical scholars of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He spends some time explaining the shift from theologians and philologians using chiefly the Latin text as a source for commentaries and exegeses up to the fourteenth century, to a growing interest in Greek translations, beginning with Renaissance humanists such as Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus. However, it must be noted that many of the landmark writers who are seen to have defined biblical interpretation during the Renaissance either began, or published, their work well after the first of the paintings studied in this thesis were made: Erasmus’ edition of the New Testament and the Complutensian edition of the Bible were first published in 1516 and 1520 respectively. Of more relevance to this thesis are the commentaries of, for example, Thomas Aquinas (who wrote on, amongst other books of the Bible, Isaiah, Matthew and John) from the thirteenth century, and Nicholas de Lyra, a thirteenth-century Franciscan. In the following analysis of John in the Bible, I shall combine modern commentaries of the Latin and Greek texts with medieval and early modern commentaries where possible.

John the Baptist in the Bible is portrayed as the last of the Old Testament prophets, the one who points the way to Christ, and his forerunner and witness. He is the point of entry for Gentiles into the church, through the rite of baptism. The story of John and the details of his life are related across the four Gospels in a manner which not only recalls those of Old Testament prophets, but whose language also prefigures that which is used to introduce Christ, though this latter phenomenon is more marked in some than in others (more so in Luke, for example, than John). At key points in the narrative of John and Jesus, the Baptist emphasises to others within the space of the story and to the reader the importance and identity of Christ as the Saviour, sometimes at the expense of his own ecclesiological importance. Furthermore, he inaugurates the ceremony of ritual baptism with water, the initiation rite for those wishing to follow Christ. A common theme of John’s characterisation in the four Gospels is the authors’

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8 See particularly the introduction of Bentley’s text for a good overview of the approach taken by Renaissance humanists to biblical scholarship. Ibid., 3-31.
9 Ibid., 70. The Complutensian Bible was a multilingual edition of the Bible coordinated by Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros, Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain.
10 Though new commentaries and exegeses of the Bible continued to be written and published throughout the fourteenth century, there was a general decline in scriptural commentaries, and certainly none exerted the influence of thirteenth- or sixteenth-century works. See W. J. Courtenay, “The Bible in the Fourteenth Century: Some Observations”, *Church History* 54 (1985), 176-187 for a neat summary of activity in this period.
efforts to stress the importance of his role, while at the same time maintaining his significance as secondary to Christ’s. This is closely linked with the problem of establishing the divinity of the Messiah himself, which occurs successively earlier in each Gospel. In the Fourth Gospel, John is never referred to explicitly as “the Baptist”, with the author preferring to employ no special epithets for John at all. By denying the use of this title, the author denies John the explicit closeness with Jesus allowed by the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), afforded by his ministration of the rite to Jesus.

In each of the Gospels, several key events in the lives of John and Jesus are recounted, and the treatment of these by each Gospel author will be examined in turn in this chapter. In the course of John’s life, the events which are deemed worthy of mention are as follows: the birth and infancy of John, his early ministry where he baptized Gentiles and was often approached by those looking for the Messiah, his ministration of the rite of baptism to Jesus, his capture and arrest by Herod Antipas, and his beheading by Herod at the behest of his daughter-in-law Salome (although she is not named in the Bible). These events, listed here in the chronological order that may be reconstructed using all four Gospels, are not related in the same order in each of the Gospels, and nor is each event given equal attention by the four presumed writers – indeed, Luke is the only author who relates the birth and infancy of the Baptist, and the Gospel of John omits most of these events entirely. It is important to examine each of these appearances by John in the Bible here, though the most obvious biblical source for the painters I will discuss in this thesis is chapter one of the Gospel of Luke, where the birth and infancy narratives of the Baptist are woven together with those of Jesus. Each mention of the Baptist contributes to the patron’s, artist’s and eventual audience’s knowledge and understanding of him, and a complete grasp of the biblical figure of John will assist in understanding the discretionary choices made by those groups in the fifteenth century. Here I will lay the basis for understanding why, when faced with the sum of information concerning the Baptist, a patron might request or an artist settle upon, representing an infant John rather than an adult.

12 See L. Hopkins Miller, “The Divinity of Christ”, The Biblical World 43 (1914), 295-304. This increasing proof of Christ’s divinity at successively earlier points in the narratives of the Gospels is sometimes attributed to a need by early church fathers to strengthen the implied right of Christ to rule, by emphasising his divine sonship. Brown also touches briefly on this subject, see Brown (1993), 29-32.
According to Christian exegesis, the coming of the Baptist is prophesied in the Old Testament in Isaiah and Malachi, preparing the reader for a more detailed treatment in the Gospels. In the form of the Bible, as in its narratives, John precedes Jesus and provides the entry point for the reader, disciple or follower to experience Christ. However, the Baptist is then used differently by each of the Gospel authors to reinforce their differing emphases, and the changes wrought upon the figure of John can be quite distinct from one Gospel to the next. In Matthew he is both parallel to Jesus and yet paradoxically less than him, and perhaps used to emphasise that martyrdom also awaits Jesus. In Mark, the Baptist’s link to past prophets is emphasised, in order to lend weight to John’s prophecy of the advent of the Messiah. In Luke this role develops so that John himself forms the midpoint between two epochs in a “continuous period of salvation” – lending inevitability to the arrival of the third period of salvation, that of Jesus’ ministry.

In the Gospel of Luke we also receive the annunciation and birth narratives of both John and Jesus in great detail, the literary style here weaving together Old Testament prophecy, Semitic linguistic forms, and a familiar, prosaic narrative that encourages emotional engagement by the reader. It is in this Gospel that the greatest number of narrative and lexical parallels are set up between the two, inextricably binding their lives and roles together. In Luke, the conception, annunciation and birth of John precede those of Jesus, thus preparing the reader for the same events and lexical forms on a grander scale. In the Fourth Gospel, the Baptist is significant only in as far as he directs others to the true Messiah, and his own holiness is but a lesser shadow of Christ’s. In the Gospel of John the reader sees the greatest reduction of information concerning the Baptist, with key moments of the Baptist’s life discarded from the narratives.

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13 Isa 10:33-34, 40:3-5; Mal 3:1-3.
14 This sentiment is echoed and examined in detail in Meier (1980), 383-386.
15 Meier’s 1980 article discusses the paradoxical nature of the Baptist in Matthew in detail, examining each individual lexical parallel and problem in order. He also advocates processing the data concerning John in the order in which it arises in the Bible, rather than thematically, to avoid preconceived ideas about the primacy of either John or Jesus. This same methodology has been used for this chapter – I will be examining each mention of the Baptist in the Bible in order, rather than focusing on, for example, the birth narrative in Luke.
16 Wink, 47.
17 For a discussion of the language and style of the Lucan infancy narrative, see Brown (1993), 245-247. Brown discusses the putative languages of source material for the writer of Luke, as well as the evangelist’s own language (probably Greek), and also the narrative character of the details and dramatisation of events that Luke provides for the reader.
central narrative, as it follows that of Jesus. The relative disinterest\(^{18}\) of Matthew, Mark and John in the birth narrative of the Baptist constitutes a major inconsistency in the accord of the Gospels, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).\(^ {19}\)

For Christian readers, the first reference to John in the Bible is found in a passage in Isaiah.\(^ {20}\) Christian interpretation of this passage as a reference to John is demonstrated by its quotation by the later Gospels. Each of the Gospels quotes either the exact words of Isaiah or echoes the imagery used, as will be shown below. It is this passage that links the Baptist, a New Testament figure, to the prophets and prophecies of the Old Testament, forging a link between Christ’s historical past and his present as related by the Gospels. The canon of the Old Testament is used to provide a history for the ministry of John, which in turn provides the immediate prehistory for the ministry of Jesus.\(^ {21}\)

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isa 40:3-5)

It is here that we see the first characterisation of the Baptist as a figure that emerges from a wilderness, who inhabits a rough, wild natural landscape, and who speaks a hard truth. This identification of the Baptist as being very much in the mould of an Old Testament prophet becomes a key part of the imagery deployed to characterise him in the New Testament. Thus, Isaiah may be seen as the first important resource for the representation of the Baptist by medieval and Renaissance artists, even when depicting him as an infant or youth. This first reference to the Baptist introduces key language and imagery that is used later in the Gospels to describe him. The Gospels refer back to this passage explicitly and recite the prophecy using the very same words (Mat 3:3, Jn 1:23).

\(^{18}\) For a very specific discussion of this literary and theological problem, see P. S. Moxom, “The Boyhood of John the Baptist”, The Biblical World 10 (1987), 454-461.


\(^{20}\) Numerous authors have commented on the identity of the prophet referred to in this verse. For commentary on Isaiah, see J. Goldingay, The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary, New York: T&T Clark, 2005.

\(^{21}\) Wink, 5. In theological scholarship, this is known as Vorgeschichte, trans. “Fore-history” – the history preceding the “current-day” time of salvation in which the New Testament occurs.
This creates strong links between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment, which is essential for establishing the lineage and divinity of Christ. Thus, the strong association between John and a wilderness setting first begins in Isaiah, is reinforced subsequently by the Gospels, and is then a key component of the visual imagery used to characterise the saint in the Renaissance.

Scobie notes that the use of the word “wilderness” in reference to John may have multiple historical and geographical valencies, and he comments on the various possible sources for the word, from Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. Regardless of its exact origins in this context, the looseness of the word allows for multiple interpretations and associations on the part of the reader. It calls to mind the wilderness where God reveals himself to Moses (Ex 3) and to which Elijah fled (I Kings 19). The wilderness, as a conceptual rather than necessarily a specific geographical location, occupies an important role as the setting of deliverance, revelation and conversion for the Israelites of the Old Testament. Thus, the strong attachment of John to this nebulous though important setting, once again anchors the events of the New Testament (a form of present) to the stories of the Old Testament (a continuous past). John, in echoing both the appearance and the literary form of Old Testament prophets, functions as a historical figure simultaneously fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and interacting with New Testament figures.

The Book of Malachi also prophesies the coming of a herald of the Messiah in a similar fashion to the Book of Isaiah:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. (Mal 3:1-4).

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22 It is worth noting here that some modern scholars have identified the Gospel quotations of Isaiah as later insertions into the text (see Scobie, 13-17 for commentary), however this is unlikely to have had an effect on the perception of Johannine imagery for the Renaissance patron or artist.
23 Scobie, 41.
24 For an examination of the role of the “wilderness” as a place of retreat, epiphany and sometimes punishment, see G. H. Williams, Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought, New York: Harper, 1962, esp. 10-27. These themes will be expounded upon further in throughout this thesis.
This dense passage does not characterise the Baptist visually as Isaiah does, but Malachi again reinforces the stern, incendiary character of the Messiah’s forerunner. The implication here is that the task of this messenger will be the preparation of the people to enter into a covenant with the Messiah. For Christian readers the passage was understood to refer to Baptism as this purifying ritual. Again, this passage is most easily read as a reference to the Baptist through quotation by Mark (Mk 1:2-4); that is, retrospectively from the New Testament. The sense of expectation that is inculcated in the reader by Isaiah and Malachi is rewarded when the identity of this prophesised figure is revealed in the Gospels. John is the tangible evidence of the fulfilment of God’s promises, and the Vorgeschichte of Christ relies heavily on the continuous narrative begun in the Old Testament and completed in the New.

John the Baptist first appears in the Gospel of Matthew at 3:1-17, and is identified by name.\(^{25}\) Matthew skips over John’s birth and childhood, to present him to the reader as an adult, whose ministry is closely linked with that of Jesus. The first two chapters of Matthew have already been consumed with revealing the greatness of Christ, and it is not until chapter three that his herald is introduced. This reflects a temporal discontinuity in Matthew, whereby a linear recount of events is subordinated to the process of establishing Christ’s divinity. In the very first sentences concerning the Baptist in Matthew, he is accorded this title and explicitly identified as the subject of Isaiah’s earlier prophecy:

Now in those days John the Baptist made his public appearance, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, saying, “Be converted, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It was of him that the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make ready the way of the Lord, Make straight his paths.” (Mt 3:1-3).

In Matthew as in Isaiah, the Baptist is immediately identified with wilderness; he is characterised as wild figure that emerges from the desert, preaching in the strongest terms of the coming of the Messiah. This is due to the quotation of Isaiah by the author of Matthew. Temporally, he is associated with the earliest days of Christ’s ministry and the events surrounding him and his disciples. Meier identifies this temporal specificity as being used to locate the Baptist – linked with the Old Testament – firmly in the

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\(^{25}\) For a discussion of the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew, see Hendriksen, 97-99 and on the ministry of John the Baptist, 195-218.
present-day events that befall Christ. Time is used to lend the figure of the Baptist both history and immediacy in the same instant, which neatly addresses the difficulty the Gospel writers face in relating the life of Christ in such a way that accords him his proper heavenly lineage, and yet also carries immediacy and relevance to the reader.

Next, Matthew gives a physical description of the Baptist: “Now this John wore a garment made of camel’s hair, and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” (Mt 3:4) This description was immensely influential in determining the appearance of not just the adult John in visual art but also, as will be seen in this thesis, the infant or youthful Baptist. In visual representations of the Baptist, the rough, hairy garment he wears is his most common attribute. It is frequently the constant which identifies the Baptist to the viewer, regardless of other changes in the setting or tone of the composition. Again, the imagery used here links the Baptist to Old Testament prophets who are often described as dressed in a similar manner: “[Of Elijah] They answered him, “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist”. He said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite”. (II Kings, 1:8), and “On that day the prophets will be ashamed, every one, of their visions when they prophesy; they will not put on a hairy mantle in order to deceive,” (Zech 13:4).  

In Matthew 3:7-11, John addresses the people of Jerusalem and Judaea directly, chastising them in strong terms for straying from the path of their ancestor Abraham. In particular, he admonishes the impenitent: “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt 3:10) Here again the Baptist is strongly associated with a wild, natural landscape; the metaphors he uses in his speech all pertain to the natural world and accord strongly with his characterisation as abrupt, simple and truthful. Due to the penitence that is required before submitting oneself for the rite of Baptism, John himself is strongly associated with repentance, and as we will see later, becomes viewed as one of a group of penitential saints. This theme surfaces repeatedly in visual depictions of the Baptist, as does the visualisation of the axe lying in wait for the tree.

The repentance and baptism described by John in this passage are by no means easy or pleasant; the figure for whom he prepares the way would seem to be fiercely judgemental:

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27 The latter verse refers to the fate of false prophets who advocate the worship of false idols, however it clearly identifies the customary garb of prophets. See Hendriksen, 199.
28 Below, ch. 3.
“I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Mt 3:11-12).

These allusions can be linked not only to John’s presumed experience of the wilderness, but also again to Old Testament passages. Mt 3:10-12 strongly recalls Isa 10:33-34, where Isaiah describes in similar detail the judgement which will fall on the Assyrians:

“Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.” (Isa 10:33-34).

Here too, verses spoken by or referring to the Baptist are used to recall the words and images of the Old Testament, and in particular those prophets who preach penitence in eschatological terms. Both Isaiah and the Baptist herald the coming of an even harsher, more judgemental figure, using the common motif of the axe felling trees in a wilderness. This reinforces the validity of John’s role as the herald of the Messiah, by lending him the authority of Old Testament prophets.

At Mt 3:13 the author relates the Baptism of Jesus by John, in a vignette full of the former’s respect for the latter. The wording here suggests that the meeting is initiated by Jesus, but rather than making him the centre of the action, it instead shifts the focus to John as the object of such high praise:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. (Mt 3:13-15)

This is accompanied by the very visually descriptive image of the heavens opening up as the Spirit of God descends “like a dove”, to voice divine approval (Mt 3:16-17). This passage clearly has the potential to be extremely influential in visual art, and is rich with metaphorical allusions, again designating both men as playing important roles in God’s plan.
Chapter 14 of Matthew gives a remarkably brief account of the capture and death of the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas. Herod arrests John because of his opposition to the ruler taking his brother Philip’s wife for himself. Once more we encounter the staunchly moral Baptist, who continues to tell people things they do not wish to hear. This accords closely with the image of the Baptist that has been conveyed to the reader thus far by Matthew. Herod wishes to put John to death, but hesitates due to the protests of the crowd, who call him a great prophet. The reader is curiously removed from Mt 14, as the narrative is told from Herod’s perspective, who can not in any way be viewed sympathetically. His decisions are not explained for the reader, and he emerges from the passage as an immoral adulterer who at first is too scared of the people’s respect for John to put him to death as he wishes, but then succumbs to his step-daughter’s request for the head of John on a platter, because she has danced for him and pleased him. The reader here is detached from the entire account and even from John. The most important verse of this chapter occurs not at the moment of John’s death or even of his capture, but rather at Mt 14:12: “His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.” Jesus then retreats to a deserted place alone and his period of contemplation is swiftly followed by the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Though not providing as clear an introduction structurally as John provides for Jesus in the infancy narratives of Luke, in Matthew the Baptist’s capture, persecution and death foreshadow those of Jesus and provide for a parallel between the two at death, as at birth.

The Gospel of Matthew is dominated by clarity of structure and frequent use of geographical information to pinpoint the narrative to a specific time and place. The events of the life of John that the author or redactor chooses to relate are organised in a fairly orderly fashion, reflecting a largely chronological reasoning behind their structure, and using plain, unadorned language that leaves the reader to decide whether these scenes hint at deeper meanings than those highlighted by the author himself. Hendriksen also identifies the author of Matthew and the result of his writing as explicitly “Jewish”, and states that the very specific, physical locations and exact prophetic quotations used serve the purpose of convincing the Jewish (or early Christian) reader that this Messiah (Jesus) was indeed the Messiah prophesied by Jewish

scripture. Due to the structure of the books of the Bible, the eschatological prophecies of the Old Testament are immediately followed by the Gospel of Matthew, offering direct, explicit evidence of the fulfilment of these prophecies. Hence the figure of the Baptist is key in proving the truth of these prophecies and the fulfilment of them in the figure of Christ.

The Gospel of Mark begins with “John the Baptiser” and the announcement of the coming of Christ:

> As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight’.” (Mk 1:2-3)

With this simple change in the order of events related (compared to Matthew), already the Baptist occupies a far more prominent role in the Gospel of Mark. Mark begins by reciting the very words of the Isaian prophecy, and repeating the now-familiar physical description of the Baptist: “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mk 1:6) Not only does this reinforce John’s appearance for the reader, but the repetition of the familiar words and phrases concerning the Baptist establishes continuity with both the Old Testament and the Gospel of Matthew. The end of the first chapter of Mark describes the citizens of Judaea flocking to John at the river of Jordan and being baptized by him with the Holy Spirit. This leads directly to the Baptism of Christ in the following chapter, a key moment for both John and Jesus. Lightfoot identifies the importance of this verse as prologue for Gospel of Mark by being both “a backward and a forward reference” – the Baptist provides a link to the past through his resemblance to Elijah, and a reference to the future through his preparatory mission for Christ.32

The Gospel of Mark begins the practice of having John deliberately and emphatically deny his own importance to those he encounters within the course of the narrative action, and thus also to the reader. By contrast, in Mt 11:7-15, Jesus himself
exalts John to his own followers while the Baptist languishes in prison. He tells them that of “those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (Mt 11:11). However, he immediately follows this by paradoxically pronouncing that “the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he”. In the following verses, Jesus proclaims John’s greatness, his identity as Elijah and the wisdom of his ascetic lifestyle. Jesus’ comparison of John to those who occupy the kingdom of heaven does not seem to diminish his account of the Baptist, followed as it is by a confirmation of John as the returned Elijah. In the Gospel of Mark however, we begin to see John compare himself unfavourably to Jesus: “He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals’.” (Mk 1:7) This is the beginning of tension between “subordination and exaltation” of John – between John’s role as a mighty, apocalyptic prophet in the Synoptic Gospels, and the role he plays as a witness to Christ rather than any sort of saviour himself in the Fourth Gospel, though this tension exists to varying degrees throughout each of the Gospels.33

The Gospel of Mark also omits the birth and infancy narratives of both John and Jesus, instead beginning with both men as adults.34 The Baptism of Christ is related immediately following the introduction of the Baptist. Thus both within the narrative of the Bible, and structurally within the text itself, John functions as the herald of Christ, preparing both followers within his contemporary setting, and the readers, for Jesus. It is he who first instructs willing followers that the initial step towards salvation is the repentance of sins, followed by the symbolic cleansing ritual of baptism.35 Wink goes so far as to say that in Mark the Baptist has no significance at all in himself, and that all statements about him are in fact “Christological”.36 However, structurally he retains some importance to the reader as constituting the beginning of good news about Christ, and the beginning of his ministry.

33 Wink, 38. This phrase sums up perfectly the problem of the Baptist for the Gospels.
34 To say that Mark omits the birth narratives might constitute a slight misnomer on my part – I mean that he begins his retelling of the lives of John and Jesus with both men as adults, while Luke does not. Much scholarly attention has been directed towards whether Luke’s birth narratives represent historical fact, a summary of sources, or a literary insertion by Luke, as they appear in no other Gospel – and the gospel of Mark is widely viewed as having been written first. A good examination of the sources for the birth narratives is given in L. D. Bock, Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern – Lucan Old Testament Christology, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987, chapter 2, ‘Luke’s Old Testament Christology in the Infancy Narrative’, 55-90.
35 For a detailed examination of the ritual administered by John, compared to Christian and Jewish traditions, see Scobie 90-116.
36 Wink, 2.
Mark 1:9-11 relates Jesus’ baptism by John. While Matthew’s description of the occasion is by no means florid, Mark dispenses with the spoken exchange between the two kinsmen, but leaves the moment where God the Father calls to his Son and offers a blessing. The wording of Mark’s account of the Baptism carefully removes any focus on John – it is not suggested that Jesus sought out John deliberately, or that he then spoke kindly to him with an admission of the seriousness of both of their missions. The way the appearance of the Holy Spirit is related designates it as an apocalyptic vision seen only by Jesus, thereby excluding John from even this apparition of holiness.\(^\text{37}\) In this version, John proves his structural importance by providing the narrative justification for this vision to occur. At the same time, he is most explicitly not the most important character in the scene.

Structurally, the order in which Mark announces the events surrounding John’s arrest and death also serves a Christological purpose. Here it is to establish what Wink refers to as “successiveness” to the reader; whereby Jesus’ public ministry really only takes place after John has been safely removed from view, so that there can be no possibility remaining in the readers’ mind of Jesus being merely a disciple of John.\(^\text{38}\) While Mk 14 relates the capture and beheading of John in full (albeit in a more haphazard, disordered fashion than in Matthew), the reader has already been informed of John’s arrest much earlier, in Mark 1:14, as an interlude before Jesus’ teaching in Galilee. This interjection serves to preface the teaching of Jesus with the knowledge, in the mind of the reader, of the eventual fate of the prophet, as described in Matthew. Here a foreshadowing effect between Gospels can be observed – from Matthew the reader already knows what is to befall both John and Jesus, so that in Mark only the subtle reminder of John need be inserted early in the Gospel in order to recall to the reader not only the death of John but the entire Passion of Christ.

John as an infant appears only in the Gospel of Luke, where immediately following a dedication, the action moves directly to the Baptist’s birth narrative (Lk 1:5-80).\(^\text{39}\) The story of John’s birth echoes Old Testament birth narratives in both form and content at a number of points, though Luke rarely quotes the Old Testament directly.\(^\text{40}\) This is then used to introduce the birth of Jesus, with the intermediary narrative of


\(^{38}\) Wink, 8-9.


John’s birth again forming a link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Various images, familiar figures and exact quotations are used in the birth and infancy narratives of John, which neatly transport Old Testament and Judaic cultural and linguistic traditions into the current salvation period occupied by Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke constitutes the chief source of information concerning the birth and infancy of the Baptist and thus demands close examination here. It is also the Gospel where John receives the most attention from the writer and from those within the narrative, and the highest status both structurally and within the action of the story that he is accorded by any Gospel author. Luke creates the closest and most deliberate parallels between John and Jesus of all the Gospel writers, using one to introduce, echo or reinforce the other, in a continuing, complex double helix.

Following the dedication to Theophilus (Lk 1:1-4), in a few verses Luke dispenses a wealth of background information necessary for the annunciation of John’s birth: lineage, time, some suggestion of place, the age and devoutness of both parents and that John’s father Zechariah belongs to the priestly order of Abijah (Lk 1:5-7). Brown has suggested that this information may be imparted specifically in order to give not just John, but by association his kinsman Jesus, some priestly heritage and thus clerical authority.\(^{41}\) Thompson proposes that John’s birth narrative serves to emphasise the Davidic descendancy of both John and Jesus, thus neatly fitting Jesus into Jewish expectations of the Messiah.\(^{42}\) Elizabeth, his mother, is identified as barren, which provides a strong link between John’s birth narrative and the miraculous births of the Old Testament, which were often to older, barren but devout women and couples (for example, Elkanah and Hannah, and Abraham and Sarah).

The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and outlines to him in detail the illustrious life that his future son will have (Lk 1:11-20). Again, John is explicitly identified with Elijah: “With the spirit and power of Elijah he [John] will go before him [the Messiah], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Lk 1:17). Within the midst of a passage with strong echoes of Old Testament narrative forms, John is again associated with the greatest of Old Testament prophets. The angel appears to Zechariah while he is in the course of fulfilling his usual duties at the temple, and despite what one might imagine to be the highly suggestive nature of the setting,

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\(^{41}\) Brown (1977), 265-268.

\(^{42}\) Thompson, 46-47.
Zechariah expresses his disbelief at the angel’s proclamation, reiterating that he and his wife are old and barren. His very words are a quotation of Abraham’s reaction to divine revelation (Gen 15:8): “How am I to know this?” (Lk 1:18). As punishment for his lack of faith, Zechariah is struck mute by Gabriel until the child is born. Thus there are two miraculous events that immediately precede John’s birth: both the miraculous conception itself, and the sign by which Zechariah is to know that Gabriel speaks the truth – the going and coming of his power of speech.

The next portion of Luke foretells the birth of Jesus (Lk 1:26-38). Again, it is Gabriel who announces the impending birth to the disbelieving parent, establishing an immediate structural and narrative parallel between the cousins. This third section of Luke begins the complex, detailed parallel between the two annunciations and births. Structurally, John is used to support and introduce Jesus. Within the action of Luke, the figures of John and Jesus are tightly bound. The introduction of Mary is similar, though not identical, to the introduction to the reader of Zechariah and Elizabeth. In the focus on Mary rather than Joseph, the annunciation of Jesus’ birth represents a slight departure from the Old Testament model which the annunciation of John’s birth follows more closely. Gabriel appears to Mary and announces Jesus’ conception and birth. The angel also makes special mention to Mary of her cousin (or kinswoman) Elizabeth and the gift of her own miraculous conception, further highlighting both the women’s familial connection and the parallels in their circumstances (Lk 1:36-37).

In the next passage, Mary visits Elizabeth, and another miracle occurs: the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps at the sound of Mary’s greeting (Lk 1:41). Brown suggests that the purpose of this scene, which does not fit into the structure of the parallel annunciation and birth narratives of John and Jesus, is to bring together the two chief “dramatis personae” of these narratives, and in so doing, also immediately and explicitly establish John’s subordination to Jesus. Hornik and Parsons however identify Mary as the focus of the Visitation pericope. This is evident, they believe, through Elizabeth’s

43 Stuhlmeller, 121.
44 Brown (1977), 292-298. Brown goes into some detail here, positing that in the Lucan sources, the annunciation of Jesus was written first, and the structure then elaborated on for the purposes of introducing John.
47 Hornik and Parsons, 141-143.
cry (Lk 1:42-45) which celebrates Mary as the “ideal believer”.\(^{48}\) However, this argument is not entirely convincing. Mary’s hymn of praise at Luke 1:46-55 (the Magnificat), certainly implies an emphasis on the miracle of God’s actions, and spends some time thanking the lord for what he has done for Mary. This places the primary focus of the Visitation on God the Father and Jesus, rather than on Mary, John or Elizabeth, despite the positioning of the passage within (ostensibly) John’s birth narrative.

Some of the language used between the two women also serves to align the events of the visitation with Old Testament miraculous pre-natal signs: Elizabeth’s words “And why has this happened to me?” (Lk 1:43) echoing those of Rebekah who says, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” when Jacob and Esau quicken and struggle in her womb (Gen 25:22). However, the miraculous event itself does serve to further the bond between John and his second cousin or kinsman, and establishes John’s role as the herald of the Messiah from even before the birth of either child. The Visitation is concluded with the information that Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months before returning home, again providing evidence of the bond between the two women.\(^{49}\) Though the Visitation is only covered briefly in the Bible, as will be discussed in coming chapters, it is not only the miracle of John leaping in the womb which is to prove compelling to readers and viewers, but the suggestion of the visit itself, and the homely relationship between the two women to which it attests.

The birth of John occurs next, with remarkably little fanfare surrounding the event itself considering the miracles and prophecies that have preceded it: “Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son.” (Lk 1:57). The birth of John follows the Old Testament path closely here by focusing on the patriarchal arm of the family. The unlikely occurrence of both parents arriving separately at the same name for the child appears to provide the necessary evidence of Zechariah’s faith in God’s miraculous works: his tongue is freed and he can speak again for the first time since Gabriel struck him dumb in the temple for his disbelief (Lk 1:59-64). We are told then that Zechariah was “filled with the Holy Spirit”, and he utters a long prophecy concerning God, the Israelites, and the fate of his son (Lk 1:67-79), known as the Benedictus. Zechariah’s speech may be regarded as the last of the Old Testament

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
\(^{49}\) Brown (1977) comments on this and other Lucan canticles in depth, 346-365.
prophecies, though it occurs in the New Testament.\footnote{50} Both linguistically through the structure and particular word forms used, and in a narrative sense, the Benedictus is deliberately reminiscent of the Old Testament, thus once more using John to form a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. While Mary’s Magnificat of Lk 1:46-55 constitutes more of a song of praise to the Lord for what he has done for the Israelites, Zechariah’s pronouncement is a definite prophecy concerning his son’s future role in God’s plans, though both passages share a number of common images and themes. The Benedictus generates some confusion relating to the Baptist’s role as “forerunner”. In Lk 1:76 Zechariah foretells that John “…will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways”. This verse has proved problematic for Christians and scholars alike, implying that John might be the forerunner of God himself, rather than of Jesus.\footnote{51}

The exalted position afforded to John by the parallel birth narratives of Luke does confuse the power balance between the two considerably for the reader, especially when coupled with certain unclear statements concerning John and for whom he is preparing the way.\footnote{52} Zechariah’s prophecy, uttered upon the naming of John, leaves room for the Baptist to be the forerunner of God the Father, rather than of Jesus. Since the other Gospels (especially John, see below) circumscribe the Baptist’s role and this possibility quite sharply it need not constitute a major crisis of faith within the Bible, but it remains an interesting open question. Hughes points to the possibility that the redactors of the Synoptic Gospels may in fact have inserted many of John’s self-conscious references to his own relationship to Jesus’ ministry, and suggests that the Q source may have portrayed a different, and crucially more historically accurate, view of the Baptist’s contemporary mission and importance, without the deliberate efforts made by later authors to fit the material more carefully within the bounds of church doctrine.\footnote{53} Thus, the occasional references to John that would have him as the forerunner of God himself may not be incongruities, but rather remnants of an earlier, original understanding of the Baptist. However, while these occasional ambiguities do allow

\footnote{50} Moxom, 455.
\footnote{51} For a discussion of this phenomenon within the Bible, see W. P. Bradley, “John the Baptist as Forerunner”, The Biblical World 35 (1910), 327-338; and J. H. Hughes, “John the Baptist: The Forerunner of God Himself”, Novum Testamentum 14 (1972), 191-218. Hughes takes a more scholarly approach than does Bradley, though his focus is more on the mission of the historical John, than just literary exegesis.
\footnote{52} Eg. Mt 3:10-12, Isa 5:33-34, if read in retrospect to refer to John.
\footnote{53} Hughes, 195.
room for interpretation, when taken with the sum of information related about the Baptist, the reader may safely continue to assume that John’s principal role is as the herald of Jesus, rather than God. This discussion is most fruitful if one considers Christ as one manifestation of the Holy Trinity, and remembers that in medieval and Renaissance thought the tripartite nature of the Trinity presented no suggestion to Christians that any one aspect of the Godhead could be separated from the others — rather, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Lord were intextricably one and the same.

The last verse concerning the Baptist in the Lucan infancy narratives is short, but crucial. After the recitation of Zechariah’s prophecy, and before the verses relating the birth and naming of Jesus, we are told that: “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” (Lk 1:80). The strong association between John and the wilderness is continued here. It is worth noting however that the idea remains nebulous and indistinct: does Luke refer to a physical, desert wilderness, or to the metaphorical wilderness of the moral chaos that precedes Jesus’ coming? Fifteenth-century artists and patrons, as we shall see, appear to have taken this last verse quite literally, especially when considered in conjunction with previous mentions of the “wilderness”, where context makes its meaning more explicit. It is likely here that the reference is also meant to remind the reader of the link between John and Elijah, the Old Testament prophet most strongly associated with the wilderness. It should also be noted that the New Testament apocrypha and medieval vitae that will be examined later in this chapter serve to fill in the gap in the narrative created by this short verse. The usual reason supplied by such texts for John’s sojourn in the wilderness is the need to flee Herod’s forces though, as we shall see, the authors then relate this journey in different ways, and with differing emphases.

The birth of Jesus follows, and represents a slight departure from the Old Testament model of miraculous births. Thus far, Luke has used John to set up a connection with familiar Old Testament forms, from which Jesus can then depart. This establishes a link between Jesus and his Davidic heritage, ensuring that he appears as a fulfilment of Jewish Messianic prophecy, but also allows the very structure of the narratives surrounding him to convey that he is special and distinct from those that have come before him — including the Baptist. The subordination of John to Jesus is not so

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54 After examining the evidence, both Bradley and Hughes reach this same conclusion, in line with the vast majority of biblical scholars (and Christians).

55 Thompson, 64.
marked in Luke as it is to be in John, but structurally it performs the function of ensuring that the reader is constantly aware of Jesus’ primary importance. The structural importance of John’s role here is perhaps more essential to the Gospel of Luke than John’s role within the narrative. Both children are marked for a special role in God’s salvific plan, but Jesus’ role remains the more significant – John reacts to and defers to Jesus, rather than the reverse.

After the wealth of detail concerning John in the birth and infancy narratives, Luke moves swiftly to pick up the story again with both men as adults. Chapter three begins with Luke’s customary markers of time and place, with an account of the present rulers of several regions, including Judea and Galilee. Here he mentions Herod, producing a nice foreshadowing effect in the mind of the reader, who has already twice seen John’s fate at the hands of the ruler of Galilee. Next, Luke stages John’s by now well-known proclamation, and quotes the Isaian verse concerning the Baptist. This passage is ripe with visual imagery and associates John with a wild landscape:

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God’.” (Lk 3:3–6)

The words used here are a very close, though not exact, quotation of Isa 40:3–4. Again, the reader is struck by such a strong link between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment, provided once more by the figure of John. The strong consistency of Johannine imagery not only allows a very clear image of the man himself to appear for the reader, but provides a familiar thread between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment for the reader to follow.

Curiously, though Luke notes at Lk 3:20 that Herod has had John put in prison, at Lk 9:7 John is spoken of as having already been beheaded by the tetrarch. It seems odd that Luke has spared the readers the gory details of the event, when he devoted so much time earlier to John and his mission, and Zechariah’s long prophecy concerning his fate – having prepared the reader so thoroughly for a climactic moment, the author in fact delivers none. Stuhlmeller suggests that this could be to allow for the greater climax of the “Gallilean ministries” to occur immediately following this news, that is,
the Feeding of the Five Thousand at Bethsaida. Again, we see that John’s prominence in the Bible must be carefully reconciled with the primacy of Jesus, so that the Baptist does not overshadow the Messiah, even in his gruesome death. There is less sense here of the Baptist’s death foreshadowing that of Jesus than in the other Synoptic Gospels, and in the telling of this news to figures within the narrative and to the reader, the focus in fact rests on Herod Antipas, portrayed as weak and frankly overrun by events.

In the Gospel of John (or Fourth Gospel), the Baptist plays a more two-dimensional role than he does in the Synoptic Gospels. He is used primarily to support and uphold the divinity of Christ and to herald his coming, rather than to demonstrate his own significance, either to the reader or to followers within the narrative. His importance is primarily due to his role as an adjunct to Jesus. Thus his own sanctity is often downplayed by the author, and within the narrative by John himself. Consistently the phrases used by and of the Baptist here reinforce his own inferiority to Jesus and his lesser role in the narrative of the Messiah. As the divinity of Christ is established earlier in each successive Gospel, so too is the Baptist increasingly emphatic in his role as merely the herald of Jesus, rather than any sort of saviour himself. The relationship between the family, lineage and divinity of Christ becomes more complex – while in Matthew Christ’s divinity and identity as the Saviour is read as implicit, through the Gospels it becomes increasingly explicit, until in John the prologue begins with a direct affirmation of the divinity of Christ and of his relationship to God.

The first appearance of John here occurs at Jn 1:6, where the Baptist is introduced suddenly, with little preamble and no sense of narrative flow. The very first verses concerning John immediately establish that his primary role here is to be that of a witness to the Messiah, rather than the Messiah himself.

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56 Stuhlmeller, 140.
58 Brown (1977) addresses the discrepancies in the divinity of Jesus in each of the Gospels, and offers the view that the process of establishing it begins earlier in each successive Gospel – see 26-32.
59 For commentary on the disordered nature of the Gospel of John, see Haenchen, 1: 44-51. For a discussion of the possibility of the so-called “Johannine Prologue” as an awkward insertion into the Gospel of John, see Hooker. Hooker seems to read the language used here as very positive, concerning John’s role as compared to Jesus – however, his justification for this reading is not entirely convincing.
There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. (Jn 1:6-8)

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah”. And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’, as the prophet Isaiah said.” (Jn 1:20-23)

By deliberately beginning the reader’s introduction to the Baptist with such a direct question, the author is able to very clearly state John’s role and his relationship to Christ explicitly, rather than leaving the reader to deduce these from the story themselves, and furthermore, to place the words in the mouth of John himself. Thus there can be no room for confusion here, as there is in Luke, over John’s prophetic role: “I am not the Messiah,” he states, and then goes on to deny that he is either Elijah or a prophet (Jn 1:20-21). These statements are even described as “confessions”, implying that John is guiltily admitting to pretending to titles he does not deserve, or at the very least that the audience is being disabused of misconceptions about the Baptist that they may have held.60 The accusatory nature of his inquisitors also contributes to the considerable lessening of the prestige of the Baptist that this exchange achieves. By the end of this interview, John has even downplayed the importance of his ministration of the ritual of baptism with water, so that it becomes a baptism without a “bestowal of the Spirit”.61 However, Vawter points out that the role afforded to John here is linked to one of the major themes of the Gospel – that of bearing witness to the Messiah.62

The polemical attitude of John (the Evangelist) to John (the Baptist) is read in differing ways by different scholars. Vawter believes it to be motivated by confusion by followers within the narrative itself – the Baptist must be explicit in stating that he is not the light himself, but rather a witness to the light.63 Haenchen identifies a linguistic problem posed by two different implied meanings to the two different uses of the phrase “Who are you?” (verses 19 and 22). He explains this by noting that the second use of

60 Haenchen, 1: 143.
61 Ibid., 46.
62 Vawter, 42.
63 Ibid.
the phrase invites the quotation of Isaiah 40:3, which provides the now familiar link between the Baptist and Old Testament prophecy.\(^{64}\) Haenchen also reminds us of the importance given to John the Baptist by the historical Jesus, who sought out his kinsman for baptism with water.\(^{65}\) Ashton reads the denial of the three titles – Messiah, Elijah and Prophet – offered to John in Jn 1:20-21 as a device of the redactor of the Gospel of John.\(^{66}\) This allows these three important titles and thus roles in God’s salvific plan to be applied then to Jesus. However, Ashton acknowledges that, at least in the instance of Elijah, this places the Gospel of John at odds with those of Matthew and Mark, both of whom assign the title unequivocally instead to the Baptist.

In John 3:30 the Baptist utters the telling phrase, “He must increase, but I must decrease”, acknowledging to his disciples that his having any sort of primacy is incompatible with Jesus’ very existence. The way that this statement is structured however, once again leads the reader to the parallel, if carefully unbalanced (in favour of Christ), relationship between the two figures: the phrase is perfect and deliberate in bringing the two men together, but in placing Christ first. In having John say this himself, his ceding to Jesus seems more graceful and natural to the reader. In the Fourth Gospel, John’s fulfilment of his designated role as “witness” is made explicit through the language he uses to refer to Christ. He recites many of the appellations by which the audience come to know Jesus and understand his role: the light (Jn 1:7), the Lord (Jn 1:23), the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29), the Chosen One (Jn 1:34), and the Pre-existent Word (Jn 1:15) – each of these concepts being essential in establishing the moral authority of Jesus.\(^{67}\)

In the Fourth Gospel, in fact the strongest words in defence of John and his role come from Jesus himself. In Jn 5:31-35, Jesus tells his followers that John’s testimony is essential, as Jesus may not testify to God’s coming himself. This passage, however, is rife with contradictions, both within Jesus’ speech and when compared with the rest of the Fourth Gospel.\(^{68}\) For the purposes of discussion here, we can note that the Baptist’s role here is strictly delineated as that of witness, though a strong image emerges here of John as a lamp burning brightly. The Baptist in the Gospel of John, as in the Synoptic Gospels, is distinct from his contemporaries – whether a voice crying out in the

\(^{64}\) Haenchen describes it as “the well-known quotation from Isa 40:3 that should not be omitted from the representation of John”, which is rather apt. Haenchen, 1: 145.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 147-149.


\(^{67}\) Meier (1994), 21-22.

\(^{68}\) Ashton, 119-122.
wilderness or “a burning and shining lamp” (Jn 5:35), he stands boldly apart from others, and his isolation seems appropriate for someone with such an important role to play in the fulfilment of God’s salvific plan.

Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on the Gospel of John can furnish us here with several important points. First, Aquinas seems to have no difficulty reconciling the significance of John’s role with the need for Christ to not be overshadowed by the Baptist’s ministry and importance to his followers. Aquinas describes how John the Baptist gently and gradually leads his followers to the idea of Christ as the Son of God, highlighting the necessity of having a mediator here. He then lays out a line of argument that allows for the Baptist to come before Christ, but to be inferior to him, which seems not so much to be based in the Gospel of the Evangelist here but rather in Aquinas’ extra-biblical reading on the subject. Aquinas makes note too of the Baptist’s blood relationship to Christ, adding that this lends weight to his testimony. Aquinas also interprets the Fourth Gospel’s quotation of Isa 40:3 as having both a literal and metaphoric meaning, encompassing both John’s retreat to the desert, and that he cries out amongst pagan unbelievers. However, Aquinas departs slightly from the strictest interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, in reading the Baptist’s proclamation as an affirmation by the man himself that he is a fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy, when the Evangelist in fact has John deny this in the very next verses. Thus from this thirteenth-century understanding of the text, we can see that a reader may not have been necessarily swayed one way or the other by the Evangelist’s polemical representation of the Baptist, and by the inconsistencies within the Fourth Gospel, and compared to the Synoptic Gospel. The emerging and enduring image that Aquinas receives from the Fourth Gospel is that of John as baptizer, witness, prophet and kinsman to Christ.

Where the Gospel writers have neglected to include the details of Christ’s life which might make him more real or engaging to a reader, a number of apocryphal texts were created to fulfil this role. Differing in age, source material and authorship, some of these texts existed in manuscript form and circulated in both the medieval and Renaissance periods, informing both clerical and lay perception of biblical figures. The Protoevangelium of James (ca. second century) is a popular and influential New Testament apocryphal text which provides details of the birth and infancy narratives of

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70 For information on the presence and popularity of the apocrypha before sixteenth century printed editions, see Elliott, 48-49.
Christ, and in this instance also those of Mary.\textsuperscript{71} This text also recounts how Elizabeth takes the young Baptist into the desert to hide him from Herod’s forces.\textsuperscript{72} This section functions as an adjunct to the same troubles faced by Mary and Joseph with their own newborn, and is used as a \textit{caesura} in their narrative, and to give justification for the dramatic slaying of Zacharias [sic] in the temple. This gory murder forms the dramatic finale to the action of the entire apocryphal gospel, and clearly provides a strong exhortation to outrage against Herod. However, using the scene of Elizabeth taking John to hide in the desert in this way means that Elizabeth and John themselves are in no way the focus of the narrative. The verses dedicated to describing this event are short and sparse in their characterisation of the Baptist. Thus, while the \textit{Protoevangelium} offers an interesting gloss on several biblical figures, it does not substantially flesh out the relationship between John and Jesus as infants, nor even bring them into contact.

Two further apocrypha, the \textit{Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew} and the \textit{Infancy Gospel of Thomas} (both ca. late second century), were also extremely influential for later audiences.\textsuperscript{73} The former describes in some detail the Holy Family’s rest on the flight to Egypt, providing much material for later visual representations and filling out the brief description of the event given in Matthew. Both apocrypha also furnish the reader with several miracles by the juvenile Christ, including that where the child sculpts twelve sparrows out of clay and brings them to life.\textsuperscript{74} Both also include several rather less admirable miracles by the young Christ, such as several instances of the child striking dead those who argue with him or move against him when he was four years old, which serve to demonstrate his power even at a young age.\textsuperscript{75} However, John the Baptist is not mentioned in either text, although the authors relate several events which in other versions of roughly the same source material have included the infant Baptist.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{71} For an introduction and full text, see Elliott, 48-67.
\textsuperscript{72} See ibid., \textit{Protoevangelium of James}, 22:3-23:2.
\textsuperscript{73} Noted by Elliott, 84. I have grouped these two texts together here as Elliott notes that they are based on the same source material, and both relate largely the same events. For introduction and full text of the \textit{Infancy Gospel of Thomas}, see ibid., 68-83. For introduction and some of the text of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, see ibid., 84-99; and James, 70-79 (including an introduction on purpose and authorship). Note also that the \textit{Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew} is a modern name, referring to current understanding of the possible identity of the author. It was known to medieval readers as the \textit{Liber de Infantia} or the \textit{Historia de Nativitate Mariae et de Infantia Salvatoris}.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., \textit{Infancy Gospel of Thomas}, 2:3-4, \textit{Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew}, chapter 27, in James, 76.
\textsuperscript{76} Elliott notes this, in addition to pointing out that the exact form narrative related in the \textit{Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew} is unknown in the Eastern tradition. Elliott, 84.
Further elaboration on the birth and infancy of John the Baptist may be found in the *Life of John* by Serapion of Thmuis, a fourth-century Egyptian bishop. The exact details of Serapion’s birth and death are unknown, but he was writing from at least 339 to 360 or 362, and is known to have been a close correspondent of St Antony, even receiving two sheepskin cloaks from the latter after the Abbot’s death.\(^{77}\) The *Life of John* was written ca. mid-fourth century, roughly two centuries after the *Infancy Gospels* and thus likely based on different source material.\(^{78}\) This *vita* focuses on the events surrounding John’s early journey to the desert. In a passage that some suggest would be highly influential for later visual representations, Serapion’s text has the archangel Uriel direct Zechariah to dress his son in a bearskin and send him out into the desert.\(^{79}\) This is a move calculated to help John avoid Herod’s massacre of the innocents. This is an interesting addition to the biblical source material: Serapion’s text neatly fills the narrative hole so quickly glossed over in, for example, Lk 1:80: “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly in Israel”. Nowhere in the Bible do the Gospel writers explain John’s sojourn in the wilderness. In Matthew and Mark, as we have seen, John appears rather abruptly from the desert wilderness, to herald the coming of Christ. The Gospel of John successfully introduces the Baptist without making reference to his activities before he was engaged with the business of announcing the Messiah. Rather, at his first mention, he denies his own importance to the priests and Levites from Jerusalem. Serapion’s *Life of John the Baptist* thus satisfies a lapse in the logic of the Gospels by providing a reason for John to remove himself to the desert, so that he can reappear dramatically later to set in motion the chain of events leading, ultimately, to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. As Elliott notes, the function of the New Testament apocrypha is to satisfy the curiosity of the faithful as to these gaps in biblical narrative, and Serapion’s narrative is a perfect example of this.\(^{80}\)

The image of Uriel and Zechariah conspiring to disguise and hide the infant Baptist is ripe for visual representation, and there is a possibility that Leonardo makes

\(^{77}\) On Serapion (called “Sarapion” in the following text, although undoubtedly the same person), see M. E. Johnson, *The Prayers of Sarapion of Thmuis*, Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995, esp. 22-23.

\(^{78}\) An extract of this is cited in Hennecke and Schneemelcher, 1: 467-469.


\(^{80}\) Elliott, 46.
reference to Serapion’s text.\textsuperscript{81} However, as will be seen in chapter 4 of this thesis, there do not appear to have been a great number of depictions of this scene. We must doubt then the likelihood of Serapion’s \emph{vita} as a chief source for the representation of the infant Baptist in the fifteenth century, as so few works illustrating Serapion’s particular narrative inventions have survived. Serapion’s \emph{Life of John} also features a passage relating that while Elizabeth and John were in the desert, hiding from Herod’s massacre, Elizabeth died and John wept alone over her body.\textsuperscript{82} Jesus had a vision of this, and transported himself and his own mother to the site on a cloud, to comfort John in his lamentation. Mary weeps over the sadness of John being so young and so alone, and Jesus comforts her by telling her that God the Father will help watch over him, and the archangel Gabriel too (which displays an inconsistency in Serapion’s narrative, as surely Uriel would make more sense here). Serapion tells the reader that during the visit, Jesus also teaches John how to survive alone in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{83} This text does perhaps provide a basis for a handful of Renaissance works depicting Christ and the Baptist’s \emph{Encounter} in the desert, or perhaps add another layer of legitimacy to a meeting between the two, when added to biblical and apocryphal accounts of the Holy Family’s Rest on the Flight to Egypt, some representation of which will be discussed in the following chapter.

What persists in Serapion’s text from its earlier Gospel forebears however is a strong association between John and the wilderness. The wilderness itself, as a word, place and concept in Christian thought is complex and nebulous.\textsuperscript{84} As mentioned earlier, the association between the two begins with Isaiah, but persist throughout the New Testament, into apocryphal texts and, as will be seen in the following chapter, is elaborated upon in medieval lives of the Baptist and other devotional texts. The concept of “wilderness” exists within a conceptual matrix bounded on the one side by the privation and isolation of an unforgiving desert landscape, and on the other, as the site of so many important miracles and revelations to God’s chosen people. The nature of the wilderness in biblical terms is most often conceptualised as a desert, but as will be explored further throughout this thesis, this changes to include other areas untouched by

\textsuperscript{81} In both versions of Leonardo’s \textit{Virgin of the Rocks}, Mary, Christ and the infant John are accompanied by an unidentified angel. See ch. 5 below, for a more detailed discussion.

\textsuperscript{82} See Hennecke and Schneemelcher, 467-468.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 468.

\textsuperscript{84} For more on the association between the Baptist and the wilderness, see J. Steinmann, \textit{Saint John the Baptist and the Desert Tradition}, trans. M. Boyes, New York: Harper, 1958, and Williams, n. 24 above.
human habitation, including forests and rocky coasts. Time spent in the desert can be negative, positive or both – often a locus of privation and self-questioning, but one which provides the stage for miraculous visions or salvation granted by the Lord. Moses and the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, enduring great suffering and uncertainty following the Exodus from Egypt. However, this desert was also the site of a number of miracles in order to feed and water the Israelites, and Mount Sinai the point of contact between God and Moses whereon Moses received the Ten Commandments. Christian eremitical desert dwellers such as Jerome, Anthony, and indeed the Baptist himself, experienced epiphanies there which anointed them as true prophets of the faith. The desert or wilderness can be seen as an indeterminate space, which has the capacity to contain both negative or positive experiences, but in which the presence of God is felt clearly nonetheless. The Baptist figure, as portrayed in the Bible and in apocryphal texts, carries both sides of this desert association with him.

Throughout his life as related in the Gospels, John carries with him an immense weight of Old Testament prophecy and prefiguration of things to come for himself, Jesus, and their followers. His birth is used to introduce the birth of Jesus, but is itself accompanied by miracles and a particularly lengthy prophecy by Zechariah that echoes the Magnificat of Mary. Throughout the course of the narrative that flows through all four Gospels, the Baptist and Christ weave in and out of one another’s lives with the Baptist appearing at key moments to baptize, witness or testify for Christ. In turn, Christ repeatedly uses praise of John and his ministry to introduce his followers to the preparation necessary for entering heaven and for what awaits them there. Wink and Talbert both address the idea of John being used “typologically” as a metaphor for the church: as witness, “John could be used typologically by the church as a means of setting forth its conception of its own role in ‘preparing the way of the Lord’.”

Wink states that far from the church seeing it as necessary to circumscribe the Baptist’s role as compared to Jesus, he is a metaphor for the essence of Christian existence, and for the point of approach or entry into Christ’s teachings. It is this Saint John – the last of the Old Testament prophets, and the beginning of Christ’s ministry on Earth – that the Florentine commune adopted as their patron. New Testament apocryphal texts and medieval vitae furthered the narrative for the Baptist, and provided additional detail where the Gospel versions were sparse. However, it must be noted that

85 Wink, 113 (quote), and Talbert, 29.
in the instance of John the Baptist, such extra biblical texts did not alter the essential character of the biblical John, but rather further explore and reinforce certain attributes, such as his asceticism and identity as the one who points the way to Christ. From this investigation, one can deduce that the visual representation of the youthful Baptist in fifteenth-century Florentine painting does not have an exact literary prototype anywhere in the Bible, or in popular New Testament apocryphal texts. However, strong thematic elements emerge to suggest some of the later iconographic symbols that came to be associated with the Baptist. He is an active figure, wholly engaged in his role in Christ’s mission, and representing a link between a number of significant binaries: between the Old Testament and the New, between the wilderness and civilisation, and between the uninitiated and the baptized.
CHAPTER 2
A CITY AND ITS PATRON: THE CULT OF JOHN THE BAPTIST IN FLORENCE

Florence by the mid-thirteenth century claimed a pantheon of local saints as protectors of the city, including St Zenobius, the first bishop of Florence, and St Reparata, in whose name a church had been built in roughly 400 AD.¹ In 1252, when the first florin was minted however, it featured the head of John the Baptist, one of the earliest signs of what was to become a defining feature of Florence in visual, cultural and religious terms: the city’s devotion to the Baptist.² From the thirteenth century onwards, Florence saw steady growth in the cult of the Baptist as the major patron saint of the city. By 1325, official recognition of devotion to the Baptist had surpassed the cults Zenobius and Reparata, in which he was declared the city’s especial patron and defender.³ The exact beginning of and reasons for the immense popularity of the Baptist’s cult in Florence have proved difficult to pin down, with no satisfactory reason having been suggested thus far.⁴ In this chapter I will examine the evidence of the

⁴ Scholars of Florentine history are curiously silent on the origin of the Baptist’s cult in the city. Several landmark dates are often cited, but a definitive study on why and when the Baptist was adopted as the patron saint of Florence remains to be undertaken. Such a line of enquiry is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would be a fruitful area for further study. Sally Cornelison’s PhD dissertation is the
Baptist’s cult in Florence leading up to the first works featuring a youthful version of the saint as an independent figure, in the mid-fifteenth century. As a way of understanding Italian and particularly Florentine devotion to the saint, key late medieval texts of John’s life will also be discussed, including the retelling of the Baptist’s life in the *Golden Legend*, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, and a *vita* of the saint that appeared in a fourteenth-century *Lives of the Saints*, with problematic authorship. These devotional texts, written from roughly the mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries, can help to situate the growth of devotion to the saint in Florence against a backdrop of increased attention to and reverence for the saint in the Latin Church in general. I will also examine key visual representations of John produced in Florence before the mid-fifteenth century, with a brief excursion to Urbino for the Salimbeni brothers’ fresco cycle of 1416. My aim in this chapter is to explore the growth of the Baptist’s cult in Florence, and to look for the seeds of veneration and representation of the saint as a youth from the middle of the fifteenth century.

As a heavenly intercessor, a more powerful saint could hardly be sought. And a powerful intercessor the Florentines could call their own was looked for – many of the other important city-states of Italy already laid claim to the attention of a number of illustrious saints. Venice had Mark the Evangelist, Padua’s Abbazia Santa Giustina had the relics of Luke the Evangelist, and Rome could call on no less a saint that Jesus’ own chosen successor, the Apostle Peter. The Baptist occupied an extremely vaunted position in biblical and Christian hierarchy, and perhaps his perceived status and proximity to Christ was part of the motivation behind his cult in Florence. Celebration of the Baptist’s nativity on 24 June was an important date in the yearly calendar of Florentine festivities from as early as the seventh century, and came to serve a number of civic as well as religious purposes. The stature of the Baptist, and highly visible observance of his cult, became a symbol of the might of Florence within its surrounding region. As early as 1306, the enforcement of offerings of *palii* (lengths of cloth) to the

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3 Other scholars (most importantly Aronberg Lavin) have identified this author as Domenico Cavalca. However, as will be discussed in further detail below, this attribution is under some doubt.

6 The earliest extant reference to the celebration of the Baptist’s Nativity is from 628. Chrétien, 49.
saint was being used a means of regional control. In the Baptist, it seems, Florentines found a figure that could unite the needs of the commune and the wishes of the clergy. The widespread adoration and approval of the Baptist was not necessarily a given, as his life had no links to Florence, and the city did not possess credible relics of the saint until the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Yet I would suggest that the inexorable growth of the Baptist’s cult matched the growth of the city as a political and cultural entity, demonstrating the close links between citizenship, self-identity and faith for the Florentine citizen. It is telling too that as religious ideas and political fortunes within the city changed, so too did the perception of the saint. The Baptist is a marker closely tied to Florentine identity and ideation. This is manifest in the changing representations of the Baptist originating in Florence, as will be discussed throughout this thesis.

The Baptist was not the first, or the only, saint in the running for most popular patron of the city. Like other cities, Florence venerated a number of saints, adding their protection to their lists and to the customary roster of heavenly intercessors called upon, including Christ, the Virgin, Peter and Paul. Two saints specific to Florence were Zenobius and Reparata, each having historic links to the city. Zenobius was the first bishop of Florence, and Reparata was supposedly responsible for the Florentine victory over the Goths in 405, after Zenobius had appealed to her. Whilst Webb notes that in most Italian city-states, the identity of the chief patron saint had been established by around 1200, in Florence this date marks rather the beginning of a period of flux, where the earlier saints’ cults began to diminish somewhat, and the Baptist’s began to flourish. Veneration of Zenobius, who appears to have been the saint of choice for the clergy of the city, did not disappear from Florence as the Baptist’s grew; rather, highly visible devotion to him in the form of public art projects, the scale of celebrations on feast days and written dedications to the saint gradually decreased over time as devotion

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7 Webb, 112.
8 For the Florentine acquisition of relics of the Baptist, see Cornelison (1999), 138-196.
11 Webb, 135.
to the Baptist increased. Similarly, it has been noted that despite the rededication and rebuilding of S. Reparata as S. Maria del Fiore in 1296, the cathedral continued to be referred to by its original title for many years. Florentines continued to express devotion to a wide range of saintly intercessors well into the Renaissance. However, discussion in this chapter will be concerned with how the cult of a saint with no real historical links to the city became the predominant patron figure and object of veneration for the entire commune.

Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, writing c. 1378-85, links Florentine liberation from the Goths in the fourth century with the feast day of the Baptist.

\[E\text{ c}\text{osi su libera la città di Firenze il di della natività di S. Ioanni Batista; e preso e morto Roadasio lor signore, ed isconfitti tutti il di di S. Reparata se ne fece in Firenze la somma ed ultima allegrezza e vittoria. In questo tempo S. Zenobio era vescovo di Firenze e cittadino su di Firenze. Feciono edificare ed onorare la chiesa di Santo Salvadore di nuovo et la sagrarono in nome di S. Reparata il cui di ebbono l’ultima vittoria.}\]

This could be a motive for adopting the saint as patron of the city, as suggested by Cornelison. As Richard Trexler has noted, it is common to adopt as civic patron those saints believed to be resonsible for significant victories, such as the well-known example of St Anne, almost contemporary to Stefani’s Chronicle. Nevertheless, it is is surprising that this specific event in association with the Baptist is not mentioned by any other commentator.

Cornelison has also noted that S. Giovanni housed the most prestigious collection of relics in Florence – including the arm of St Philip, a piece of the True Cross supposedly given to the city by Charlemagne, and a relic of St Barnabas. While the city was not to acquire relics of the Baptist until relatively late (the first of these was acquired at the end of the fourteenth century), the fact that other powerful relics had

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13 Cornelison (1999), 16.
15 Cornelison (1999), 131-132.
16 Trexler (1980), 222.
17 Cornelison (1999), 131-132.
been gathered to the Baptistery, and not the cathedral, also indicates the importance of the Baptist’s central position in the pantheon of Florentine saints, and may suggest a relationship of reciprocal power and prestige between the Baptist’s cult, and those of the relics the Baptistery held.

Other markers of the Baptist’s growing presence and power in Florence between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries can be noted. As mentioned above, the saint featured on the first florin, which would seem to constitute proof of the confluence of commerce, civic power and religious devotion that the Baptist and observance of his cult represented in Florence. His feast day was a major event of the Florentine year, with preparation beginning months before the day itself, and festivities lasting up to ten days even early in the fifteenth century. Celebrations for St John’s day allowed various groups to demonstrate their piety, observance and also civic standing in differing ways – merchants were permitted to lay out their wares and sumptuary laws were relaxed allowing for much primping and public extravagance. As mentioned above, enforcing ritual observance on John’s feast day was used as a public signifier of Florentine dominion in the region, neatly achieving a political outcome via a gesture of faith.

Naturally, celebrations also consisted of “a solemn procession of all the clerks, priests, monks, and friars” of the city (usually on the twenty-third), and theatrical reenactments and representations of scenes from the life of John, performed generally by members of the city’s confraternities. Trexler is careful to remind the modern reader however that the more commercial or even “straightforwardly materialistic” manifestations of devotion to the Baptist were by no means at odds with the religious nature of the day. Rather, they mark the Baptist – through the celebrations of his feast day – as a patron of equal value to all citizens, whether clergy, cloistered religious, or lay, including merchants and tradesmen. The Baptist’s feast day is best understood as the feast day of the entire city, where citizens’ pride in themselves, their city and their collective piety found its most demonstrative expression. Specific accounts of the Baptist’s feast day will be discussed in further detail below, but for the moment I will

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19. Trexler very much reads Florentine celebrations and enforcement of observance of John’s feast day as partially a political instrument, as well as being commercial and religious in nature. See ibid., 256-258.
20. The enumeration of ecclesiastical personnel here comes from Dati, describing the processions of c. 1406. As cited in Trexler (1980), 249-251. See also Chrétien, 48-54.
22. Ibid., 248.
turn back to the question of how or why such devotion to the saint arose in the Florentine commune.

Thus far I have outlined a series of dates and markers which chart the growth of devotion to the Baptist. However, such dates and signals do not give us an understanding of why John was popular in Florence, and why his cult gathered strength particularly from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. In seeking an explanation for the extraordinary dedication to the Baptist, who was not a local saint, who in the period I examine had no major relics, and to whom no major miraculous events in the city had been attributed, we can turn perhaps to contemporary devotional texts. In three key texts written from the mid-thirteenth to –fourteenth centuries, I will show that the profile of the Baptist grew at a commensurate rate to his popularity within Florence. In examining each of these texts, as in my examination of the Gospels I will discuss not only the thematic image of John that emerges, but also pay particular attention to the treatment of the boy Baptist and his childhood. Significantly, in these texts the essential narrative details of the Gospel of Luke are further elaborated, with particular attention paid to the infancy and youth of the Baptist, which may suggest to us the earliest beginnings of a cult following of the young John. All of these authors clearly delineate the Baptist as a figure second only in holiness and worthiness to Christ. It is my suggestion that part of the reason that Florentines, in seeking a powerful patron and protector for their city, looked to claim the Baptist for that purpose was due to his venerated position in the devotional literature of the time. Whilst these texts are Italian but not Florentine, they demonstrate a parallel growth in both the status of the Baptist, and interest in his infancy and youth, which is mirrored in the visual representations of the saint produced in Florence during the same period.

The most popular collection of the lives of the saints written after the Early Christian period was the influential thirteenth-century compendium of Dominican friar and later bishop of Genoa, Jacobus de Voragine.23 Originally named the *Legenda

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Sanctorum, its modern title is now the *Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)*. It chronicles the lives of the saints according to festival cycle of the liturgical year. At the beginning of each entry, Jacobus outlines in a very orderly fashion reasons for the veneration of each saint and the beginnings of their feast day. He then relates details of the saint’s life, or the story of their martyrdom, interweaving an explanation of how such events and actions demonstrate the saints’ worthiness, or provide lessons in conduct for the right-thinking Christian. There is disagreement amongst scholars as to Jacobus’ purpose and intended audience in writing the *Legends*, however as it was composed originally in Latin (rather than in the vernacular), it seems likely that Jacobus, a Dominican friar-preacher himself, had other clerics in mind.\(^\text{24}\) Once written, it disseminated rapidly and was translated into most European languages, and with the advent of printing was republished frequently.

The text could be used as a basis for sermons and other study, and certainly the large number of manuscript copies and subsequent printed versions of the text from the later fifteenth century on would seem to testify to its interest to preachers and their audience.\(^\text{25}\) As Reames notes, the *Golden Legend* was in fact the only abridged legendary in a vernacular language to be made available to lay readers until 1523-24, ensuring that Jacobus’ text enjoyed a monopoly not just on clerical readers, but also on the interested layperson.\(^\text{26}\) While Jacobus provides etymologies for saints’ names (some of these dubious), and gives quotations from early church fathers (such as Ambrose, Eusebius and Chrysostom in the Baptist narrative), and a selection of Doctors of the Church (such as Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Damian), the provision of a great deal of descriptive detail in many of the *vitae* lends parts of the texts a familiar, anecdotal tone. In the instance of John the Baptist, Jacobus elaborates on the symbolic or thematic aspects of John’s character and life as related in the Bible and his exalted position in salvific history.

Jacobus’ text features two feast days of John the Baptist: his Birth and his Beheading. The latter differs greatly in tone from the former, as the detail that Jacobus includes departs further from the Gospels than is customary for the author; as noted in my previous chapter, the Gospels do not linger long over the death of John. In this tale Jacobus relies more heavily on his other sources, especially Petrus Comestor’s twelfth-

\(^{24}\) De Voragine/Ryan I, xvii.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., xiii. See also Reames, 197-198.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 204.
century Historia scholastica.\textsuperscript{27} Beginning with the feast day of 24 June, Jacobus does not provide an etymology of John’s name, as he does for many of the other saints, but rather list a number of titles, attributes and prerogatives that shape the Baptist’s life. He calls John “dicitur enim pro pheta, amicus sponsi, lucerne, angelus, vox, Helias, baptista salvatoris, praecox judicis et praecursor regis”\textsuperscript{28} Many of these are in alignment with what we have already seen in the Gospel, in conjunction with quotation from the Old Testament, but what is interesting is the separation of the titles Jacobus accords him. “praecox judicis” (herald of the judge) and “praecursor regis” (forerunner of the king) are given as separate aspects of John’s role, which has the effect of emphasising both his proximity to the process of divine judgement and his place in the heavenly kingdom or New Jerusalem. Furthermore, the use of the epithet “amicus sponsi” (friend of the bridegroom) is significant. This refers to the close relationship between John and Jesus, hinted at in the Gospel of John, though its significance is deepened with consideration of the Song of Songs.

This label “friend of the bridegroom” warrants further examination here, as I believe it to be a significant aspect of the Baptist’s multi-layered figure in the Renaissance. Jacobus states that the title of amicus sponsi comes with the “prerogative” of “loving and being loved” – in amico sponsi prae rogativa dilectionis.\textsuperscript{29} However, the epithet of “loving”, or the quality of “being loved” does not appear to be accorded to the Baptist in the Gospels as such – except inasmuch as any acquaintance or companion of Jesus’ was loved by him, or in the sense that Zechariah and Elizabeth loved their miraculous child. The Baptist speaks of the “friend of the bridegroom” in the Gospel of John, when asked about the “purification” ritual he administered and which, we read, Jesus now performs across the Jordan. When John replies to his disciples, he says:

\begin{quote}
John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (Jn 3:27-30).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} For the possible influence of the Historia Scholastica on the Golden Legend, see R. F. Seybolt, “The Legenda Aurea, Bible and Historia scholastica”, Speculum 21 (1946), 339-342.
\textsuperscript{28} De Voragine/Graesse, 356. In English: “prophet, friend of the bridegroom, lamp, angel, voice, Elijah, baptizer of the Saviour, herald of the judge and forerunner of the King” – see De Voragine/Ryan I, 328.
\textsuperscript{29} De Voragine/Graesse, 356; De Voragine/Ryan I, 328.
The Baptist does not state explicitly that he is the friend of whom he speaks – Christ’s friend – he could refer to any who consider themselves close to Christ and feel joy at his coming. However the title can be understood as referring specifically to the Baptist, and evidently, considering Jacobus’ interpretation, the epithet friend of the bridegroom became associated with John the Baptist himself.\(^{30}\)

The term bridegroom in a biblical context originates with the Song of Songs, one of the “wisdom” books of the Old Testament.\(^{31}\) According to interpretation by various exegetes over time, the feminine protagonist or speaker in the Song of Songs has been understood as representing a number of figures. Beginning with Judaic interpretation of the Old Testament, the Song of Songs was interpreted as an allegory of God’s love for his people, the Israelites. Medieval Christian readings of the Song cast the female protagonist as the Virgin Mary, an interpretation whose influence can be seen in many medieval and Renaissance visual representations of the Madonna and Child.\(^{32}\)

Beginning with Origen in the third century, the text of the Song of Songs can be understood as an allegorical expression of the “spiritual wedding”, whereby “Christ is called the Bridegroom of the soul, whom the soul espouses when she comes to the faith”.\(^{33}\) This interpretation did not gain wide traction until the later Middle Ages, but is relevant here in a consideration of the Baptist’s role in the spiritual marriage of the individual soul to the divine. For the period when the Golden Legend was written, and the epithet “friend of the bridegroom” applied to John, we can look to twelfth-century Cistercian Doctor of the Church Bernard of Clairvaux’s commentary on the Song of

\(^{30}\) Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has written on the epithet “friend of the bridegroom” and its application in Renaissance art, mostly to angels (with a brief consideration of the Baptist). She appears to be the only modern scholar who comments on this particular title in conjunction with the Baptist. See M. Aronberg Lavin, “The Joy of the Bridegroom’s Friend: Smiling Faces in Fra Filippo, Raphael, and Leonardo”, in Art the Ape of Nature, M. Barash and L. Freeman Sandler (eds), New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981, 193-210.


\(^{33}\) As cited in Scheper, 766, n. 21.
Songs for interpretation. At this point in Christian thought, the mystical union at the heart of the Song of Songs was primarily understood as the union of the individual soul to Christ.

The epithet “friend of the Bridegroom” could then be understood in a number of ways. John, as the figure who both embodies and is responsible for baptism, is the friend of the bridegroom, and acts as adjunct to him in helping to prepare the bride – the soul of the individual who wishes to enter into a marriage of the spirit with Christ – for the marriage itself, by anointing the individual with baptismal oils. This interpretation recalls the notion, discussed in my first chapter, that John could be seen thematically as a representative of the Church in general, which would place him and the Church as the mediators in the relationship between Christ and the soul. This interpretation is supported by evidence from the liturgy, which suggests that the text could be used in connection with baptism, understood as a symbolic spiritual marriage. Ambrose of Milan suggested that not only could parallels with baptism and the taking of the Eucharist be found in the Song, but that it was unsuitable material for those who had not been baptized – and thus entered into a spiritual marriage with Christ. The text of the Song of Songs itself is replete with marriage and wedding imagery, which assists the reader in understanding the union of the soul with Christ as a nuptial arrangement. References to the Bridegroom as “oil poured out” (Songs 1:2), the first of many such references in the text, evoke the ritual of baptism for Christian exegetes at the same time as they evoke the nuptial bath taken to prepare for marriage. Ambrose drew a distinct parallel between the oil of the Bridegroom and baptismal waters in his commentary, further cementing the association of the Baptist with the mystical union in the Song of Songs. Thus the Baptist, as the intermediary who applies the baptismal unguent, is positioned as the friend of the Bridegroom who readies the Bride.

The Song of Songs, as many have commented, supports a number of simultaneous or interlinked readings, with no single level of the text precluding understanding of it on another. So whilst the Baptist can act as the friend of the

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35 Scheper, 759-792
37 On the nuptial bath see Scheper, 766-767.
38 Norris Jnr, 33.
Bridegroom who anoints the individual who approaches a spiritual marriage with Christ, he also fulfils a larger role as friend to the Bridegroom who acts as intermediary with the whole of the Church. I commented in my first chapter on the possibility of the Baptist acting as a symbol of entry into the church, or even of the church itself. Here I posit the existence of a further layer of meaning that necessitates a level of separation from the Church itself, whereby the Baptist is the fulcrum between the divine and those who seek union with it. The Baptist here is the facilitator who joins the other two parties together. He administers the rite of baptism, with the penance and mental preparation that demands, and thus is both of the church but also outside it. For the congregation of souls, he represents the ecclesiastic intermediary in this ceremony of spiritual marriage. Again, none of these interlinked layers of meaning preclude another – the individual can hold in his or her mind concurrent images of the Baptist as representative of the church, and also as the figure who joins them to the church, and thus to Christ. The Baptist then is the friend of the Bridegroom, who brings him his smiling Bride, and indeed friend of the Bride also, for he holds her hand as he prepares her, approaching the very moment of joining but not participating.

Returning to the rest of the *Golden Legend* text, the narrative of the birth of John focuses at first on the actions, thoughts and reactions of Zechariah and Elizabeth to the miracle of conception in their old age, and then the miraculous events that follow: Zechariah struck dumb for his doubt, John leaping in his mother’s womb, and Zechariah regaining the power of speech. The didactic message is clear: the emphasis on having faith in God’s plan and his word is imparted with aid of quotations from Genesis and Judges, along with an explanation for Zechariah’s punishment for his doubtfulness. In the course of the announcements to Elizabeth and Zechariah, Jacobus further reinforces the link between John and Elijah, giving a list of similarities between the two that he characterizes as “ratione” (reasons): where they came from (the desert), what they ate and wore, their zeal, and their office.\(^39\) Jacobus describes Elijah as the forerunner of the judge and John as the forerunner of the saviour, which explains the epithet of “*praeco judicis*” (herald of the judge) in the prologue. Later in the *Birth* tale, Jacobus repeats the comparison, describing the statement at Ecclesiastes 48:1 as referring to the Baptist: “The prophet Elijah rose like a fire”.\(^40\) Evidently, Jacobus deems the link between the

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\(^39\) De Voragine/Graesse, 357; De Voragine/Ryan I, 329.
\(^40\) De Voragine/Graesse, 359; De Voragine/Ryan I, 331.
Baptist and Elijah significant. It helps establish links between the Old Testament and the New, and lends authority to John.

After Jacobus tells of Mary visiting Elizabeth and John leaping in his mother’s womb, he lists the nine “special and singular privileges” enjoyed by the Baptist, which fits with Jacobus’ practice of ordering his text via numbers and lists. After John has encountered the Saviour for the first time (though both are yet in utero), Jacobus tells us of privileges John receives by virtue of his close relationship with Christ. These are:

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\text{Nam idem angelus, qui donimum annuntiavit, ipsum annuntiavit, in utero matris exsultat, mater domini ipsum a terra levat, lingnam patris reserat, baptismum primus ordinat, Christum indice demonstrate, ipsum Christum baptizat, ipsum prae omnibus laudat Christus, in limbo positis Christum venturum praenuntiat.}
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(the same angel who announced the coming of the Lord announced the coming of John; he leapt in his mother’s womb; the mother of the Lord lifted him from the earth; he unlocked his father’s tongue; he was the first to confer baptism; he pointed out Christ with his finger; he baptized Christ; Christ praised him above all others; he foretold Christ’s coming to the souls in Limbo).

There are a few extra details here that do not appear in the Bible. First is that Mary “a terra levat” (lifted him from the earth), and second is that he foretells the coming of Christ to the souls in Limbo. The first of these could be fruitful when considering visual representations of the youthful Baptist. Jacobus tells us that from the “Scholastic History”, we know that Mary remained for three months with Elizabeth, and was present at John’s birth. This suggests the closeness of John’s relationship not just with his own kinsman Christ (which the other privileges highlight), but of his closeness within the family unit to Mary as well. The image of the Baptist pointing clearly at Christ (pointing the way to Him) is also made explicit, and subsequent visual representations of the saint make great use of this motif. Again, this exact motif does not appear in the Bible: John makes the way clear for the Lord, and leads other to

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41 De Voragine/Ryan I, xv-xvi.
42 De Voragine, 358.
43 De Voragine/Ryan I, 330.
Christ, but in the Bible does not himself physically point to Christ with his finger, as Jacobus has him do. The strength of Jacobus’ suggestion here to the creator of visual representations of the Baptist is evident.

For the rest of the birth and infancy narrative, Jacobus remains fairly close to the Gospel of Luke, with the support of additional quotations from Genesis, Malachi and Ecclesiastes. This assists the reader with understanding these references in the Old Testament as specific references to the coming of John. The foreshadowing of John’s appearance with biblical quotations provides a parallel with the Baptist’s own foreshadowing of Christ in the structure of the Bible. The actual progression of a linear narrative slows down following the birth of John, with Jacobus pausing to relate that John’s holiness receives a threefold testimony from each part of the Trinity, and explains a number of offices held by the Baptist. This section of the Legend is theologically complex in comparison to many other tales, featuring the identification of hierarchy of celestial beings, each of whom recognises the holiness of John, and the delineation and cataloguing of John’s many virtues, graces and gifts. De Nativitate sancti Johannis baptistae would be one of the less accessible vite in the Golden Legend to the lay reader, given the number of highly technical reference to theologians and early church doctors made by the author. Only short passages – the history of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s childless marriage, and very briefly, the moment of his birth – are dedicated to a narrative recount, with an enumeration of the Baptist’s titles and various aspects of his role given equal, if not greater importance. As a source for a preacher wishing to elaborate on the virtues of the Baptist for his congregation, Jacobus’ text could provide the basis for the writing of sermons and other homilies. Jacobus’ many references to other Church Fathers that such an audience might also be expected to have read, would assist in the creation of a web of allusions and references, upon which a preacher could build.

The Golden Legend testifies to contemporary thirteenth-century understanding of the Baptist and his place in the Christian pantheon. Although Jacobus followed the standard liturgical calendar of saints’ days for his text, the content – if not the presence – of John’s vita indicates the respect and veneration accorded to the Baptist at the time of writing. Given what is known of the Golden Legend’s popularity and distribution, John’s vita as given in Jacobus’ text likely both justified and inspired devotion to the saint. It is both evidence of, and perhaps partially an explanation for, the growth of the Baptist’s cult around that time. Considering the perspective from which I examined
written sources relating to the Baptist in my previous chapter, I note here that not much more time is spent by Jacobus on the infancy and childhood of the Baptist in his vita than the Gospel authors – in fact considerably less if one includes Luke. As a source for patrons and artists of the fifteenth century at least, I suggest that the Golden Legend’s influence is more thematic than literal. Nevertheless, as examined above, a number of significant motifs are introduced or hinted at, including the Baptist’s pointing figure, and the nature of his close relationship to Christ. The sum vision of the Baptist that emerges from the Golden Legend is of a figure of great holiness and worthiness, which is undoubtedly reflected in the material evidence of his cult in Florence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Chronologically, the next significant devotional text to feature the Baptist was the Franciscan Meditations on the Life of Christ, c. 1300.44 Previously attributed to Bonaventure, recent scholarship has built on the eighteenth-century assertions of the scholar Bonelli, to identify the author as fourteenth-century Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus from Tuscany.45 The text addresses a “sister” (a Franciscan nun) and, coupled with the Johannes’ own history in the Franciscan order, could suggest that he intended it to encourage devotion and reflection amongst other members of religious orders or cloistered communities. Directed at his fellow religious novitiates, the Meditations could provide ample material for sermons. For religious and lay readers alike, it served as an inspiring and engaging stimulus to devotion and meditation, and quickly established itself as a bestseller.46 While Johannes does fill in several notable gaps in the narratives of the canonical Gospels (for example, he specifically addresses Jesus’ life and activities between the ages of twelve, where the Gospels leave him, and thirty, where the narrative resumes), he adheres for the most part to events related in them.

However, Johannes’ text treats these events differently than the Gospel writers. The focus of his text is very much on the emotional engagement of the reader with biblical figures, so moments which offer more opportunity for contemplation, reflection and empathy (for example) are lingered over longer than aspects of the Christ’s life

46 De Caulibus/Taney et al, xxviii-xxx.
which might instead assist with narrative cohesion and progression. He wishes to lead his reader into a close spiritual understanding of the meaning underlying the story of Christ, rather than to impart the precise details of the story in an orderly fashion. However, several insertions into the narrative thread of the text stand out. At various points Johannes pauses to deliver digressions on the proper thought and actions of the faithful, to give a series of meditations on the Passion suitable for various hours of the day. Following Christ’s resurrection, but before Johannes relates the story of doubting Thomas, various canticles on other biblical figures are also included. Structurally, these diversions flow from the themes and events of the previous section in the life of Christ; so naturally the meditations on the Passion follow that scene of the narrative. The *Meditations on the Life of Christ* is a guide to devotion rather than a straight retelling of a story, with which the reader would certainly already be familiar.

Though his method and tone are not didactic, Johannes is gently instructive of his reader, guiding them to moments of what he identifies as great beauty in Jesus’ life, or important moral lessons. Johannes’ sign posting of the message within his own text ensures that the reader’s experience is fairly straightforward, and tightly directed by the author. For example, in the course of describing the Holy Family’s Flight to Egypt, Johannes instructs his reader: “*Hec et his similia de puero Iesu meditari potes: dedi tibi occasionem. Tu uero sicut uidebitur extendas et prosequaris, sisque paruula cum paruulo Iesu...*” (Meditate on these and similar thoughts about the boy Jesus: I have given you the setting. Enlarge on it and proceed as it seems fit, and be a little girl with Jesus...).\(^47\) The translators and editors of a recent edition which presents a new proposition for the authorship of the work describe the author of the *Meditations* as “put[ting] the life of Jesus... on the streets of his world”.\(^48\) Even more so than the *Golden Legend*, the *Meditations* are engaging and accessible, and provide many exhortations and ways in which to make the events of Jesus’ life relevant to the reader. The immediate popularity of the *Meditations* demonstrates its appeal to readers, and it directly inspired medieval mystery plays, not to mention its possible influence on visual art.\(^49\)

Johannes does not spend a great deal of time on Christ’s infancy narrative. The Visitation, Birth and Circumcision are all covered, as well as the Flight to and Return

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\(^47\) De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 52; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 45.  
\(^48\) De Caulibus/Taney et al, xxvii.  
\(^49\) Ibid., xxviii-xxix.
from Egypt, but other than these, Christ’s childhood is not addressed in particular
detail (for instance, the miracles related in Thomas and Pseudo-Matthew are not
recounted). John obviously features in the Visitation episode, but his portrayal is
mixed. According to Johannes,

\[ \text{Nec prius repletur mater quam filius, sed filius repletus replet et matrem, non} \]
\[ \text{quidem in anima matris aliquid efficiendo, sed per Spiritum Sanctum aliquid} \]
\[ \text{in ea fieri promerendo, eo quod in ipso Spiritus Sancti gracia affluencior} \]
\[ \text{refulgebat, et prior graciam sensit.}\]

(John accomplished nothing in his mother’s soul by his own doing, but
merited some grace for her through the Holy Spirit).

This implies that John’s precocity demonstrated by leaping in the womb at the
presence of Jesus is not a miracle of his own, so much as a miracle afforded by Jesus.
When Johannes narrates John’s birth, he praises the child: “…[T]ales matres talibus
filiis fecundate, Maria et Elisabeth, Iesus et Ioannes… Considera magnificenciam
Ioannis”. (…[S]uch mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, fruitful with such sons, Jesus and
John!… Consider the greatness of John.) Johannes is always careful however to
temper his mentions of John with accolades of Mary and Christ. The author describes
Mary helping to care for John and “leuauit a terra” (lifting him from the earth) as a
“priuilegia” (privilege), as did Jacobus. While Johannes does mention both the
Magnificat and the Benedictus, he does not insert them into his text or address them in
any detail.

Two episodes in the Meditations feature a meeting between Christ and the
Baptist while they are children. First, after the Virgin has given birth, Johannes relates
that she wished to visit Elizabeth before she left for Egypt. The author does not spend a
great deal of time on the scene, but says that the meeting between the two women and
their sons is celebrated by a great feast (not elaborated on by any other authors that I am
aware of), and that “Et Ioannes quasi intelligens reuerener se habetat erga Iesum.”
(John, as if understanding, conducted himself reverently toward Jesus). This is
apparently De Caulibus’ invention, as in the Bible there is no follow-up meeting to the

51 De Caulibus/Taney, 25.
52 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney et al, 18.
53 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 26; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 19.
54 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 26; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 19.
55 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 47-48; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 40-41.
Visitation. This single line suggests that the *Meditations*, more than any other text examined here, could have inspired Florentine painters of the fifteenth century to include the figure of the child-Baptist in an Adoration composition. However, there are elements of Johannes’ version of the event that seem to be absent from visual representations, if one were to accept the paintings examined in this thesis were influenced by the *Meditations*. For example, I do not know of any representations of the feast Johannes mentions or of Elizabeth celebrating with Mary and the two children. Nevertheless, I concede that there is a possibility that this line in Johannes’ *Meditations* could be seen to evoke the image of Mary and John both engaging in reverent contemplation of the infant Christ.

Furthermore, when the Holy Family returns from its flight to Egypt, the author notes that as they were passing through, they may have encountered John. The conditional language used to frame the meeting shows the author’s own ambiguity regarding the location of the meeting, but otherwise seems to be quite suggestive of later visual representations of the Virgin, Child and young St John:

\[Cum \ autem \ fuerunt \ prope \ finem \ deserti \ inuenerunt \ Joannem \ Baptistam, \ qui \ iam \ ibi \ penitenciam \ agere \ ceperat, \ cum \ tamen \ nullum \ haberet \ peccatum. \ Dicitur \ quod \ locus \ Iordanis \ in \ quo \ baptizavit \ Ioannes \ est \ ille \ unde \ transierunt \ filii \ Israel \ quando \ uenerunt \ de \ Egypto \ per \ dictum \ desertum; \ et \ quod \ prope \ illum \ locum \ in \ ipso \ deserto \ Ioannes \ penitenciam \ fecit. \ Vnde \ possibile \ est \ quod \ puer \ Iesus \ inde \ transiens \ in \ reditu \ suo \ inuenit \ eum \ ibidem.\]

(But when they were near the end of the desert, they came upon John the Baptist, who even though he was guiltless had already begun to do penance there. It is said that the site on the Jordan where John was baptizing is that very spot where the sons of Israel crossed over when they came from Egypt through the same desert, and that it is near that place in the selfsame desert that John performed his penance. So it is possible that the boy Jesus, crossing over there on his return, found him there.)

The reader is then encouraged to “*Tu autem et in adventu et in discessu genuflecte Ioanni, deosculans pedes eius, benediccionem petens et ei te recommendans*” (kneel before John, kiss his feet, beg his blessing, and commend yourself to him). The author

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57 A complete survey and examination of all works featuring the young Baptist produced during the fifteenth century occurs in chapter 4 of this thesis.
58 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 59.
59 De Caulibus/Taney et al 51.
60 De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 59; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 51.
appears to be offering the reader an opportunity for empathetic projection, and to consider and enjoy a further episode in the infancy of Christ. The scene also offers a gratifyingly positive conclusion to the risky and frightening Flight to Egypt. When they leave, Johannes notes that they “immensa recreacione spiritus habita” ([experienced] tremendous spiritual refreshment), and so too, after picturing this scene, is the reader spiritually refreshed.\footnote{De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 59; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 51.} Johannes ends this vignette with a few pronouncements on the young Baptist: “Ipse enim fuit primus eremita religiose uiuere uolencium. Fuit uirgo purissimus, fuit predictor permaximus.” (He was the first hermit of all those persons desirous of living in a godly way. He was a most pure virgin, and a preeminent preacher).\footnote{De Caulibus/Stallings-Taney, 59; De Caulibus/Taney et al, 51.} In adding the Baptist to the narrative at this point, he affords the characters of the Holy Family, and the reader who is following along, a chance for rest and respite, and places John as an example and an object of veneration before the viewer. The Meditations might offer the reader the most compelling basis thus far for a meeting between the Virgin, Child and boy Baptist, though the passage which relates it is brief. Furthermore, the author of the Meditation begins to colour in a more emotive impression of the relationship between Christ and his earthly family, including his relationship with John.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin attributes much of the characterisation of the Giovannino Battista figure in the visual art of the fifteenth century to a fourteenth-century collection of the lives of the desert saints by the Pisan Dominican friar Domenico Cavalca, the Volgarizzamento delle Vite dei Santi Padri, often referred to as the Santi Padri.\footnote{MAL 1955 and 1961. For a biography of Cavalca, see C. Delcorno, “Domenico Cavalca”, Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, Rome: Treccani, 1979, vol. 22: 577-586.} Current scholarship has dated the bulk of the text to c. 1342.\footnote{Ibid., 578.} The text was a vernacular translation of saints’ lives, incorporating a number of sources (both older, including the new Testament apocrypha, and more recent medieval vite), weaving them together with a great deal of extra, expressive detail provided by the fourteenth-century author. However, the Life of John is not a part of the Santi Padri proper, but rather given in a short additional text by an anonymous fourteenth-century author (who I will refer to as pseudo-Cavalca), attributed by many to Cavalca himself, and often appended to both manuscript and later printed...
versions of the text. This additional text is often not distinguished from the main body of the *Santi Padri*, and rarely is the distinction between Cavalca, and the author of the Baptist text made. Aronberg Lavin acknowledged the two separate authors in her supplement, published in 1961. Biographers and other scholars of Cavalca also routinely misattribute other texts of unresolved authorship to Cavalca, as judgements of authorship based on style or references are difficult due to make given the unresolved nature of the friar’s total body of work. The question of attribution cannot be solved here, but I have approached the pseudo-Cavalcan text with care, as different authorship for the *vita* could lead to different conclusions about readership and circulation. Nevertheless, many Renaissance scholars have accepted Aronberg Lavin’s 1955 attribution, and her assertions about the text’s influence on Renaissance art, so I will examine the pseudo-Cavalcan life of John here.

The pseudo-Cavalcan text of John’s life is somewhat less formal in tone than the *Golden Legend*, and somewhat less conversational than the *Meditations*. In places the author either follows biblical versions of events, or makes specific reference to certain biblical passages (for example Zaccharius’ Benedictus), while in others appears he elaborates quite extensively. The purpose of these expansions is not always clear. While Jacobus includes exegesis of epithets not accorded to the Baptist in the Bible for the purposes of explicating the importance of his role, the embellishments made by the anonymous fourteenth-century author of John’s *vita* add narrative length and tone, but not always clarity, as occasionally fixed details such as time and place are lost or elided in the course of more emotive writing. Nevertheless, the author spends perhaps two thirds of the text describing the Baptist’s birth, infancy, childhood and youth, his relationship with his parents, the wilderness and importantly, his relationship with Christ – giving extra detail in all of these areas than is found in other devotional texts.

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65 On the author of the additional texts appended to the *Santi Padri*, see MAL 1961, 320-321.
66 MAL 1961, 321. The version of Cavalca’s *Santi Padri* used here is D. Cavalca, *Volgarizzamento delle Vite de’ SS. Padri*, Milano: G. Silvestri, 1830, 6th ed. The Baptist’s *vita* in this edition is 259-369. As the author of the *Santi Padri* as published is referred to as “Cavalca”, I will use this epithet in footnotes citing the text. However, in the body of my thesis I will refer to the author as pseudo-Cavalca, as was the practice with, for example, the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, who was referred to as pseudo-Bonaventure until the attribution to Johannes de Caulibus was confirmed. I have only been able to find the version of Cavalca’s text that Aronberg Lavin uses, so am unable to determine which saints’ stories belong to Cavalca’s version, and which may have been added by a subsequent redactor.
67 On problems of attribution and Cavalca, see Delcorno, *op. cit*. He notes there are problems with making definitive statements about the authorship of the last book of the *Santi Padri* (the book which contains the Baptist), and does not make any final statements to this end, only noting inconsistencies in style and program that make a pronouncement difficult.
68 Cavalca, 263.
Much of this detail is descriptive in nature, providing a clear evocation for the reader of John’s feelings, behaviour and the settings in which he undertakes his mission.

The introduction to the pseudo-Cavalcan *Vita* begins by making a fairly standard justification for recounting the saint’s life: that if the life of Christ is worth meditating on, than John’s life should be considered too, in details both small and large. The author divides the text into three parts, focusing in turn on the Baptist’s nativity and his journey out into the desert, his time in the desert; and lastly, his death. Due to the length of John’s *vita* relative to both the *Golden Legend* and his passages in the *Meditations*, far more time is spent on each of these stages than in other *vite* and devotional texts. For example, the anonymous author gives a lengthier description of John preaching in the desert and the audience and reception of these sermons than other authors. However, the most notable expansion to John’s story here is in the author’s description of the saint’s childhood and early forays into the desert. Aronberg Lavin has taken this additional information to mean that all artists from the pseudo-Cavalcan author’s time of writing onwards were inspired solely by this text; in fact, she calls it “the fountainhead of the entire subsequent development of the iconography of the infant St. John in the West”.69 Such a sweeping statement I believe is inappropriate when considering the visual representation of one of the main figures of the Bible, who also features notably in many other devotional texts besides. I posit an alternative view: that the author responded to a growing interest in the Baptist, and in particular in his infancy narrative, as evidenced by, for example, the expanded narrative scheme of Andrea Pisano’s Baptistery doors, and that both text and examples of art were manifestations of the same current of devotion to the saint. It is possible that later examples of the young John were inspired by the pseudo-Cavalcan text, but it cannot be said without doubt that this text inspired the whole development of the boy Baptist motif in Renaissance art.

The pseudo-Cavalcan text’s account of John’s childhood for the most part emphasizes the young saint’s prodigious piety and seriousness. From the Baptist’s birth and circumcision, accompanied by Zechariah’s Benedictus, the narrative moves swiftly to a demonstration not only of his early wonder at God’s creation, but of his strong affinity with the wilderness. In the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are told, the young John, from the age of three or four, goes out into the garden and hides there, delighting in thinking of God. A few years later he begins to venture out in the forest

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69 MAL 1955, 87.
(more so than any of his peers), finding it to be filled with beasts, birds and plants that again fill him with the wonder of the Lord. This would seem to be suggestive, in a visual sense, or portrayals of the young John alone in the wilderness, but these are rare even in the second half of the fifteenth century, as we shall see. The child begins to spend longer and longer in the woods, venturing further from home, although at first still returning to his parents. Eventually, they realize that this yearning for the wilderness is evidence of his holy mission, and they reluctantly accept that he must leave them, though not before we are given a lengthy description of John’s many forays into the wilderness. In the text, the fact that the Baptist’s time in the desert or wilderness is to take up fully two-thirds of the narrative signifies that the desert itself occupies an important part of the saint’s story, and indeed his identity.

Throughout, the desert is referred to as diserto, which we could take to mean “desert” or “wilderness”. This later, as the young John takes his first exploratory steps into the wilderness at the age of about five, it is often referred to as bosco, or wood. This conflation of the idea of desert and wooded wilderness, so that it is primarily the wild nature of the landscape that defines the character of the place, rather than necessarily its barrenness, allows for the further conflation of wilderness with forest, which as we will see later in this thesis is the way the setting is often interpreted visually. The pseudo-Cavalcan conception of wilderness-as-forest is further supported by the author’s mention of birds and large beasts in his description of John’s place of retreat. Nevertheless, the desert remains a malleable concept for the author of the Vita, as it sometimes appeared for the Gospel authors. The desert wilderness into which John departs on the Florentine Baptistery doors, to be examined below, is one of forbidding rocky outcrops, but the almost-contemporary pseudo-Cavalcan wilderness is envisaged as desolate of human inhabitants only – but with birds, beasts and flora aplenty. The sum image of John’s wilderness for the fourteenth-century viewer or reader would appear to be any landscape not recognizable as a city, thus bereft of not only the governmental structure and intellectual and commercial pursuits of civilization, but also its quarrels, distractions and temptations.

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70 Cavalca, 260. According to Aronberg Lavin, the 1830 edition appears to be a transcription (not translation) of the original. MAL 1961, n. 11 and 12, 321.
71 See for example Cavalca, 277-278.
72 Cavalca, 279.
73 A number of sources can provide some illumination on the attitudes towards wilderness and city held by late-medieval and Renaissance Christians. See J. Larner, Culture and Society in Italy, 1290-1420, London: Batsford, 1971, esp. chapter 4, 62-96; L. Martines, Power and Imagination: City-states in
The exact age at which the Baptist departs for the desert is, as has been discussed, unclear from literary sources, and the pseudo-Cavalcan text is no exception. Luke gives little indication, saying only that “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly in Israel” (Lk 1:80), which does not specify whether the saint left for the desert before or after “growing”. In the pseudo-Cavalcan text, we learn that the Baptist begins his forays into the wilderness at about the age of five, and that he spent seven years in the desert. The author also relates that the saint met with the young Christ whilst both are in the desert. There may be some conflation here between the Rest on the Flight to Egypt and the sort of Encounter described in the Meditations, as Mary and Joseph are present at the beginning of the scene, but not a party to Christ and John’s private discussion. Though the author gives a more conversational and emotive description of this scene than in the Meditations, the motif is not unique to the pseudo-Cavalcan text.

The reader is not told exactly how long after John leaves for the desert proper, or at what point during his seven years there this meeting takes place – the scene is an example of the lack of specificity sometimes present in this text. Despite the precocity of both Christ and John even from birth, the seriousness with which the two discuss their future missions at the desert meeting would seem to be at odds with any visual representation of it depicting the two as infants. From this (and the later visual representations of the Encounter as a distinct motif, to be addressed fully in chapter 7 of this thesis) we can surmise that for patrons and artists, either the age or the setting of a meeting between the two is not too important, as very few examples of the Encounter seem to accord with the pseudo-Cavalcan meeting in all particulars. The age at which John returns from the desert in the pseudo-Cavalcan text is also not entirely clear, and could be between about 12 and 14, but this does not completely match the way the saint is portrayed. The timeline of the narrative becomes muddled at this point, breaking with the biblical tradition which has the Baptist preaching in the desert until Christ comes out to him to be baptized.

As a source for visual representations of the young Baptist, I would accord the pseudo-Cavalcan text much the same importance as the other devotional texts or retellings of the saint’s life examined thus far. I repeat my caution that Aronberg

_Renaissance Italy_, London: Allen Lane, 1979, reprinted 1980, esp. 94-103 and 221-229; and D. Hay and J. Law, _Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1380-1530_, London and New York: Longman, 1989, esp. 29-35 and 47-51;
Lavin’s insistence on its primacy is problematic, when modern scholars cannot be sure when exactly the Baptist’s *vita* was added to the *Santi Padri*, and what sort of readership and currency it had. With very few exceptions, it appears that modern scholars have followed Aronberg Lavin’s hypothesis without questioning the pseudo-Cavalcan text’s authorship or historicity. Furthermore, as will be shown repeatedly throughout this thesis, seeking to match later visual representations of the young John directly with the *Santi Padri* is as problematic, and ultimately fruitless, as endeavors to fit such imagery to any one individual text such as the *Golden Legend* or *Meditations*. Instead, it is most appropriate to view the pseudo-Cavalcan text primarily as another example of interest in the Baptist, and particularly, in his childhood and youth in the wilderness. It is entirely possible that the text proved inspirational for patrons and artists, but to pronounce it the single most important source for subsequent visual representations of the young Baptist is incorrect. What is of most interest to the present study is not the nature of individual embellishments the author has made to the accepted Baptist narrative, but rather the overall expression of increased interest in the saint’s childhood and youth, evidenced here by the author’s protracted description of his infancy at home and childhood in the forest wilderness. In this, the pseudo-Cavalcan author follows and expands on the example of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, showing over time an increase in attention paid to the saint’s youth.

A similar development in the iconography of the Baptist can be charted in visual representations of the saint, from the Early Christian era, to fourteenth-century Florence, and fifteenth-century central Italy. Early iconography of the Baptist closely followed Gospel descriptions, showing him as a bearded, ascetic figure garbed in a camel hair tunic.74 In Eastern and Early Christian art, his most frequent appearance was in scenes of the Baptism of Christ, as in the early sixth-century mosaics in the cupola of the Arian and Orthodox Baptistery at Ravenna (fig. 2.1).75 In the Arian Baptistery mosaic, the Baptist appears as a large, bearded figure, wearing the rugged skin of some exotic

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75 Kaftal and Bisogni (1978), 509. See also Poeschke (2010), 134-143. For the images in this thesis, the initial number refers to chapter reference (eg. 2 here) and the numbers after the period are their sequence within the chapter.
animal (the pelt is grey and spotted), with a curled shepherd’s staff over his shoulder. The presence of the staff in this early example of Baptist iconography begs further examination, for the cruciform staff John carries was to become, by the fifteenth century, one of the saint’s most ubiquitous distinguishing features. I can find no entry in the literature on the Baptist (on either his literary or visual representation) which addresses the meaning or form of the cross the saint is almost always depicted carrying. When the staff is mentioned, it is in the course of noting or deciphering the Baptist’s proclamatory scroll or banner, which is often wrapped or furled around the staff. Considering the saint’s characterization in the Gospels as being very much in the guise of the Old Testament prophets and hermits (see discussion in ch. 1), the Baptist’s cross could be a conflation of the hermit’s staff with the Crucifix, with the result being not dissimilar to the reed or palm crosses made in the image of the Cross. This early example might show a step in the device’s morphology, with later artists adopting the idea from Ravenna and elsewhere of a further feature to identify the Baptist’s wild roots, and imbuing it with Christological or martyrlic significance.

A thirteenth-century fresco cycle of the saint’s life in the Baptistery at Parma appears to contain one of the earliest Western Christian representations of the Baptist being led out into the desert by angel (fig. 2.2). The iconography of this particular scene likely shows the influence of the vita by Serapion of Thmuis, discussed in my previous chapter, or Byzantine art. In Parma the Baptist is depicted as a small figure dressed in a shaggy, animal-skin robe, led up a steep hill by an angel (likely Uriel). The child carries a small tablet bearing the words of the older preacher-Baptist, but not visually suggestive of the later combination of cross and proclamatory banderole used to identify the saint, even as a youth. Further up the hill, in the top right hand corner of the scene, is a depiction of the adult Baptist kneeling and praying. The two apparitions of the Baptist are dressed identically, and in fact appear so similar that it is only the relative size of the figure with the angel that designates him as a child. The child saint

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76 This includes no references in Baptist scholars such as Meier, Meyer, Scobie and Wink, and none in scholars on Christian imagery including Kaftal, Rushforth (see below) or in Schiller. G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols, trans. J. Seligman, London: Lund Humphries, 1966, English ed. 1971.


79 For the inscription on the Parma Baptist’s tablet, see Boskovits, n. 207, 293.
here appears not a separate figure in its own right, but as a step on the way to John becoming the Baptist. Thus, the young John is dressed the same as the adult Baptist, and his features are identical to those of his older counterpart, to show his direct relationship with the older version of the saint. By including the two ages of the saint in the same scene, the author of these frescoes makes clear the fact that the two are to be considered one continuous figure. This is quite distinct from the first appearance of the young John in Florence, where a youthful figure of the saint is accorded his own narrative moment, and depicted individually in a mosaic scene devoted to the theme of the Baptist’s transition from childhood to adulthood. The Parma fresco cycle features a young Baptist, but does not develop a distinct iconography for the figure.

In the second half of the thirteenth century in Florence, the iconographic features of the nascent boy Baptist figure began to coalesce, in the mosaic life cycle of the saint laid in the cupola of the Florentine Baptistery likely between 1250 and 1300. In these mosaics we begin to see the animal-skin robe, staff and banner used systematically as markers of the Baptist even when the saint is depicted as a youth. The interior of the Baptistery ceiling is hexagonal in shape, with one wall given over entirely to a large portrait of Christ the Redeemer. The Baptist’s lifecycle is depicted along the bottom row of mosaics on five walls, with the story divided into five sections (figs 2.4-2.8), with smaller individual scenes delineated within each section. Boskovits attributes the design of the Baptist’s scenes to Francesco (Master of the San Miniato Crucifix), for some of the earlier scenes, and Cimabue, with subsequent interventions by restorers – one of these is especially visible in the form of an inscription inserted into the scene of John the Baptist Leaving for the Desert (fig. 2.9). The Baptistery mosaics devote a

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80 The dating of the mosaic decoration of the Baptistery, as well as the authorship of the designs and finished product, remains under debate. The most recent summary of evidence and thus pronouncement on dating is found in Boskovits, 22-26. The mosaics covering the triumphal arch and apse of the interior can be dated to 1225, but the covering of the cupola and the lines of mosaics featuring various angels, saints and life cycles are less certain. See Schevill I, 242-243. Di Cagno describes the work as “well advanced in 1271”, Dunford advances the argument that at least two of the panels in the Baptist’s life-cycle cannot have been done before about 1300 (although she bases some of this on the supposed importance and influence of the pseudo-Cavalcan vita, which as discussed above, is problematic for a number of reasons). Falk does not trouble to distinguish between the portion of the mosaics begun in 1225 and those dated by documentary evidence to shortly after 1300. See G. di Cagno, The Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Campanile, Florence: Mandragora, 2001, 29; P. A. Dunford, “A Suggestion for the Dating of the Baptistery Mosaics at Florence”, Burlington Magazine 116 (1974), 96-98; I. Falk, “The Genesis of Andrea Pisano’s Bronze Doors”, Art Bulletin 25 (1943), 132-153, 133.

81 Boskovits discusses the iconography of the Baptist’s lifecycle in detail 289-302.

82 Boskovits notes that the author of the cartoons of the Baptistery mosaics in general is in doubt (and then elaborates on the problem of the anachronistic style of the mosaics compared with their probable
great deal of time to John’s martyrdom; with mosaics from the east side of the vault to the south (half of the east wall and two full sections of the southeast and south walls) depicting John’s imprisonment, treatment at Herod’s court, and his beheading and subsequent interment. As Boskovits notes, the inclusion of a life cycle of the Baptist in the decoration is by no means unusual, but the Florentine Baptistery mosaics are remarkable for having so few precise visual precedents, instead drawing on a number of visual sources – both Byzantine and Italian – and various literary sources as well.83

One such highly unusual scene, at the far right of the north section of the vault (fig. 2.9), shows the young Baptist travelling out into the desert and is the original Florentine prototype figure for the young Baptist studied at length in this thesis. The artist has depicted the saint fully marked as the Baptist, but not depicted as an old, bearded prophet, and striding out into the desert unaccompanied at the beginning of his ministry. This constitutes the first Florentine example of the juvenescence of the saint, a feature which was to become progressively more pronounced over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Furthermore, as Boskovits agrees, this representation of the saint as leaving for the desert alone (that is, unaccompanied by angel such as in the Parma frescoes), and still in his youth, is unique in Central Italian iconography of the saint, and as such warrants a detailed examination.84 I note also that Boskovits is unwilling to attribute this scene directly to the pseudo-Cavalcan text, advising a cautious reading of Dunford’s suggestion that it must be the source.85 In general, he seems sceptical of the efforts made by authors including Aronberg Lavin, Dunford and Falk, to link the scenes of the Baptistery mosaics to assorted written sources of widely varying currency and readership.86 Instead, he proposes that the iconography of this particular figure was likely influenced by any number of apocryphal and devotional texts, in addition to the Gospels. This model, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, best explains the numerous variations on the central theme of the Baptist seen throughout the fifteenth century, as single sources for the most part do not account for the rich variety of detail in visual representations of the saint.

In the Baptistery mosaics, a tall, slim young man stands at the base of a rocky mountain, his left leg bent, showing his determination to move forward into the space of

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83 Boskovits, 301.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 292-293.
86 For example, see also ibid., n. 204, 292-293.
the wilderness. He wears a hair robe and a short cloak, the latter adding to his general appearance of youthfulness. His face is unbearded but his brow set with strength, showing his determination as he strides up a rocky outcrop dotted with the sprigs of exotic trees. He carries a long staff with three crossbeams near the top – looking not dissimilar to the Russian or patriarchal cross, which could be due to Byzantine influence. It is distinct from both the hooked shepherd’s staff depicted in the Ravenna mosaics, and the later, simpler reed crosses, showing perhaps an intermediate or related step in the refinement of this symbol. The figure of John in the next mosaic section (the far left of the northeast section of the vault) is bearded, and speaking to a crowd of followers, his right hand pointing at the sky. Boskovits has advanced a strong argument for this latter scene representing not a generic image of John’s ministry, but the specific scene related in the Fourth Gospel where the Baptist is questioned by the priests and Levites (Jn 1:19-28).  

Though Boskovits does not explore the implications of this distinction fully, I submit that such a deliberate choice helps to make the overall focus of the Baptist’s life cycle his role in preparing for Christ’s ministry. The scene depicted in lieu of the Baptist preaching contains some of the Baptist’s most strident speeches on behalf of Christ, and whilst the visual representation here can also stand for the Baptist’s ministry in a more general sense, its specific significance is Christological.

The mosaic artist makes a clear distinction between both the adulthood of the bearded figure who is questioned by the Levites, and the babyhood of the tiny, swaddled infant who looses Zechariah’s tongue in the section immediately preceding the saint’s departure for the desert. The implication is of three distinct stages in the Baptist’s development: infancy, youth and adulthood. The figure of the saint who departs for the desert in the Florentine Baptistery mosaics is of an indeterminate age, and so too of an indeterminate purpose. The adult John prepares the way for Christ and baptizes him, and the young John is associated with the miracle of Zechariah’s Benedictus. The John who leaves for the desert then, is at this point in the development of the figure’s iconography still a nebulous figure in terms of age and mission, though clearly recognisable as the Baptist. His youth – as an intermediate point between infancy and adulthood – has yet to be defined as a distinct moment in the life of the Baptist, and coloured with companionship with Christ seen in later representations of the young

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87 Ibid., 293-294.
Baptist. As Boskovits notes, this scene has no precise visual or literary precedents,\textsuperscript{88} and yet is compelling enough to exert influence on the works that followed, as will be seen below. This first Florentine representation of the young John, strongly associated with the wilderness, marks the beginning of the visual trajectory I examine in this thesis.

In 1322 the opera of the Calimala, responsible for the upkeep of the Baptistery, commissioned a set of doors for the southern doorway from Andrea Pisano (fig. 2.10).\textsuperscript{89} The doors, featuring another extensive lifecycle of the Baptist, were finished in the 1330s. At around the same time, in 1325, the city statutes claimed the Baptist as their patron and defender, making the patronal relationship they desired and envisaged official.\textsuperscript{90} Falk has observed that the Baptistery mosaics constitute the major source of inspiration for Pisano’s doors.\textsuperscript{91} However, instead of the iconography of the doors simply replicating the narrative of the Baptist as illustrated in the mosaics, Pisano has made considerable expansions to the John’s narrative (supported to varying degrees by literary sources), with most of the extra scenes depicted on the doors inserted into the retelling of the saint’s infancy. It seems that in the period between the mosaics being laid in the thirteenth century, and Pisano designing his bronze doors in the fourteenth, the early part of the Baptist’s life had risen in interest to the Calimala, the patrons of both works. In one particular scene depicted on the doors (fig. 2.11) – that of John’s departure for the desert – in addition to the representation of the same scene from the earlier mosaic cycle, appears to offer a precursor to later depictions of the young Baptist.

The Baptist’s lifecycle is depicted in twenty individual scenes, which are read in pairs from the top to bottom of each door in parallel zigzags, drawing parallels between the infancy and adulthood of the Baptist. The bottom eight panels across the two doors show depictions of the virtues. The left door culminates in a scene showing the Baptism of Christ, the point of most significant intersection between the lives of the adult John and Christ. The whole right door focuses on the martyrdom of John, implying a parallel

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 301.
\textsuperscript{90} Cornelison (1999), 136; Webb, 104.
\textsuperscript{91} Falk (1943), 136. She also considers the structural precedent of the cathedral doors at Pisa, and some influence by Giotto, but concludes that it is to the mosaics that Pisano owes the greatest debt.
between John’s sacrifice and the Passion. In this division, Pisano roughly follows the artist of the Baptistery mosaics who, as Boskovits noted, depicted the Baptist Rebuking Herod at the very centre of the saint’s lifecycle, designating the moment as John’s turning point between prophet and martyr. Here Pisano uses the Baptism of Christ to emphatically mark the end of the first chapter of John’s life, with the Baptist Rebuking Herod forming the first scene on the right hand doors, and as such, marking the beginning of the final phase in the Baptist’s life.

The figures of Zacharias, Elizabeth, Gabriel and John in Pisano’s infancy narrative are delicately moulded by falls of drapery, filling the voids that the static volutes and the borders of the quatrefoils create. Many of the scenes also contain one central narrative moment, surrounded by figures forming almost a geometric boundary, facilitating the viewer’s focus on and understanding of the central message of each moment – the interplay of gesture between the stooped Zacharias and the upright Gabriel, the calm form of Elizabeth bisecting a scene of busy industry after she has given birth, the reverence of Zacharias and Elizabeth as they name John. On the doors, the annunciation, birth and childhood of John are allotted six out of the twenty scenes, compared to the three of the mosaics’ total thirteen. The expanded retelling of the Baptist’s early life on the doors includes the Annunciation to Zechariah, who is then shown struck mute, the Visitation (here included specifically in the Baptist’s lifecycle, where as it was technically part of Christ’s in the mosaics), the Birth and Naming of John (depicted separately, rather than collapsed into one scene as in the mosaic cycle), and finally the young John’s departure for the desert. This narrative sequence demonstrates the miraculous nature of John’s birth, his precocity in recognizing Christ whilst in his mother’s womb, and alludes to Zecharias’ Benedictus. As such, they emphasise John’s importance and role in God’s plan for salvation – qualities of the Baptist that are more visible and easier to understand earlier in his story, before his life intersects with Christ and his mission is subsumed by his cousin’s. As discussed in my first chapter, it is also in the annunciation, birth and naming of both Christ and the Baptist that the clearest parallels between the two are made.

With a mind to considering the development of the young Baptist motif in Florence, it is significant that from the Baptistery mosaics from the second half of the thirteenth century to Pisano’s doors in the first half of the fourteenth, though almost the

92 Boskovits, 302.
exact same scene has been used to depict the young Baptist entering his desert wilderness, John has undergone something of a youthful transformation in Pisano’s doors. This juvenescence has gone unnoticed – or at least, not remarked upon – by scholars such as Falk and Clark, Finn and Robinson, in their studies of the doors. However, I note that the figure of John has been rejuvenated in the later work, and is clearly younger in Pisano’s depiction than in the mosaic version. Pisano’s figure is smaller in comparison to his surroundings (see figs 2.11 and 2.12), dwarfed slightly by the forbidding, rocky mountain at whose base he stands, poised to follow the path implied by the quatrefoils’ strong sense of linear movement. He is round-headed, with short locks, carrying a staff bigger than he is, which both emphasizes his small stature, and provides something of a yardstick by which to measure his height. The young Baptist wears a robe articulated in bulky folds that make it look too big for him, further increasing the viewer’s sense of his youth. He appears to falter more than his predecessor in the mosaics, whose feet and figure were planted on an upward slope, whereas on the south doors he appears to be preparing to step down. The uncertainty of this small, hesitant figure is more poignant in Andrea’s version, emphasizing more dramatically the saint’s extraordinary act, leaving his family and striking off into the desert whilst still a boy, impelled by his prophetic mission. The heightened emotion of the Baptist leaving for the desert is matched on the right hand side of the doors by the moment of his beheading at Herod’s court, frozen on the upswing of the soldier’s sword. This pairing reinforces the significance of the moment where the young John leaves for the desert.

Expanding further on the examples of the Baptistery mosaics and doors, a fresco cycle in Urbino again expands further on the visual depiction of the saint’s childhood and youth, and offers a further prototype figure for the mid-Quattrocento boy Baptist. These frescoes (fig. 2.13), at the Oratory of St John the Baptist and signed and dated 1416 by Lorenzo and Jacopo Salimbeni, devote yet more space to the Baptist’s time in the wilderness, and continue the chronological trend of increased interest in the childhood and youth of the saint. The frescoes at Urbino do not demonstrate the popularity of the Baptist in Florence, but rather show that interest in the youth of the

93 On these frescoes, see P. A. Dunford, “The Iconography of the Frescoes in the Oratorio di S. Giovanni at Urbino”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973), 367-373; and M. Minardi, *Lorenzo e Jacopo Salimbeni: Vicende e protagonisti della pittura tardogotica nelle Marche e in Umbria*, Florence: Olschki, 2008, esp. 61-84. Many thanks to Di Haskell for sharing her copy of Minardi with me.
Baptist spread even beyond Florence. The Urbino frescoes are also extremely significant for their apparent relationship with the devotional texts examined in this chapter, and for their possible influence on depictions of the Baptist in the fifteenth century. Both Aronberg Lavin and Dunford are insistent on the frescoes’ origin in the pseudo-Cavalcan vita.\(^{94}\) Whilst both make a number of reasonable points, I am unconvinced of a such a strict text-to-image interpretation as they suggest, and would rather recognise various thematic elements of the choice of scenes in the frescoes as common to many representations of John, as seen in the examples of the Baptistery doors and mosaics above. However, the fresco cycle does include two scenes showing the Baptist as a boy or young adolescent, with little or no precedent in Italian art at the time of their production; that is, of an *Encounter* between the Baptist and Christ during their shared childhood, and a depiction of the Baptist preaching in the desert, portrayed as a young man or adolescent. As I will show, it is the second of these, rather than the first, which might constitute a source for the representation of the young Baptist in the second half of the Quattrocento.

At Urbino, a large fresco is devoted to a depiction of the Baptist’s birth, naming and circumcision, efficiently conveyed via the use of an architectural cross-section which divides the space of the fresco into an interior and exterior scene, implicitly linked through a shared wall to convey a shared narrative (fig. 2.14). On the left, Elizabeth is placed in a large chamber, furnished with a contemporary bedstead and a decorative gilt ceiling. She and Zechariah are distinguished from other figures in the room by their diamond-shaped gilt haloes. By contrast, the Virgin is identified by her circular halo. She stands in the foreground of the fresco, isolated from the other figures, her attention rapt in the infant Baptist she cradles in her arms. Dunford asserts that the substance of this scene has come from directly from the pseudo-Cavalcan text.\(^{95}\) However, as discussed above, a precedent for Mary’s presence at John’s birth is already specifically provided by the *Golden Legend*, meaning that this scene alone is not sufficient proof of the Salimbeni’s reliance on the pseudo-Cavalcan text. This scene also offers a parallel with the biblical *Visitation*, wherein the Baptist is the first character to recognise Christ (while both infants are in the wombs of their respective mothers). Here, the Virgin performs a similar role of recognition, but in this Birth of John, it is the Virgin who appreciates the importance of the Baptist’s role in the narrative to come.

\(^{94}\) Dunford (1973), throughout; MAL 1955, 89-90.

\(^{95}\) Dunford (1973), 369.
The Baptist’s Circumcision is a scene not specifically related in the Gospels, and the Salimbeni’s depiction of it appears to be unprecedented in Italian art. Dunford again attributes the choice of subject matter here to a reader of the pseudo-Cavalcan Vita. I agree that this seems the most likely source of the fresco’s depiction of the Circumcision of the Baptist, although other, more conventional elements of the scene (such as the particulars of the Birth) are present in various other literary and visual sources. However, I would again add that the choice of this scene emphasises the parallels between the infancy narratives of Christ and the Baptist. The effect of illustrating and thus drawing attention to the Baptist’s circumcision (which, though not explicitly related in the Gospels, the reader can assume to have occurred) is manifold. First, the Baptist’s status and authority as descendant of Judaic history and traditions is affirmed, thus reinforcing his role as the link between the Old Testament past and the present of the New Testament. Second, the Salimbeni have provided further visual evidence of the synchronicity between the lives of Christ and the Baptist. A depiction of the Baptist’s circumcision, with its shedding of blood and premonitions of future suffering, cannot help but call to the viewer’s mind the significance of Christ’s circumcision.

In the Salimbeni Encounter (fig. 2.15), Christ and the Baptist are depicted as boys, at perhaps eight years old – older than infants, but younger than the representation of the saint in the fresco of the Baptist preaching (fig. 2.16). The two children crouch together, kneeling on the ground, with roughly mirrored body-language. The Baptist reaches forward to Christ, who seems to peak out from behind the Virgin’s gown. Though this section of the fresco has been damaged, which makes a detailed analysis of this scene difficult, it appears that the Baptist carries a banner, the inscription on which is no longer legible. There are few markers here of what would later become the accepted attributes of the saint – he is depicted as a normal boy without the animal skin robe or banderole. So while the age of the Baptist as depicted in the Encounter proved popular for depictions of the saint as an independent narrative actor, the Salimbeni Encounter was not the only source upon which artists drew for iconography of the saint. This section of the fresco is also very small, compared with the large space dedicated to other narrative moments, such as John’s preaching and the Baptism of Christ. This leads me to be somewhat circumspect in pronouncing this small painting to have exerted

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96 Ibid., 379-380.
97 On the iconographic significance of Christ’s circumcision, see Steinberg (1996), 49-56.
much influence over later depictions of the saint, and also in ascribing the iconography of the entire cycle wholly to the pseudo-Cavalcan vita, as others have done. John’s ministry in the desert is easily extrapolated from biblical sources, whilst the largest panels of the cycle are devoted to scenes taken directly from the Gospels.

The image of an encounter between the young Christ and Baptist does not appear to have definite biblical or apocryphal sources. For his part, I note that Kaftal considers the motif to be a “transposition” of the Visitation, which is an idea worth considering, particularly in the context of the Urbino fresco cycle. This would fit in with the strong current of prefiguration that runs through this cycle (as it does in many other lifecycles of the Baptist, for example Pisano’s doors examined earlier). In the Urbino frescoes, the Circumcision of John is represented, which is an unusual inclusion on a lifecycle of the saint. The Encounter could be a means of bringing the two children together again – here in a literal sense – as in the Visitation, which is strongly redolent of the Baptist’s role as the last prophet. As the first to recognize Christ even before their births, it is fitting in a narrative sense to bring the two together again as children, before the fulfillment of the Visitation prophecy occurs at Christ’s Baptism.

The Encounter then represents an intermediary moment – a caesura in the stories of both John and Christ – representing the notion that their paths are fated to cross. Bringing the two – Messiah and Witness – together three times in this fresco cycle, at birth, childhood and adulthood, creates a narrative circularity which visually echoes the sense of prophetic fulfillment which the Baptist’s life serves within the structure of the Bible. As will be discussed in chapter 7 of the thesis, the timeless futurity of an Encounter between the young Baptist and Christ becomes a popular motif towards the end of the fifteenth century, with artists often abandoning any supporting narrative structure. Here I suggest that, as in my examination of apocryphal or medieval sources for the scene, to assume the existence of one specific literary pretext for the scene, misses the possibility that the Encounter motif may have evolved organically from a thematic interpretation of a number of sources.

In the absence of a figure of the young John distinctly characterized as the Baptist in the Encounter scene, I can instead highlight a different figure that I suggest may constitute a prototype for depictions of the young John the Baptist in fifteenth-century Florence. Following the Encounter, the first fresco panel on the bottom left of

98 Kaftal (1965), 616.
the wall depicts John’s early ministry, preaching to a crowd of followers from a rocky promontory in the desert (fig. 2.16). The John who preaches to the crowd piled into the frame here is older than the figure of John in both the Salimbeni *Encounter* and earlier depictions of the saint leaving for the desert, but not yet by any means the bearded ascetic prophet of Gospel tradition. He is depicted as younger in this scene than at the same narrative moment depicted in the earlier Baptistry frescoes (fig. 2.17), showing that his youth has been effectively extended by the Salimbeni. I note here also that the Salimbeni depict him during his ministry wearing the animal-skin robe (which he is conspicuously without in the *Encounter*), with elides any necessity to explain to the viewer how he came by the garment, a point on which Gospel and apocryphal sources do not agree. In the Urbino *Preaching* scene, John has also acquired a proclamatory banderole. 99 This depiction of John, in terms of his physical characterisation, as I will discuss in the fourth chapter of this thesis, had a tremendous influence on other fifteenth-century depictions of the saint.

His wisdom and youth are held in balance here – we see from his audience that he holds their rapt attention, and thus we gather that he has already begun preaching and preparing the way for Christ, but as we see by comparison to the next panel depicting John baptizing the multitudes, he is not fully grown yet (fig. 2.18). That John is taller, his face is more gaunt, and he has grown a beard. In the next scene, the *Baptism of Christ*, John is older still; his figure taller and rangier, and his beard and haggard face yet more pronounced (fig. 2.19). With this progression of age, the artists imply that the Baptist does not reach the full height of his wisdom and manhood until his path crosses with Christ. Pisano hinted at such an apex in his arrangement of the life cycle across the two Baptistery doors, but the Salimbeni here have heightened the effect by using the age of the Baptist as a deliberate marker of his stage in his mission. To compare the two adult figures John the Baptist in the Urbino frescoes, with the figure of John preaching, is to see the preacher-Baptist as boyish by comparison – his cheeks are rounded, his limbs are muscular and his face is smooth and hairless. This Baptist – somewhere between childhood and adulthood – and the symbolism used to characterize him – exerted, I suggest, a powerful influence on artist and patrons of the rest of the fifteenth century. This figure is the most compelling prototype that emerges from the Salimbeni frescoes, not the figure in the *Encounter*.

99 The proclamation is “ECCE AGNUS DEI” – refer to Di Haskell’s forthcoming thesis for more on these frescoes. Many thanks again to Di for sharing her information on the frescoes with me.
The Urbino frescoes carefully chart John’s progress by graduated ages. The Salimbeni are the first to show the Baptist active in his ministry as a young man, whereas earlier representations of him preaching invariably show him as an older, bearded figure. The scene of John as a teenage prophet, young and beardless, yet capable of holding the rapt attention of his listeners would seem to be analogous to Christ in the Temple, dominating the skeptical elders as a child. The Urbino frescoes show a fundamental shift in the perception of John and his mission, and are evidence of the iconographic choices made by patrons in depicting the Baptist. Due to the ambiguity of many literary sources for the saint’s life, including the Gospels, the choice of what age to depict John at for particular narrative moments has been in the hands of patrons, and as such can tell us much of the prevailing image of the Baptist held in the collective imagination at the time that these visual representations of the saint were produced. Thus while the age of John leaving for the desert is not specified in the Bible, and remains unclear in other texts, the patrons of the Baptistery mosaics elected to depict John as a young man, and the patrons of Pisano’s doors made him younger still. Similarly, whilst earlier representations of the saint depict him in his desert ministry as a bearded, older man, as we shall see, the patrons of the frescoes at Urbino decided to further extend John’s youth, and imbue his reaching of maturity with symbolic importance. Aronberg Lavin notes that Pisano was an exact contemporary of Cavalca, and thus posits that the choice of which particular moments in John’s birth and infancy narrative to expand upon were influenced by Cavalca’s text, and the youth of Pisano’s departing John. However, recent research has placed the Cavalcan text at around 1342, making it too late for it to have influenced the subject matter of the doors. What I would suggest instead is that both works – visual and written – were informed by, and thus fed into, the same current of interest in the Baptist’s infancy and youth, which as I have shown grew steadily with the saint’s cult in Florence. Though the Urbino frescoes are not evidence of John’s cult in Florence, they nevertheless testify to parallel devotion to the saint, and to a continuation of the process of his juvenescence.

Evidence of the saint’s cult in Florence can be found not only in such monumental visual cycles as the Baptistery mosaics and doors, but also in the celebration of his Nativity in the city, falling on 24 June. Whilst religious texts such as the Golden Legend and Meditations I suggest may have contributed to devotion to the

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100 MAL 1955, 85-101, 89.
101 Delcorno, op. cit.
saint, it is important to keep in mind the role of religious celebration and devotion in public life in late-medieval Florence, and the inextricability of faith and observance from more earthly concerns.\textsuperscript{102} By the fifteenth century, the Baptist was extremely popular with all sections of Florentine society – from the elite, to the popolo, from the clergy to lay confraternities to the general public, and across the many factional groups – political, economic and social – that made up the Florentine commune. What I wish to consider is the pervasive appeal of the Baptist that led to support of and devotion to his cult from all quarters. To this end, one important factor to be considered as a more mundane reason for his popularity (in addition to his vaunted position in the Bible and extra-biblical texts, as examined thus far) is the Baptist’s role as the patron saint of the Calimala (the Cloth Merchants’ guild).\textsuperscript{103}

The Calimala was one of the most powerful guilds of Florence, one of the wealthiest, and perhaps one of the oldest.\textsuperscript{104} Along with six of the other leading guilds, the Calimala was part of the arti maggiori, a cross-section of both elite families and the upper echelons of the popolo, which wielded considerable political power in Florence from the thirteenth century onwards.\textsuperscript{105} The guild was tasked with the administration and upkeep of the Baptistery sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, likely earlier rather than later as the guild was, as previously mentioned, patrons of both the Baptistery mosaics and doors.\textsuperscript{106} Other major guilds in Florence were responsible for the upkeep of similarly important buildings. The Arte della Lana (Wool Merchants’ guild) was responsible for the Duomo and Piazza della Signoria, and the Arte della Seta (Silk Merchants) for the Orsanmichele.\textsuperscript{107} The other major guilds were not necessarily moved by their relationship with other religious buildings to adopt the titular saint as

\textsuperscript{102} Such an observation has been made by many scholars, but one of the best introductions to the mixed religious and civic nature of public life in Florence can be found in Trexler (1980), 1-8, and throughout his book.

\textsuperscript{103} I have been unable to determine the date that the Calimala’s relationship with the Baptist began, although I note that Boskovits places their earliest association with the Baptistery at 1182. Boskovits, 16.

\textsuperscript{104} For a very informative discussion of the members, activities and history of the Calimala, see E. Staley, The Guilds of Florence, London: Methuen, 1906, esp. 105-138. See also Staley’s discussion of guild religious practice and patronage in the thirteenth century, 494-534. See also Najemy, 40-41.

\textsuperscript{105} For a more detailed explanation of the guild system, see Staley above, for the Calimala and other textile industry guilds see Najemy, 39-44 and 100-109.

\textsuperscript{106} Toker gives one precise and one possible date, of 1193 and 1157 respectively. Schevill places the Calimala’s opera in charge in the thirteenth century (by 1293); Mary Hollingsworth places it imprecisely “during the fourteenth century”. This latter suggestion can probably be ruled out due to lack of evidence, and likewise for Schevill’s suggestion. Using Toker’s information, a date somewhere in the second half of the twelfth century seems likely. M. Hollingsworth, Patronage in Renaissance Italy, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, 17; Schevill I, 243; Toker (1976), 158.

\textsuperscript{107} Hollingsworth, 17.
their own however – it seems the association of, for example, Reparata or the Virgin with the cathedral was not sufficient to encourage the Lana to adopt either as their patron saint. When the major guilds were charged with decorating the niches on the outside of the Orsanmichele with statues of the saints, the Arte della Lana commissioned a bronze of St Stephen from Ghiberti in 1425. That such an influential and wealthy guild as the Calimala was charged with the upkeep of the Baptist’s titular church, and linked to his cult so explicitly, surely accounted for some of the magnificence of the material manifestations of devotion to the Baptist in Florence. The textile and clothing industries were very important to the Florentine economy, and as interest groups their respective guilds wielded commensurate power.

As noted, the Baptist’s nativity was one of the most important days of the Florentine year, with celebration and observance of the day being a significant event in both the liturgical calendar and for local government. The character of celebrations changed over time in concert with changing trends in the ritual of celebration, usually entailing a display of the city’s wealth and authority in more material, secular terms, along with religious observance. As a celebration of the entire commune’s power and achievements, the day itself often lined up – whether by chance or design – with celebration of recent military or territorial victories, and thus began to take on something of an imperialist cast. For example, the feast day that Florentine merchant and diarist Gregorio Dati so enthusiastically described c. 1410 appears to have been partly a celebration of recent victories over Milan and Pisa. At such times, the processions that wound through the city on 24 June took on a martial flavour, with demonstrations of the cavalrymen’s skills including battles and jousts. Descriptions by Dati of the proceedings of the Saint’s day demonstrate the easy confluence of religious and martial public celebrations:

108 Ibid., 28.
109 On the textile industry in Florence, see Najemy, 100-103; and Staley, op. cit.
110 For a note on the determination of the saint’s feast day (through liturgical means), see M. T. Ferer, “The Feast of St John the Baptist: Its Background and Celebration in Renaissance Polyphony”, PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1976, 24-27. Ferer also notes other dates of the liturgical calendar that celebrate the Baptist (27-28), and the means of tracing the celebrations of the feast day in the Early Christian church (28-33).
111 G. Dati, Istoria di Firenze di Goro Dati dall'anno 1380 all'anno 1405 (con annotazioni), Florence: Manni, 1735, 84-89. See also Chrétien, 48, and C. Guasti, Le Feste di S. Giovanni Battista in Firenze, Florence: Per cura della R. Società di San Giovanni Batista, 1908, 4.
112 Trexler (1980), 218 and 222.
La prima offerta, che si fa la mattina, si fono i Capitani della parte Guelfa con tutti i Cavalieri, essendovi ancora Signori, Ambasciadori, e Cavalieri forestierim che vanno con loro grande numero de’ più onorevoli Cittadini della Terra, e col Gonfalone del segno della parte Guelfa innanzi portato da uno de’loro donzelli in su uno grosso palafreno vestito di sopravvesta di drappo, e il cavallo covertato insino a terra di drappo bianco col segno della Parte Guelfa. 

As mentioned earlier, the enforced offerings of *palii* by protectorate states or neighbouring townships was used a means of reinforcing Florence’s authority within Tuscany from the beginning of the fourteenth century. In the last quarter of the thirteenth century, celebrations of the Baptist’s feast day appear to have referenced the saint’s role as friend to the bridegroom, as invoked in the *Golden Legend*. It is likely that Jacobus, in writing of John’s “prerogative of love”, articulated a common understanding of the Baptist as he was viewed at the time. These are evidenced by the character of celebrations of the feast day at around the same time as Jacobus wrote the *Golden Legend*. On the St John’s Day of 1283, of which chronicler Giovanni Villani wrote, took the form of a brigade and gathering devoted to the idea of courtly love, with knights dressed in white, playing games and singing songs on the theme. Trexler has read this permutation of the celebrations surrounding the Baptist as an indication of the true nature of ritual in Florence being the celebration of private individuals, occasionally enacted in public. I would like to read into the character of those celebrations as an enactment of John’s “prerogative of love”, and of his role as “friend of the bridegroom”. The character of these celebrations does little to detail the annunciation or birth of the Baptist, nominally the subject of the feast day on 24 June, but nevertheless celebrates other aspects of the figure as understood by the contemporary Christian. The nature of the celebrations in 1283 show the malleability of the Baptist’s character, and how contemporary understanding of him could shift key based on new or popular texts of the time.

Perhaps partially because of the close relationship between the Calimala and the Baptist, celebrations of the saint’s feast day had a decidedly mercantile cast at times, with this aspect of the feast becoming more pronounced as the association between guild and saint deepened, and the guild’s wealth and clout increased. Trexler goes so far

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113 Dati, 87.
114 See n. 7 above.
115 As cited in Trexler (1980), 217. See also Chrétien, 49-50.
as to describe the feast as the “Day of the Merchant”, noting the opportunity it provided for the public display of costly items of material culture.\textsuperscript{117} On the Baptist’s feast day and sometimes on days surrounding it, citizens enjoyed a loosening of the city’s stringent sumptuary laws, which wealthy citizens (the very same who were members of the Calimala, the Arte della Lana and the Arte della Seta) were constantly lobbying to have revised.\textsuperscript{118} Trexler also notes that the feast itself was an excellent opportunity for merchants to make money – even those who were not members of the Calimala.\textsuperscript{119} However, the strength of the Calimala did make itself shown in the custom of offering \textit{palii} (singular \textit{palio}), cloth offerings that were elicited from the \textit{commune} and outlying areas under Florentine rule, which were hung in the church.\textsuperscript{120} The high visibility and accountability of such a practice forged a link between the saint’s feast day, the commercial activity of the Calimala, and the assertion of authority by Florence over its dominion subjects. The \textit{opera} of the Calimala, naturally, was behind a complaint in 1406 of the general laxity of citizens in complying with the offering of \textit{palii}, which may be seen as at once shrewdly commercially minded, yet simultaneously an expression of genuine devotion to the guild and city’s patron saint.\textsuperscript{121} Nevertheless, it appears that in general Florentines had no difficulty reconciling their enterprising commercial spirit with their devotions to the saint.\textsuperscript{122}

Reverence of the Baptist in Florence, by the middle of the fifteenth century, occupied an important role in enactments of both civic pride and religious sentiment, and the cult of the saint facilitated expression of both of both by the \textit{commune}. While Reparata and Zenobius had fulfilled the needs of Early Christian and medieval occupants, the Baptist was seen as a fitting symbol for a proud republic of wealth, learning and power. Various important groups within the city had links to the Baptist and publicly demonstrated their devotion, with a fervour that was to largely outpace the

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{119} Trexler (1980), 269.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 268-269.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{122} A letter to fifteenth-century Florentine banker Bartolommeo Caccini containing a description of the saint’s day celebrations from 1454 mentions, one after the other, “flagellants, priests and friars”, and then the \textit{palio} race, upon which it appears huge amounts of money were wagered. Though the (modern) editor of the volume this letter is printed in appears to have picked it out to emphasise the contrast of religious and moremundane or commercial impulses, the author himself does not remark on any conflict of atmosphere between the two aspects of the celebrations. See F. Caccini, “A Letter to Bartolommeo Cederni on Gambling at the Feast of St John,” in \textit{Images of Quattrocento Florence}, S. U. Baldassarri, and A., Saiber (eds), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, 61-63.
cults of previous patron saints of the city. The Calimala, one of the most powerful guilds in the city, adopted the saint as their representative and may perhaps be seen as an example of how the saint’s devotees were mercantile or lay worshippers, rather than strictly clerical. The adoption of the Baptist, from a cult without clear beginnings, rose with the current of Florentine pride and wealth, and yet was no less fervent or pious for its civic celebrations. As devotion to the saint grew, so too did interest in the infancy and youth of the saint. This is manifest across various media, including written devotional texts and the expansion of lifecycles of the Baptist to include further detail in these periods, effectively extending the youth of John so that he reaches maturity at the moment he baptizes Christ. Though no exact prototype was produced, it is possible to see in a number of works, including panels in the Baptistery mosaics, south doors and even outside Florence, in the form of the Salimbeni frescoes in Urbino, the beginnings of the figure of the youthful Baptist. In the following chapter I shall examine the use of this rejuvenated Baptist figure by one of the Florentine elite’s leading families.
CHAPTER 3
THE BOY BAPTIST BEYOND THE NARRATIVE:
THE ADORATIONS OF FILIPPO LIPPI

This chapter will examine the emergence of the boy Baptist as an independent narrative actor outside a lifecycle of the saint. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, a youthful figure of the Baptist had become more frequent and more common within pictorial narratives from Florence to Urbino, in the 1450s in Florence the young Baptist was extricated from the confines of the narrative setting of his own life, and transported into an altarpiece of the Virgin Adoring the Child painted by Filippo Lippi for the Medici family c. 1459. Such a context for the young Baptist was entirely new, and signifies a change in his relationship with the Holy Family and in his perception by viewers. The composition was successful enough to be repeated (reversed with some minor changes) by Filippo for another Medici family member during the 1460s. This chapter will investigate the circumstances of production of these works, to try and understand significance of the boy Baptist for patrons and viewers. In this chapter, it will be shown how the Medici utilised the figure to demonstrate not only their religious fervour, but also their civic pride, and to cement their status as worthy Florentines and de facto ruling family of the city.¹ In the course of painting for the Medici, Filippo also

formulated the nascent figure of the Giovannino Battista that was to become so popular in the second half of the fifteenth century in Florence and beyond. These phenomena — that of the Medici’s extensive influence in Florence, and Filippo’s invention of the format for the youthful Baptist when inserted into an Adoration — formed a nexus of social ambition and artistic invention that produced the eloquent and very serviceable boy Baptist figure, which in turn exerted tremendous influence over the Medici family’s peers and Filippo’s colleagues. As I will discuss below, the innovations of Filippo’s new iconographic system were afforded by the needs of the Medici’s personal patronage in Florence.

Known as the Wilderness Adorations by modern scholars, the series of three paintings are connected loosely by patronal links to the Medici. Together, they constitute an exploration of the themes of the Nativity of Christ, transmuted into the more timeless and static form of an Adoration. Over the course of the three panels, Filippo strips back the narrative elements of the composition to reveal a more ambiguous, thematic representation of the Incarnation of Christ, and personal responses to the infant Child. The young Baptist, newly animated as an independent figure, appears in the latter two Wilderness Adorations, in part confirming the nature of the compositions as having moved past pure illustration of the story of the Nativity, and as will be discussed, in part representing the Medici family. Beginning with the Annalena Adoration in the early- to mid-1450s and assisted by the patronage of the Medici, Filippo developed a new iconography for portraying the Adoration of the Christ Child.

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3 On the Wilderness Adorations, see Holmes (1999), 172-182; Ruda (1993), 218-235. Ruda (1993) argues for the inclusion of a fourth painting, a late workshop Adoration now in the Galleria Comunale di Palazzo Pretorio in Prato, in the group of Wilderness Adorations. However, other scholars such as Holmes recognise only three paintings in this group. For the purposes of this thesis I agree with the tripartite Wilderness Adorations, as I am discussing specifically the innovations of Filippo in the middle of the Quattrocento, particularly for Medicean patrons. The later Prato Adoration is likely by a different author and features markedly different iconography from the other three.
by the Virgin Mary. This was continued in the Palazzo Medici Adoration, painted in the mid- to late-1450s, and repeated in the Camaldoli Adoration, painted in the mid-1460s.

In each composition, Filippo gradually moved away from previous representations of the Nativity, stripping the narrative and figural elements of the traditional scene down to its core characters, the figure of Mary kneeling before Christ in an attitude of prayer. There has been some suggestion that the combination of this central figural group, combined with the wooded setting for which the Wilderness Adorations are known, shows the influence of St Birgitta’s Revelations in the form of the kneeling figure of the Virgin. More significant than the inclusion of what was to become a relatively standard depiction of the Virgin and Child, was the surrounding iconography and further points of interest and meaning in the wooded setting. As was discussed in both chapters one and two of this thesis, the Baptist’s strong association with the desert, which for a medieval or early-Renaissance audience could be interpreted as a forest wilderness, provides part of the justification for the composition’s setting. The wooded space of the Wilderness Adorations is populated with a cast of additional onlookers which changes with the needs of the patron, the intended setting of the work, and Filippo’s development of his iconographic system. Though other works, notably Donatello’s statue of David, have been analysed as part of the Medici system of patronage and political control, an examination of the boy Baptist and the Wilderness Adorations as specifically connected with these same aims has to date not been undertaken.

As recent research by Dale Kent has confirmed, the Annalena Adoration (fig. 3.1) was an altarpiece for the Benedictine convent of San Vincenzo d’Annalena. The patron is not recorded in any extant documents but, as proposed by Kent, is most likely to be identified as Annalena Malatesta, the founder and abbess of the convent, and god-daughter of Cosimo de Medici. On the basis of style, the painting has been dated to

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6 Kent, 324. For more on Annalena Malatesta, see A.V. Coonin, “New Documents concerning Desiderio da Settignano and Annalena Malatesta”, Burlington Magazine 137 (1995), 792-799, esp. 792-
around 1455. This would make it the first in the series of Wilderness Adorations, earlier than the altarpiece of the Palazzo Medici. As scholars have noted, from the mid-1440s to around 1460, Filippo Lippi was much occupied with a series of Medici commissions, and it is therefore highly likely that this commission was also due to the artist’s connections with the family.\(^7\) Ames-Lewis even goes so far as to concur with an earlier supposition that Cosimo himself commissioned the altarpiece for the convent, although this comes with an attendant earlier dating in the 1430s.\(^8\) I believe the tastes of the Medici, and particularly of Cosimo, are present in the choice of artist, and in the choice of iconography for the work, whose particular characteristics were common to all three Wilderness Adorations that Filippo painted. Annalena Malatesta may have been either assisted or more directly influenced by her godfather in the choices made for the commission.

The composition takes the commonplace elements of the Virgin and Child accompanied by markers of the Nativity (Joseph and the ox and ass) and combines these with penitential saints Magdalene, Jerome and Hilarion (a desert saint whose biography was written by Jerome), angels, and a wilderness setting. The result is an inflection of the Nativity motif with the themes of penitence and incarnation – elements attendant in the broader implications of the Nativity narrative, but not always emphasised in visual representations. The focus of the composition is the figural group of the Virgin and Child, slightly to the right of the centre. Though Joseph sits nearby, visually he is separated from Mary and Jesus by way of a fissure in the lines of rocks that delineate the space of the manger and the space occupied by the animals beyond. The Virgin is flanked by the penitent Mary Magdalene, identifiable by her long hair, her pose neatly echoing the Virgin’s, but her body also separated from the Virgin and Child by the ruins of the stable wall. Filippo effectively isolates the most important aspect of the composition, whilst providing echoes and reinforcements of its main message elsewhere in the panel. The attitude of Joseph is echoed by the appearance of the older, bearded

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penitential Jerome, whose position in the composition balances that of Mary Magdalene. 9

Filippo moves the Holy Family out of the confines of the stable and further into the flowered meadow and woods beyond. The trio in the foreground is set apart from other protagonists in the painting, resting in a grassy clearing, shielded by a short screen of rocks and trees behind them. The scale of the human figures indicates a dialogue between the means of determining size for Trecento artist and an artist of the Quattrocento and beyond. The figures recede in size further back in the composition, but the figures of Mary and Christ remain nevertheless slightly oversize, as an indication of their hierarchical importance in both the composition and in heaven. The only figures that interact with one another within the narrative of the painting are Christ and Mary. The Virgin kneels beside her child, the deep pink cloth of her robe tumbling forward from about her loins to form the bed on which Christ lies, providing a tangible visual link between the two, and also mimicking the colour and substance of the bodily fluids of birth, further reminding the viewer of Christ’s issue from her womb. 10 Mary’s head is inclined toward the child and her hands are clasped before her in an attitude of prayer. Christ in turn, though he looks out toward the viewer, seems to acknowledge the presence of his mother by stretching out his foot toward her, making contact with her bent knees as suggested by her weighty drapery. Christ is the only figure whose pose suggests movement, enlivening him in contrast to the static poses of the others. He is thus the centre of life-force within the composition, with the other figures paused in adoration or contemplation of the miracle of the living Word before them, an interpretation strengthened by Christ’s gesture, pointing to his own mouth, effectively doubling the Word.

The Annalena Adoration gives several cues that suggest a reading of the composition as a Nativity – the remains of the stable, the ox and ass, the host of angels at the top of the panel, and the recumbent infant Christ. However, such a reading is problematised by the inclusion of the additional figures of the onlooking saints Mary Magdalene, Jerome and Hilarion, who are not usually present in depictions of the Nativity, though the inclusion of extra saints in devotional narrative representations was

9 On the melancholy of Joseph, indicated by his head in hand position, see Schiller, vol. 1: 56—58. For this pose as the dreaming Joseph’s, see also C. C. Wilson, St Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art, Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2001, 35-40.

10 The motif of the pinky-red of the Virgin’s robe stretching out to form a couch for Christ has been discussed by Leo Steinberg in his brief discussion of the Palazzo Medici Adoration as an indication of Christ’s “whenceness”. Steinberg (1996), Excursus VII, 121-129.
not necessarily unknown.\textsuperscript{11} The stable does not serve to furnish the narrative so much as give context, both thematically and compositionally, to the figures of the Holy Family. The beasts are absorbed by the landscape and appear less to be stabled, than as features of a natural, pastoral setting. The penitential mode of the image is established by Jerome and the Magdalene, both represented at the moments of their lives most redolent of penance. The Magdalene appears with her long hair, so symbolic of her gesture of humble servitude in the washing of Christ’s feet, her face wracked with sorrow as she gazes heavenward. The figure of Jerome, set against a backdrop of rocks, appears in the guise of an ascetic desert penitent, his shirt open as he prepares to beat his breast with a stone.\textsuperscript{12}

As onlookers privileged enough to witness the Incarnation of Christ – as a symbolic rather than narrative moment – the suggestion is that it is their true penitence that has afforded them such an honour. Only those who truly repent, as did Mary Magdalene, or suffer the privations and redemption of Jerome, will be granted such close proximity to the body of Christ, the manifestation of God’s promise to believers. For the religious female viewers at the Annalena convent, such an emphasis on penance dovetailed with the purposes and practices of the cloistered life, as did the very presence of Jerome and Hilarion. Reminders of the importance of penitence added to an Adoration of the Christ Child was combination that was to be further developed by Filippo over the course of the two following Wilderness Adorations, under the auspices of continuing Medici patronage. Though the young (or indeed, old) Baptist does not appear in the Annalena Adoration, Filippo’s association of penitence and redemption with the Nativity was to continue into the following Wilderness Adoration, into which the young John was inserted. Hilarion, Jerome and the Magdalene were removed from the composition in favour of a representation of the original desert penitent, the Baptist. In the Annalena Adoration, Filippo begins experimenting with the format which he was to refine and repeat in the form of the Palazzo Medici Adoration.

The next of Filippo’s Wilderness Adorations for the Medici family was to have, relative to the Annalena Adoration, a far broader audience, as the altarpiece for the chapel in the family’s new city home. The culmination of the Medici family’s personal branding project, lavishly realised in the form of the new palazzo, was the construction

\textsuperscript{11} Hilarion is identified by inscription. Ruda (1993), 442.
and decoration of the chapel. The frescoes and altarpiece carefully articulated the family’s perception of their role in Florentine civic life, and the commensurate fervour of their faith. Construction of the new Medici family palazzo at via Larga began in 1445, with work on the chapel probably beginning about 1449. Filippo’s altarpiece was most likely in place by about 1459, when the chapel was finished and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Count of Pavia and eldest son of the Duke of Milan, visited the Palazzo and described it in detail in letters. The chapel itself was a masterpiece of tightly controlled self-representation, with the rarefied holiness of Filippo’s altarpiece the perfect counterpoint to the worldly dazzle of Benozzo Gozzoli’s frescoes of the Procession of the Magi that decorated the chapel walls. The altarpiece’s placement within the chapel, in conjunction with its frescoes, gives an indication of the dual religious and civic purposes of the composition’s iconography. In discussing the second of Filippo’s interventions in the representation of the Nativity, I will demonstrate that by adopting the youthful Baptist as a visible symbol of the family, the Medici hoped to claim the favour of Florence for their own family.

The Medici family, like much of Florence, experienced a tumultuous start to the fifteenth century, with the fortunes of the family and the city changing repeatedly in the first half of the century, with a gradual upswing for stability and prosperity. In 1429, Cosimo inherited control of the Medici family and the party of friends and supporters over which they held sway from his father, Giovanni di Bisticci. The 1430s were eventful for Cosimo, with opposition to his growing influence over Florentine politics resulting in his exile from the city in 1433. Though his banishment was supposed to be first a death sentence, then a life-long exile, and was then commuted to ten years,
Cosimo waited out his opposition in Venice, and returned to Florence only a year later. The Medici family, though without doubt wealthy and well connected, struggled for a time to persuade members of the older patrician or ruling families to view the Medici family as part of the same class. That Cosimo was able to return to the city so triumphantly in 1434 was a sign that he had entrenched himself and his family sufficiently in the \textit{reggimento} of Florence that to expel them was seen as risking further political instability, which the general \textit{commune} did not want. Cosimo further withstood a further concerted move against him in 1437 – the so-called “Aretine Conspiracy”, which destroyed the Medici family’s opponents rather than the family itself. By the 1440s, the Medici had managed to wrest much of the control of the city’s democratic system from the incumbent rulers, led first by Niccolò da Uzzano, and then by Rinaldo degli Albizzi, but Cosimo and then Piero both appeared aware of the constant threat of opposition, and did everything they could to ensure the appearance of power and nobility.

Cosimo’s vision for a new family seat in the city would go a long way towards ensuring the family’s status and security as part of the ruling class of Florence. The magnificence of the palace would glorify both the family and the city of Florence, and further intertwine perceptions of the two. As Alberti wrote, “We decorate our property as much to distinguish family and country as for any personal display, and who would

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18 Hale, 22-23.
19 D. V. Kent (1987), 65.
20 For the Aretine Conspiracy, see A. Field, “Leonardo Bruni, Florentine Traitor? Bruni, the Medici, and an Aretine Conspiracy of 1437”, \textit{Renaissance Quarterly} 51 (1998), 1109-1150.
21 The faction opposing the Medici did not have so clear a leader as did the Medici in Cosimo. Dale Kent writes that they were referred to as the Uzzani, “since the patricians had taken as their leader a most eminent citizen named Niccolò di Giovanni da Uzzano” – Kent (1978), 211.
deny this to be the responsibility of a good citizen?” The identity of a good citizen and his city were inextricably linked in Quattrocento writings and consciousness: to build a magnificent palace for oneself and one’s own family was also to build a magnificent edifice to duly adorn the public spaces of one’s city. The design of the Palazzo is usually attributed to Michelozzo. The design echoed both Florentine and classical Roman forms, implying both familiarity with and belonging to Florence, and further echoing the Florentine claim of Roman ancestry for the city. Quotation of “rusticated” Tuscan forms also implied authority, and reminded the viewer of older communal buildings. Cosimo de’ Medici, in the design of his palace and the references to the architectural models of governmental buildings both ancient and contemporary, invited the impression that his palace was “a second seat” of Florentine rule. It appears that this ambition was successful, as the Palazzo Medici was used for government business during the constitutional reform of 1458.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the Palazzo Medici however, was the private chapel – the first to be built in Florence. Cosimo had been granted the privilege of a portable altar by the pope in 1422. Either he then installed this altar in the chapel, or it was consecrated at some point in the 1450s, as the Medici received Pope Pius II in April and May of 1459, and mass was conducted within the Palazzo’s chapel. The chapel was situated in a chain of chambers and anterooms used by Piero. Distinctions between nominally “public” and “private” spaces – with all the connotations of the spectacle of display, performative identity and conversely, the gendered spaces of public and domestic life – have been disputed in the instance of domestic architecture for

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26 D. V. Kent (2000), 228-229. See also C. A. Luchinat (1995), 125-133 for some additional remarks on likely dates and architects for the Palazzo (and the chapel), following the chapel’s restoration.
27 Addressed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
28 F. W. Kent (1987), 54-55.
33 Hatfield briefly discusses the issue of identifying the altar in the Palazzo Medici chapel in Hatfield (1992), 228.
34 Ibid., 221-222.
Renaissance citizens. Studies of contemporary documents and descriptions have shown that many spaces within the Palazzo Medici were used to conduct the business of the family bank, to sign contracts, and to receive visitors who were not always members of the immediate family. The furnishings of such exterior and interior spaces show openness to a fluidity of demarcation between personal and public uses, which would seem to dissolve the boundaries delineating the public exterior spaces of the city and the palace and the private interior spaces of the palace, including the personal chambers of various family members, and the chapel. Some observers wrote of the practice of signing contracts before the chapel’s altar, in order to seal the agreement in both sacred and profane terms. Far from the practice of conducting business in the chapel showing disrespect to its sanctity, rather Cosimo’s affairs were lent authority and gravity by their a capella setting.

The choice of decoration for the chapel, in the form of Benozzo Gozzoli’s detailed frescoes of the Cavalcade of the Magi (figs 3.2 and 3.3), has been viewed as politically-minded by many scholars, although it should be noted that such a reading does not exclude the religious significance of the space.

Richard Trexler argues vigorously that by appropriating the motif of the Procession of the Magi for themselves, the Medici meant to imply that despite their wealth and worldliness, they were nevertheless on a spiritual journey towards true devotion. Certainly, the Medici were devoted and highly visible members of the Compagnia de’ Magi, a company of elite worshippers who staged elaborate parades and devotions in the guise of biblical figures at Epiphany and on the Baptist’s feast day. The pageant of the Three Kings, which accompanied the Feast of Epiphany (6 January), was described by an observer in 1429.
as including members of the *commune* dressed as Herod and the Virgin and Child, and a procession of some “seven hundred costumed men on horseback, among whom were the three Magi and their retinue, honourably dressed.”\(^{43}\) The parade through the streets of Florence, representing the Magi’s journey from “Jerusalem” (staged at the Piazza della Signoria, from 1429) to “Bethlehem” (located at San Marco, just a block away from the Palazzo Medici), took in a number of important city locations and staged scenes of biblical stories, ensuring a spectacle of a scale that impressed numerous visitors to the city.\(^ {44}\) Significantly, the Feast of Epiphany and the lavish celebrations staged by the Compagnia were described as turning Florence into a representation of Jerusalem by one observer writing around 1480-82, prefacing Savonarola’s rhetoric which was to echo the same sentiment at the end of the century.\(^ {45}\) It was clear that partially through enacting such pageantry, Florentines saw themselves and their city as occupants of a simulacrum of paradise, even allowing for Filippo Strozzi’s 1465 caveat that it was “*un paradiso habitato da diavoli*”.\(^ {46}\)

It is not necessary here to cover the dual civic and religious natures of such events as May Day, St John’s feast day (see chapter 2 of this thesis) and Epiphany.\(^ {47}\) However, it is worth noting that participation in such grand public religious celebrations is in accordance with Cosimo’s programme of solidifying his and his family’s influence in Florence. The imagery of the frescoes is designed to meld the ephemeral but real-world experience of the Compagnia’s pageantry with the biblical narrative of the Magi. Thus the choice of Gozzoli’s *Procession of the Magi* frescoes to permanently adorn the walls of the family chapel implied a direct association between the Medici themselves, and the Magi.\(^ {48}\) They transform what would have been an impressive spectacle on the

\(^{43}\) Translated by and cited in Hatfield (1970), 112. Hatfield also provides the original text in an Appendix, Doc. 5b, 146.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^{45}\) From the writing of Fra Giovanni di Carlo, a Dominican historian, as cited in Hatfield (1970), 114-118, original text in Appendix, Doc. 9b, 148-51.


\(^{47}\) This has been covered in great detail by many scholars of Trecento and Quattrocento Florence. See for example Trexler (1980), 216-222 and 247-249, and Webb, 201-216. Trexler states repeatedly that the mix of commerce and religious sentiment was natural and unremarkable during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As noted in my previous chapter, Trexler goes so far as to dub 24 June “The Day of the Merchant” – Trexler (1980), 247.

\(^{48}\) The Medici’s persistent claim for association with the Magi has been examined by Hatfield (1970); Trexler (1980), *op. cit.*, and is also discussed in R. C. Trexler and M. E. Lewis, *Two Captains and*
day but was nevertheless ephemeral in nature, and only occurred annually (as noted, the Compagnia participated in the celebration of other feast days, but only on Epiphany could they legitimately claim ownership of the entire event), into a lasting visual testament to the piety, grandeur and authority of the family. Cosimo, Piero, Giovanni and other Medici family members are depicted in the retinue of the young Magus Caspar on the east wall of the chapel, to the viewer’s right as they enter (Fig. 3.4). Gozzioli, in depicting the Medici in their guise as members of the Compagnia, situates the frescoes themselves in a firmly contemporary setting, but more importantly, enshrines the family member he depicts in their role as Christ’s loyal followers. As Dale Kent notes, the Medici family’s appropriation of the Magi imagery has often been understood as part of Cosimo’s efforts to assert control – or at least the illusion thereof – over Florentine society.

The procession is executed in minute detail, which lends itself to close examination in the relatively small interior space of the chapel, with the faces of the participants exhibiting clear evidence of character studies from life, and aspects of the figures’ clothing, riding tack and heraldry identifying them as Medici family members. The identities of the Magi follow a traditional program with the figures being portraits of important clerics representing the three ages of Man, with the Medici family depicted in the train of the youngest Magus. Melchior, the aged Magus, is likely represented as Joseph, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Balthasar, the middle-aged Magus, is represented as the Eastern emperor John VIII Palaeologus. Caspar, the third Magus, is depicted as the very vision of youthful promise, reflecting contemporary ideas of the

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For a discussion of portraiture in the frescoes, see Cardini (2001), especially the sections “From Celebration to Fresco”, 27-36, and “Portraits, Devices, Allusions”, 37-51. See also D. V. Kent (2000), 315-318 and Luchinat (1993), 363-370. All include diagrams of the portraits that have been identified thus far.

D. V. Kent (2000), 305.

Cardini (2001), 36.

Ibid., 28-33, Luchinat (1993), 39-44.

Cardini (2001), 30. Crum also discusses the validity of this interpretation, examining the identification of the Magi as portraits of the Eastern Church’s delegates to the 1439 Council of Florence between the Latin and Greek Christian churches. He states that this interpretation has fallen out of favour slightly since E. Gombrich’s 1960 reappraisal of the frescoes, but makes a strong argument in order to return that interpretation to favour. Crum, 403-404. Hatfield (1992) also reaffirms this identification of the portraits.

Ibid., 31.
beauty, grace and potential of young men. A link can be drawn between the three generations of the Magi depicted, and the three generations of the Medici dynasty – Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo.

An argument has been advanced for the identification of Caspar as Lorenzo de’ Medici himself (Lorenzo the Magnificent – see fig. 3.5). The blond, straight-backed youth who rides at the head of the Medici faction of the cavalcade is younger than his counterparts Melchior and Balthasar, but nevertheless too old to have been a representation of Lorenzo, who would have been no older than ten years of age when the frescoes were painted, not fully-grown like Gozzoli’s Caspar. Hatfield has advanced the view that this young man should be identified as one of the Palazzo Medici’s most powerful visitors, the young Galeazzo Maria Sforza himself, son of the Duke of Milan. Hatfield also points out that a portrait of the young Lorenzo might be found further back in the Medici retinue, pictured as his true age of ten or eleven. However, due to Caspar’s proximity to the Medicean device of the laurel-bush, and the portraits of Medici family members in his train, it is likely that the intention was for the viewer to associate the youthful Magus with the Medici family. The connection Cosimo wished to forge between the Medici family and the future of Florence – not just the establishment – is evident. Furthermore, as I will argue, his self-identification of the family as closely tied with the future of Florence also motivated the depiction of the Baptist as a youth, of an age with the real young Lorenzo, rather than a bearded ascetic prophet. Though the unusual inclusion of the young John the Baptist in the Palazzo Medici Adoration has sometimes been noted (for example, by Ames-Lewis and Hatfield), detailed exploration of the significance of both the saint’s presence and his juvenescence within the composition and the overall chapel scheme has not been attempted.

Gozzoli’s elaborate cavalcade, with its strong sense of linear progression, lead the viewer inexorably to the endpoint of Filippo Lippi’s Wilderness Adoration (fig.

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55 On the grace and beauty of young men in Renaissance art, see sources noted in the introduction to this thesis, and a further discussion in Chapter 4.
57 Lorenzo was born in 1449, and the frescoes were completed by about 1459.
58 Hatfield (1992), 234.
59 Ibid.
60 Ames-Lewis (1995), 119; Hatfield (1992), 139-140. Both note the Medici family appropriation of the civic saints of Florence, such as Bernard. For Bernard as a Florentine saint, see M. K. Lesher “The Vision of Saint Bernard and the Chapel of the Priors: Private and Public Images of Bernard of Clairvaux in Renaissance Florence”, Ph.D diss., Colombia University, 1979.
The dark, magnetic space of the altarpiece draws the viewer’s gaze immediately in contrast to the light, pattern-filled surfaces of the frescoes. The Palazzo Medici Adoration continued the break from traditional representations of the Nativity begun by Filippo in the Annalena Adoration. Actual commission details of the altarpiece are scant; most of the details have been reconstructed from more secure dates relating to the frescoes, the completion of the chapel itself, and the 1459 visit of the Pope and young Sforza. The visit generated a great deal of contemporary correspondence, from which we can deduce that the frescoes and altarpiece were in place by the time the group arrived.

Various attempts have been made to unravel the iconography of the altarpiece, however these are often conducted from within the framework of determining the level of control over the commission by Cosimo or his son Piero, or Piero’s wife Lucrezia Tornabuoni, who will be discussed in further detail below. Steinberg offers a short but thought-provoking analysis of the painting where he characterises it as new type of Nativity/Adoration, which he has dubbed an “Incarnation”. He draws a distinction between an Adoration, as a direct descendant of the Nativity narrative (and so encompassing Adorations by the Magi or by the shepherds), and an Adoration of the Christ Child’s physical presence on earth, as a manifestation of God’s Word. It is to this distinction that I will turn in my analysis of the Palazzo Medici Adoration, for as will become clear, the youthful Baptist’s ability to bear witness, as a significant component of his biblical role, is an essential element of incarnational iconography.

The setting of the Palazzo Medici Adoration is a rocky wood, with a patch of delicate and detailed flowers in the foreground. The trunks of the trees in this forest have assumed part of the role of the stable in the Annalena Adoration – that is, of providing the indications of linear perspective for the composition, with the neat bare trunks marching in an orderly fashion across the panel and receding obediently into the background. The effect of the columnal trees provides a deep, dramatically receding

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62 Hatfield (1992) includes a good examination of this correspondence, esp. 221-228.
63 See for example Ames-Lewis (1995), 116-120; Hatfield (1992), 229-231 – for Hatfield’s part, he believes that “there is no real reason to suppose that Piero de’ Medici ordered the picture” (241); Holmes (1999), 174-182; Ruda (1993), 224-230, cat. 51, 447-448; S. Solum, “Attributing Influence: The Problem of Female Patronage in Fifteenth-century Florence”, Art Bulletin 90 (2008), 76-100; Tomas, 84-85 (both Solum and Tomas are proponents of the theory that Lucrezia is responsible for the subject matter if not the commission of both the Palazzo Medici and Camaldoli Adorations). Solum and Tomas’ views in particular will be discussed in further detail below.
64 Steinberg (1996). 122.
space in which the figures are placed, although much of the forest is empty, and the figures are concentrated largely in the foreground. From the Annalena’s starting point as a transformed Nativity, in the Palazzo Medici Adoration supporting elements of the composition have been pared down severely: there is no stable, there are no animals or angels, and even Joseph is gone. The absence of Joseph is perhaps the clearest change which informs the viewer that the scene is no longer to be understood purely as an illustrative representation of the Nativity, as the Holy Family is not present as a distinct unit. The Virgin and Child form a distinct, self-contained figural group at the centre foreground of the composition. They are flanked at some distance by first the figure of the boy Baptist, and then the older, bearded St Bernard of Clairvaux, emblem of cloistered life. At the top of the picture plane, a waist-length figure of God the Father appears, hands outstretched, above a dove in full flight. Thus, instead of the Holy Family, the second Wilderness Adoration features the Trinity. In contrast to the relatively crowded composition of the Annalena Adoration, with saints, animals and angels occupying a naturalistic landscape filled with rocks, trees and shrubbery, the space of this second Wilderness painting is dark, empty and mysterious.

The centre of this empty but charged space is pierced by rays of light radiating from the dove of the Holy Spirit and God the Father. The deep void at the centre of the composition constitutes the symbolic vanishing point of not just the altarpiece itself, but of the chapel itself, as the most important pictorial action dances across its surface, the contrast between dark background and gilt rays often inadequately captured in reproductions of the work. The apparition of God the Father serves to confirm the infant Christ’s divine identity, as the red cloth of the Virgin’s robe which Christ so deliberately reaches out to touch with his foot, a visual quotation of the device used in the earlier Annalena Adoration, confirms his physical “whenceness”. Heightened with gilt, the rays that surround the Father and issue from his outstretched hands establish a link that indicates the holiest points of the composition, and envelop all three hypostases of the Trinity. God is surrounded by chains of gilt stars arranged in concentric circles, alluding to his heavenly position. Golden rays radiate from the wings of the dove, which appears

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65 Crum discusses the significance of this representation of the Holy Trinity, in conjunction with an examination of the frescoes and altarpiece being a celebration of the Council of Florence. The Council of Florence interpretation is contingent on the identification of the Magi portraits in Gozzoli’s frescoes. It seems more possible that the portraits make reference to the Council than Filippo’s Adoration. Crum’s argument is in this respect not entirely convincing. Various interpretations of the altarpiece and its source material will be considered below.
to take flight toward the viewer. These rays traverse the implied physical and spiritual distance between the heavenly body and the physical present.\textsuperscript{66}

On their journey, they begin to emit tendrils of golden smoke, which in turn surround the infant Christ, lying on the meadow. The golden rays are almost diagrammatic in nature, assisting the viewer in understanding the unified nature of the Holy Trinity.\textsuperscript{67} Visually, the motif of gilt or gold powder decoration links God in heaven directly with Christ on earth, who wears the same flat disc for a halo.\textsuperscript{68} Gilt is also used on the halos of the other figures, with their decreasing opacity from Mary, to John, to Bernard, perhaps indicating their relative importance.\textsuperscript{69} It also serves to highlight other important points within the composition, drawing the viewer’s eye around the figure of Mary via the pattern on the edge of her robe, to the top of the martyr’s cross held by John, and to the artist’s signature on the helve of the axe in the foreground. The figures of the composition, ranged around this central, hollow space, describe the form of a circle which, pierced with gilt rays, suggests the space of the Virgin’s womb, penetrated by the Holy Spirit.

From the figure of God placed at the head of the image, the viewer progresses via the Holy Spirit to Christ and the Virgin. Mary is the largest of the figures represented, and dominates the composition through her relative size, the bright blue of her cloak, the light that illuminates her face, and her implied volume, conveyed by the almost architectural rendering of the fold of her cloak. Her hands, clasped together in prayer, emerge delicately from the weight of this drapery. Her face is youthful, though serious, its girlishness scarcely matching the gravity of her presence within the composition. Christ is represented as a very young baby, which would seem to accord with the origins of the Wilderness Adorations in the Nativity. His limbs are plump and dimpled, with a hint of the Herculean strength which, amongst other things, sets him apart from other mortal infants.\textsuperscript{70} The gaze he fixes on the viewer is solemn and

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\item Steinberg’s remarks on the subject of the rays and their various visual manifestations are most illuminating. Steinberg (1987), 25-26.
\item Francis Ames-Lewis discusses the currency of the Venetian technique of using powdered gold pigment, rather than gold leaf, in Medicean Florence. Such technical differences are worth being aware of, but do not enter into the discussion of this thesis. See Ames-Lewis, F., “Matteo de’ Pasti and the Use of Powdered Gold”, in Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 3 (1984), 351-362.
\item Ruda (1993), 227.
\item On the “Herculean” infant Christ, see Steinberg (1996), 123-125.
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deliberate. With his right hand he supports his left elbow, his left hand gesturing to his mouth. This gesture could allude to Christ as the Word of God made flesh, or to the wisdom of his later teachings. In either case, there is a clear emphasis on the importance of the Word, to which we will return. Christ does not look towards his mother here, his attention rather on the audience, though he still seems to deliberately stretch out a foot to maintain contact with her. Here a visual link between the two is achieved by a layer of transparent cloth, which issues from Mary’s robe, and deftly softens the view of Christ’s genitals, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to what has been concealed.\footnote{For a discussion of the role of the transparent veil of Christ’s genitals, see Steinberg (1996) esp. 33-45, 133-135, 147-149, 157-163. The nudity (or not) of Christ will be discussed further in ch. 6 of this thesis.} This cloth also echoes the connection between the two already established by the Virgin’s robe, which Christ’s foot reaches out to touch.

The figure of the youthful St John the Baptist is the next closest figure to the viewer after the Virgin and Child. The resemblance between John and Christ is striking. Whether it is the result of Filippo using the same model for the two figures, or a deliberate choice on the part of the artist, cannot be known; however the effect is an undeniable visual link between the two, alluding to their familial relationship. Here John is an older version of Christ, perhaps a boy of ten (incidentally the same age as Lorenzo de’ Medici at the time of painting). The two share the same nose and mouth, and the same crop of curling hair – though John’s is slightly darker – and the same serious gaze, full of awareness. John is identified by his martyr’s cross, his animal-skin tunic, and a banderole that floats away from his figure to display the words “ECCE·ANGNUS·DEI” [sic]. He makes a self-referential gesture that is reminiscent of that of Christ: in addition to pointing to Christ, as is usual for the Baptist, he points to himself, with the latter gesture being the more noticeable. John’s pose suggests that he has paused briefly, rather than that he is deliberately standing still. The Baptist is the most active figure in the composition, his bent left leg foreshortened with shadow suggesting that he is about to take a step toward Christ, and the direction of his fluttering banderole confirming this forward movement. He gazes out of the frame of the painting, not directly at the viewer, but rather at the Procession of the Magi on the chapel walls.

The axe in the immediate left foreground is positioned directly beneath the Baptist, establishing a strong link even before the viewer has understood the axe’s
theological significance. The axe combined with the tree stump it cleaves, clearly references the Baptist’ sermon at Lk 3:7-9:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down, and thrown into the fire.”

This sermon, occurring in the Gospel of Luke immediately before the Baptism of Christ, features the customary furious adult John calling uncompromisingly for repentance from those who have sought him out for baptism. He seems to suggest that whatever acts they have previously performed and thought of as repentance do not count as true penance, and he warns too against ancestral pride. The John of Luke, at this point, promotes humility and true repentance. Pairing the reminder of such an unrelentingly stern sermon next to the boyish, soft face of the young Baptist creates a contrast that invites the viewer to reflect on the future of the golden-haired young John before them, and thus inevitably, on the future of the infant Christ on the forest floor. The Baptist here also lends legitimacy to the physical setting of the composition. In my first chapter, I discussed the possibility of understanding the “desert” with which John is associated as a spiritual or at least not literal desert. Here it seems that Filippo has transported the viewer to a “desert” of an Italian nature – that is, an empty and unpopulated forest, the bosco rather than diserto discussed in my previous chapter. The hewn-down trees and rocks that turn the wilderness into a forbidding landscape analogous to a desert have come directly from the Baptist’s sermon on the necessity of repentance.

St Bernard appears immediately behind John. The saint is presumably kneeling, with only the upper part of his body visible to the viewer, leaning on a rocky ledge with his hands clasped in prayer. Bernard is depicted in a humble attitude, with eyes downcast, and appears to be deep in meditation. He is removed from all the other figures, separated by an expanse of rocks and trees. Bernard represents a further link to humility, as suggested by the kneeling Virgin and by the inclusion of John.\(^7\) Again, there is the suggestion of a simple hierarchy of holiness, according to which the more earthly figures in Filippo’s composition are be placed further back from Christ.

\(^7\) Crum, 406-407; Ruda (1993), 219-221.
Bernard’s figure is unobtrusive in posture and colour, almost blending in with the surrounding forest. He also does not fall within the rough cross shape formed by the other figures, with God and Christ forming the vertical axis and John and Mary the horizontal. There has been some suggestion that the composition may be broadly illustrative of Bernard’s vision of the Incarnation. Like Birgitta, he too saw the Virgin and Child appear within a forest setting. This would also lead to the possibility that the size, relative position and behaviour of the figures represent different levels of reality, with Bernard effectively experiencing a vision of the Virgin and Child with the young St John. Furthermore, the viewer could then mirror Bernard in his attitude to the apparition of the Incarnation which appears before them both. However, Filippo has not included any other visual cues, besides the grouping together of characters which do not appear simultaneously in any one narrative, from any source, to suggest that the composition must be read this way. Rather, it is safest to conclude that St Bernard is an onlooker to the scene, rather than a participant. He provides an example of devotion to the viewer and shows an appropriate reaction to the apparition of the Incarnation before him, in the form of meditative prayer.

Neatly, via the sylvan setting of this Adoration, Filippo establishes a mood of hermetic isolation, in stark contrast to the throngs of people in Gozzoli’s frescoes (fig. 3.7). The choice of figures and the particular emphasis laid on penance and redemption add further to the sense that at the end of the Magi’s procession is in a wilderness retreat, experienced via a representation contained within the bounds of its diametrically opposite number, a city mansion. Both Holmes and Ruda have noted that the sparse, ascetic setting of the Palazzo Medici Adoration, particularly posed in contrast to the Cavalcade, evokes a mountainous, eremitical setting, like those occupied by penitent saints, ancient or monastic. Ruda observes that the austerity of the setting matches the emphasis on penitence implied by the painting’s iconography, citing several references within the work to sources dealing with redemption through penance, including the life of the Cistercian monk St Bernard, St John’s sermon on repentance (Luke 3:7-9), and Isaiah 55:1-13, a passage describing repentance in a wooded setting. Holmes raises the possibility that the altarpiece could have functioned as a sort of surrogate pilgrimage to

73 Ruda (1993), 447. See also details relating to Filippo’s earlier painting of St Bernard’s Vision of the Virgin, Ruda (1993), 169-173.
74 On Bernard’s vision, see Lesher, 11-14.
75 Ruda (1993), 224-229, and Holmes (1999), 176-182.
76 Ruda (1993), 227-228.
an isolated hermitage, allowing the wealthy patrons and their visitors a simulacrum of the experience of penitent eremitic monasticism.\textsuperscript{77} The immediate effect of this marked change in population and space from Gozzoli’s frescoes to Filippo’s altarpiece is to ensure that the viewer leaves the riches and spectacle of the streets of Florence and the Palazzo Medici outside the boundaries of the altarpiece.

A number of different texts have been suggested to make sense of the Palazzo Medici \textit{Adoration}, a composition which contains layered messages, but suggests no single clear key for interpretation. The composition stubbornly defies categorisation as a Nativity, as an illustration of the \textit{Meditations of the Life of Christ}, Birgitta’s \textit{Revelations},\textsuperscript{78} the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux,\textsuperscript{79} or Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s \textit{Volgarizzamente vite} of the Baptist (which will be examined in further detail below),\textsuperscript{80} all of which have been proposed as being the basis of the altarpiece’s imagery. The problems with the proposition of these sources as inspiration for the composition are that in no instance do the text and the image exactly fit. In each instance, the authors proposing them always need to make allowances and attempt to explain why an element of the composition does not appear to have come from their text, or why Filippo has chosen to leave out an important element of the supposed source. This will be shown in detail in the case of Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s proposed patronage of the altarpiece. A recurring theme in this thesis is my insistence that such complex and multi-layered works (or indeed, any devotional works) need not necessarily be based on one source alone. As I have shown already, and will continue to demonstrate below, the key to interpreting such works lies not in looking for one all-encompassing text which seems to account for every detail, but rather in understanding the significance and intentions behind a work’s themes, and how these work together to generate meaning.

Whilst it can be safe to assume that if Piero was in charge of the commission for the chapel’s altarpiece, as it seems he was for the frescoes, he was acting with either direct knowledge of his father’s wishes, or with the intention to dovetail the work with the larger program of Medicean patronage, the often-repeated suggestion that it was Piero’s wife Lucrezia Tornabuoni who was responsible for the iconography of the painting, if not the commission itself, is more problematic.\textsuperscript{81} Despite a number of efforts

\textsuperscript{77} Holmes (1999), 180-182.
\textsuperscript{78} Cardini with Bussagli, 28; Kent (2000), 324.
\textsuperscript{79} Hatfield (1992), 229-230; Kent (2000), 325.
\textsuperscript{80} MAL 1955, 92-95; Solum, \textit{op. cit}; Tomas, \textit{op. cit}.
\textsuperscript{81} A good summary of who attributes the work to Lucrezia can be found in Solum, 79-80 and 94.
to prove that the painting was Lucrezia’s project, evidence of her involvement remains insufficient. Proponents of the theory that Lucrezia commissioned the Palazzo Medici Adoration from Filippo include Natalie Tomas and Stefanie Solum, both of whom place the work within the larger context of Lucrezia’s other artistic patronage (some of it more easily proven), her well-recognised influence in Quattrocento Florence, and the issue of women in artistic patronage in general. Solum is more circumspect than Tomas, in noting that women could patronise art in all but an official sense, providing the ideas, money and motivation for a work, even if societal conventions of the time did not always allow them to be recognised in documents as the official patrons a work. This would seem to allow room for the idea that Lucrezia was responsible for the substance of the Palazzo Medici altarpiece, while Piero was responsible for more practical considerations. Solum recognises a lack in our current terminology that would allow description of such a relationship between male and female patrons and their artists, which could prove fruitful for further research. Tomas however is firm on attributing the work to Lucrezia under her own auspices, despite what she concedes is a lack of concrete evidence.

The chief evidence cited by scholars who support the theory that Lucrezia Tornabuoni either commissioned the Palazzo Medici Adoration, or suggested its iconography, is Lucrezia’s famous devotion to John the Baptist. This was manifest in several forms both during her lifetime and as recognised subsequent to her death in 1482. These included her production of a storie sacre of the saint, her commemoration by her brother in the form of a lifecycle of the Baptist in the Tornabuoni chapel at Santa Maria Novella following her death, and the donation by her and her husband c. 1463 of a cell dedicated to the saint at the Camadoli hermitage near Arezzo, which was to contain the third Wilderness Adoration. For several writers, Lucrezia’s retelling of the Baptist’s life, which may have circulated in manuscript form in Florence, is inextricably linked to the Adoration. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has proposed a chain of influence, from the pseudo-Cavalcan vita (discussed in my previous chapter), to Lucrezia’s retelling, to Filippo’s painting. However, careful examination of Lucrezia’s text by translator Jane

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82 Solum, op. cit.; Tomas, op. cit.
83 Solum, 76-77.
84 Tomas, 84.
85 See for example MAL 1955, 92-95; Solum, 94-95; and Tomas, 28-29, 84-85.
86 Tomas, 39-40.
87 MAL 1955, 92-95.
Tylus has, I contend, ruled out the possibility that Lucrezia’s *storie* was the inspiration for the altarpiece, as I will explain.

Tylus approaches Lucrezia’s text as a translator and literary historian. In her introduction to Lucrezia’s collected writings in general, and in the introduction to the Baptist *storie*, she identifies Lucrezia’s major sources and influences. Though in the case of the Baptist she characterises these as too numerous to delineate, given his status as patron saint of Florence, she notes that Lucrezia’s major influences were probably the *sacre rappresentazioni* featuring the Baptist and often Christ, many penned by Feo Belcari in the 1460 and 70s, and associated with the Medici family. The fourteenth-century pseudo-Cavalcan text, which Aronberg Lavin describes as Lucrezia’s main source, is mentioned only by Tylus in a footnote, as a relatively unimportant source. I would suggest that, in addition to the sources Tylus has identified, Lucrezia’s *storie* might have been inspired by the fifteenth-century manuscript *vita* of the Baptist that Solum discusses in her article. Solum makes a strong argument for the manuscript having been the sole commission of Lucrezia, and for it being part of her personal library (and not of Piero’s famed collection). Aronberg Lavin’s thesis that Lucrezia’s text directly inspired Filippo’s painting however relies on a vague dating of both the text and the painting, the former of which Aronberg Lavin dates only to the second half of the fifteenth century. Tylus’ examination of the corpus of Lucrezia’s religious writings has demonstrated that the majority of these were written from about 1469-1478. From surviving letters it appears that Lucrezia sent the manuscript of the entire corpus to Poliziano in the late 1470s, which would suggest that she had only recently completed them before sending them for review. Furthermore, due to the sophistication of Lucrezia’s Baptist text relative to her other *storie sacre*, Tylus believes it to have been written towards the end of this period, perhaps even after she had finished all of her other poems.

Whilst the present thesis is not the place to undertake a similar study of Lucrezia’s collected writings, what can be noted here is that it seems highly likely that

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89 Tylus, 40-43 and 217-218.
90 MAL 1955, 95; Tylus, 217, n. 3.
91 MAL 1955, 95.
92 Tylus, 23.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 222-223.
Lucrezia’s *vita* of the Baptist was written after Filippo’s altarpiece for the Palazzo Medici was painted, perhaps as long as fully twenty years later. As the existence of Lucrezia’s text appears to constitute for many the chief evidence for the claim that she was responsible for the *Adoration*’s commission, I suggest that this argument must be set aside, at least until solid documentary proof of Lucrezia’s involvement can be found. Solum has built upon Tomas, and Tomas has built upon Aronberg Lavin, citing the hypothesis that Lucrezia’s text predated the painting as proof that the commission must have been hers. However, with clearer knowledge of the text’s likely date, the position becomes untenable. Scholars including Aronberg Lavin, Ruda (following Aronberg Lavin), Solum, and Tomas have been unwilling or unable to recognise what Tylus has discovered through examination of the documentary sources, which is that rather than Lucrezia’s text influencing representation of the Baptist, it demonstrates the subsequent currency of the youthful Baptist’s cult in Florence in the years after the completion of the altarpiece.\(^{95}\)

Instead of the hypothesis that Lucrezia’s devotion to the young Baptist led her to have him included in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration*, I suggest that Lucrezia responded to this religious and cultural milieu, and was moved to write her text as a later expression of her devotion to the patron saint of her city and the family into which she had married. As I discussed in my previous chapter, from the late-medieval period onwards, Florentines demonstrated a rapid increase in devotion to the Baptist, and concurrently with this trend, increased attention was paid to his youth. In the first half of the fifteenth century, increased interest in the youth of the Baptist was demonstrated by the inclusion in fresco cycles of the saint of more scenes pertaining to the Baptist’s birth, infancy and childhood, or by extending the Baptist’s youth through to his early ministry in the desert. In the second half of the fifteenth century, as can be seen in this chapter and will be explored in greater detail in my next chapter, this was manifest in the isolation of the youthful Baptist figure from these fresco cycles, and inclusion of the boy Baptist in other media such as personal devotional paintings.

It appears that the figure of the youthful Baptist, circulating in fresco cycle and devotional text form, inspired Lucrezia to write her own retelling of the saint’s life, as it inspired Cosimo to have Filippo include the figure in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration*. As much of a boon as it would be for feminist studies of the Renaissance to be able to

\(^{95}\) Ruda (1993), 227 and 357, n. 14.
attribute such a prestigious commission – the centrepiece of Cosimo’s entire self-representation strategy – to Lucrezia Tornauoi and her *storie sacre*, it seems more likely that the image of the infant Baptist did not emerge, fully-formed, from any one textual source, biblical or otherwise. Rather, in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration*, the figure of the young Baptist draws on a number of different written sources and a confluence of cultural, political and religious influences. Furthermore, with no solid evidence to suggest otherwise, it seems highly unlikely that Cosimo would relinquish control of the Palazzo Medici’s central image to Lucrezia’s personal interests, considering the significance of the altarpiece, chapel and new palace to the entire family.

In the Palazzo Medici altarpiece, Filippo demonstrates an extraordinary economy of iconography, relying on the various layers of meaning that can be read for each figure, so that his composition weaves together multiple themes while remaining deceptively simple in its construction. St Bernard for example appears as a representative of reformed eremitic Cistercian life, and as a representative of penitence. Additionally, he also appears as a representative of the Florentine government. As patron of the chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, he was one of the civic patrons of Florence, and as such, especially associated with the priors and ruling elite of the city.96 Both Bernard and the young Baptist here are included in the composition not only for religious reasons, but also for political reasons. The Medici explicitly link themselves with the authority of the patron saints of Florence, and in so doing, make a claim for that authority themselves. This is the same strategy employed by the Medici in their adoption of another Biblical figure with civic resonance in Florence, that of David. A bronze statue of a youthful, graceful and triumphant David, commissioned by Cosimo or Piero around the 1450s or 60s, stood in the Palazzo Medici courtyard from around the late 1460s, and may have been intended to suggest the Medici were akin to Old Testament champions of the people.97 The iconographic program for the altarpiece, the chapel and other Medicean commission relies on the overlapping religious and political significance of certain figures such as Bernard, David and the Baptist. The innovation that occurred

96 Hatfield (1992), 229 and n. 46. See also Lesher, *op. cit.*
in the design and production of the Palazzo Medici *Adoration* was to depict the Baptist as a boy, full of youthful promise, and so to associate the Medici with the future of Florence, as in Gozzoli’s frescoes where the Medici appeared in the train of the youngest Magus.

The youthful Baptist was the perfect symbol for the Medici to adopt. While they played the Compagnia of the Magi during festivals, their home and public art commissions prominently displayed the youthful Baptist. In order to align themselves with the new *commune* of Florence, rather than choosing Reparata, Zenobius or even the older, bearded John, the Medici chose the young Baptist, who was theologically and socially potent, but whose identity in the city had, much like their own, not yet been quite fixed. The figure of John in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration* is familiar, yet revitalised, allowing for both the recognition of the established patron saint, and for the addition of Medicean ownership of the figure. The civic resonance of the Baptist figure is expanded upon and echoed in pendant form by Bernard. At the same time, John retains his biblical role of leading to Christ, via his position in the composition, and his posture, which suggests that he moves towards the Child.

The Baptist is the only biblical figure that could occupy this role. As we have seen, John represents the link between an old covenant of the Israelites and the present and future fulfilment of that promise in the coming of Christ. He performs the rite of baptism and represents the point of entry into the church. In Filippo’s altarpiece, baptism is alluded to via the narrow channel of water that runs between John and the Virgin and Child. The saint’s pose, poised to step forward, at the side of the composition, at the boundary between the contemporary world of Gozzoli’s frescoes and the visionary world of the Trinity and the prayerful Virgin. This strongly recalls his customary stance in Renaissance representation of the Baptist. Crucially, John is also a markedly modest figure – due most of all to his emphatic self-denials in the fourth Gospel. Despite his exalted position, John does not claim greatness for himself, but rather serves a greater good. The appeal for the Medici, wealthy but subject to sumptuary laws and contemporary ideas of modesty and piety, and powerful but needing to carefully modulate the threat they represented to other power brokers in Florence, is clear. The youthful John represented the youthful potential of Lorenzo de’ Medici and Cosimo’s dynastic hopes for the family, their piety and their aim to identify themselves with the Florentine republic. Furthermore, adoption of the youthful Baptist as their symbol helped the Medici to claim membership in the communal identity of Florence. Powerful
in their own right, the family chose to align themselves not with Zenobius and the clergy, but rather with the Baptist and the commune.

By 1459, when Niccolo de’ Carissimi da Parma, a member of Galeazzo’s retinue, wrote to Francesco Sforza to report on his stay at the Palazzo Medici, the chapel had apparently already gained sufficient repute that it was described as a highlight of the visit.\(^{98}\) By 1 August 1464, when Cosimo died, he had earned the title of “Pater Patriae” from the people of Florence, who voted to place the inscription on his tomb.\(^{99}\) It seems that Cosimo’s determined programme of judicious image control and self-representation in the city had succeeded: he died probably the most powerful man in Florence, and under his successor Piero, the family continued to flourish, successfully staving off attempts at their position and occasionally on their lives.\(^{100}\) While Piero himself survived his father by only five years, he continued the program of art patronage that helped to cement the family image in the city.

Piero and his wife Lucrezia were almost certainly responsible for commissioning the third of Filippo’s Wilderness Adorations, for a cell at the hermitage at Camaldoli which was dedicated to John the Baptist.\(^{101}\) From Vasari, we have a report that the artist made a replica of the Palazzo Medici chapel altarpiece for a cell dedicated to the Baptist in the Camaldolese hermitage, endowed by the Medici in the early 1460s.\(^{102}\) Vasari attributed the commission to Cosimo’s wife, Contessina de’ Bardi, however no contemporary documents still exist to confirm this transaction.\(^{103}\) It is more likely that Vasari conflated the two Medici women, as Solum has noted, confusing Contessina and Lucrezia.\(^{104}\) Though imprecise in his description of the panel (and its patron), it seems likely enough that Vasari describes the painting that hung in the cell at Camaldoli until at least 1712, which is now in the Galleria degli’Uffizi, Florence (fig. 3.8).\(^{105}\) It is of the commission of this painting that it is appropriate to make observations regarding

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\(^{98}\) Hatfield (1992), 227.

\(^{99}\) Hale, 42.

\(^{100}\) See for example attempted coups against the Medici in 1466 and 1478.

\(^{101}\) Holmes (1999), 174–176; Ruda (1993), cat. 58, 465–466.


\(^{103}\) Ibid., 465.

\(^{104}\) Solum, 94.

\(^{105}\) Ruda (1993), cat. no 58, 465–466.
Lucrezia’s devotion to the Baptist, as the Camaldoli Adoration was of a similar scale and type as other commissions by her.\(^{106}\)

The composition of the Camaldoli Adoration is similar to that of the Palazzo Medici Adoration, with the principal actors of the Virgin, Child and young St John remaining. The same sylvan setting reappears, with the landscape that forms the backdrop for the Virgin and Child streamlined further into slim, columnal bare tree trunks and rocky outcrops and fissures. However, the work is not merely a replica. Rather, several small but significant changes make it different enough iconographically to warrant individual examination. The particular question to be examined here is how an image so emminently suitable to form the crux of worship in the Medici’s lavish urban chapel could also be deemed appropriate for a very different audience – a cloistered religious viewer at Camaldoli. Are the changes to the composition made according to their different intended audiences? Bernard of Clairvaux has been replaced here with St Romuald, founder of the Camaldolese order.\(^{107}\) This suggests that the resonance of Bernard as a link to Florentine hierarchy has been removed, in favour of a reference to the setting and intended audience, members of an order that was monastic rather than mendicant.\(^{108}\) This conclusion is further strengthened by the placement of Romuald within the composition, compared with that of Bernard in the Palazzo Medici Adoration. In the second version, Romuald appears in the foreground, cut off by the frame of the painting so that he appears to occupy the viewer’s space, deliberately creating a closer link between monastic patron and monastic viewers.

The most immediate difference is that the composition of the Camaldoli Adoration is a mirror image of the Palazzo Medici panel, so that Mary and Christ are at the left of the painting and John is on the right. This may assist in facilitating a faster reading of the painting for the viewer, with the most important figures – Mary and Christ – placed at the eye’s entry point to the painting. This slight change in composition also means that the viewer moves from contemplation of the Virgin, to the Trinity, to the


\(^{107}\) Ruda (1993), 466.

ascetic saints John and Romuald, representative of the monastic audience. Again, gilt is used as a leitmotif to lead the viewer through the composition and highlight the apparition of the Trinity. The haloes of both Christ and the Virgin have become opaque gold discs – flat areas of gilt reminiscent of the Gothic works of Filippo’s earlier career. God the Father has been reduced to the apparition of two outstretched hands at the very top of the panel, flanked by miniature kneeling angels. Golden rays flow from these hands, encompassing the dove of the Holy Spirit. The change in the representation of God the Father might reflect the eremitical viewer who would not need the tripartite nature of the Trinity delineated so clearly, or it might be due to a reluctance to depict the Father bodily. The dove emits further rays of light, which fall in the geometric centre of the panel, though not the composition. These rays do not traverse an unfathomable darkness as in the Palazzo Medici Adoration, crossing rather the unremarkable geographic features of the landscape likely to be located not only in the background of this image, but outside the monastery’s walls. The infant Christ here is younger than in the Palazzo Medici painting, and again gestures deliberately to himself, though not to his mouth. Christ again fixes the viewer with a knowing, steady gaze. The infant Christ’s body is more clothed in the Camaldoli Adoration than in the Palazzo Medici panel, exhibiting more decorum in keeping with the audience at the hermitage. Overall, many of the changes to the composition from the execution of the Palazzo Medici altarpiece to the Camaldoli panel seem to be related to austerity of the latter’s setting and the circumspection and devotion of its audience.

The figure of Mary is more youthful, and more solid. Her cloak falls further from her shoulders, in the same richly architectural folds as before, but now occupying a greater space in the composition, so that her presence is even more substantial and unmistakeable. The top of the Virgin’s body is visible here, encased in a light pink robe richly suggestive of her youth and innocence. The Virgin’s eyes are open wider and her head is held higher; she seems aware of her devotion and occupies not so much a pose of obeisance as one of contemplation. Christ is couched on the edge of his mother’s robe as before, but here the infant is placed much closer to his mother’s kneeling figure, so that the two form a compact figural group. The lower part of the Virgin’s robe is more visible in this panel than in the Palazzo Medici version, and her cloak has slipped slightly from her shoulders, emphasising not the Virgin’s upper body, but the pinky

109 Steinberg and Edgerton discuss the nature of the dove as a representation of the Holy Spirit in their two-part project on Filippo’s Annunciations – see Steinberg (1987) 25 and 34-35; and Edgerton, 49-50.
redness of her robe, delineating more clearly the link between her womb and Christ’s body lying before her. Christ’s youth in the Camaldoli *Adoration* has the effect of emphasising even further the very extraordinariness of his deliberate gesture, indicating his status as the Word of God made flesh. Together, the increased emphasis on Christ’s issue – both earthly and heavenly – distinguishes the Camaldoli *Adoration* firmly as a representation of the mystery of the Incarnation, rather than as a Nativity. The shift in emphasis from the Annalena *Adoration* to the Camaldoli panel is complete – while the former represented an embellished or expanded moment from the narrative of Christ’s birth, the latter represents nothing more or less than the central mystery of the Christian faith.

The Baptist has changed the most from his representation in the Palazzo Medici composition. As Christ has become younger, John has become older, and the facial similarities between the two have largely disappeared. John appears now as a youth on the cusp of adolescence; the last vestiges of babyhood plumpness have disappeared from his limbs, to leave behind an older and more active figure, who more deliberately enacts his biblical role. John here is transformed into the literal forerunner of Christ, with his pose indicating that he has run into the clearing at the centre of the painting from outside. He looks back over his left shoulder and points at the figure of Christ before him, using this hand to draw out the proclamatory banderole in a deliberate gesture, presumably motioning at the contemporary audience. As before, he is identified to the viewer in a number of ways. First, he wears the customary animal-skin robe and crude cloth toga often used to signify the Baptist.\textsuperscript{110} The brush strokes used to delineate the hair of this robe are less delicate and less distinct than those used in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration*, contributing to a darker and heavier garment, in keeping with the increased maturity of the Camaldoli figure. Second, he carries a slim cross, again illuminated by gilt. Finally, the Baptist is identified by his stance and gestures, literally performing to the viewer his biblical role as the one who points the way to Christ.

Though within the realm of the Camaldoli composition the Baptist has moved closer to the Virgin and Child than in the Palazzo Medici *Adoration*, his more energised pose calls even more deliberately to those outside the frame. His whole body is not contained within the bounds of the composition – rather he steps forcefully forward into it, his left foot still invisible outside the frame. His intrusion into the realm of the solid,

\textsuperscript{110} This characterisation will be explored in greater depth in my following chapter.
static figural group of the Virgin and Child lends urgency and action to the composition, positioning the Baptist as a youthful champion of Christ and model for the watching Camaldolese viewer. His right hand, pointing down at the infant Christ, combined with the orthogonal of his right shin, turns his figure into an arrow, unmistakably directing attention to the miraculous incarnation of the child before him. Though the axe so prominently displayed in the Palazzo Medici Adoration is no longer physically present here, its work is in evidence throughout the Camaldoli panel, in the form of the hewn tree stumps visible in the background. The past tense of this action suggests that to the Camaldolese, the culling of the unfaithful or unrepentant has already begun.

With the contemplative and more highly theologically-educated audience of this composition, Filippo can afford to make the iconography of the Camaldoli composition simpler, with the artist safe to assume that his viewer would understand the significance meant by the symbols he has included. Hence God the Father need only appear in the form of a pair of hands at the top of the panel, from whence the dove of the Holy Spirit springs. Given the context of the Camaldoli Adoration, the vein of penance and contemplation highlighted in the Palazzo Medici Adoration need only be an undercurrent here. As an object to stimulate private devotion inside a cell at a remote Camaldolese hermitage the focus on contemplation and withdrawal from worldly distractions is established by the setting. The emphasis on contemplation and retreat is further emphasised by the Baptist who, as explored in the first two chapters of this thesis, represents the eremitic solitude of the wilderness. The Baptist’s slightly older appearance in the Camaldoli Adoration also brings him into line with age of a young novitiate at a monastery. Though Filippo left the walls of S. Maria del Carmine to paint, he could easily have recalled the air of solitude and devotion required of the viewer for this panel. Filippo then adapted the composition of the Palazzo Medici Adoration, preserving its central theme, for the more withdrawn and austere setting and viewer of the Camaldoli panel. Rather than appearing as a representative of the Medici here, the patrons and Filippo have recognised the potential for the youthful Baptist figure to appeal to the monastic viewers at the hermitage.

This chapter has highlighted the first appearance of the boy Baptist figure outside of his own narrative setting, and has conducted an examination of the context of the

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111 Holmes is a particular proponent of the view that Filippo’s own upbringing and monastic surroundings could have influenced the iconography of his paintings. She discusses this notion in conjunction with the Wilderness Adorations in Holmes (1999), 176-182.
Palazzo Medici Adoration to suggest the possible meanings of the young saint in this new compositional setting. A comparison of Filippo Lippi’s three Wilderness Adorations, each with a Medici connection, has revealed the development of a new motif in Florentine Quattrocento art, that of the Incarnation of Christ. This chapter has also highlighted the deft manipulation of the political symbology of Florence by the Medici family – particularly in the form of the youthful Baptist, whose importance to the Medici’s scheme of self-representation has never before been noted. Whilst the young Baptist was first included in the Palazzo Medici Adoration to represent the family themselves, and to crystallise in the minds of viewers from outside the city the power, piety and potential of the family, Filippo’s innovative exploitation of his figures’ multiple valencies for different observers allowed the youthful Baptist to transform into a representative of not just the Medici, but of the city, the church and the viewer as well. The imagination and theological knowledge of the artist they chose to paint their family chapel’s altarpiece concocted an eloquent figure to represent the Medici’s chosen self-image. The youthful Baptist could exist divorced of any textual source, legible to lay people within the city, visitors outside, and those with a clerical education alike. The following chapters of this thesis will trace the development, expansion and enormous popularity of the boy Baptist figure in Quattrocento Florentine art and beyond.
CHAPTER 4
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF GIOVANNINO IN FLORENCE AND BEYOND,
1460-1500

In this chapter I will discuss the development of the boy Baptist in Florence following the use of the motif by Fra Filippo Lippi for the Medici in the 1450s and 60s. In the late 1460s, production of further painted works including the figure of the young Baptist coincided with the production of a series of marble portrait busts of the Baptist as a boy. These in turn led to a run of several painted portraits that built on the visual form of their sculptural counterparts. A number of variations on the theme of the boy Baptist as an independent actor in compositions of the Virgin and Child were developed including, as will be discussed below, his role in attesting to and demonstrating the significance of the Incarnation of Christ. I believe the extraordinary proliferation of works including the boy Baptist in the second half of the fifteenth century to be closely tied to, and a mirror of, growing interest in depictions of the Incarnation. Thus concurrently with the development of the young Baptist figure, came the development of a visual iconography to convey the mystery of the Incarnation (a theme which will continue to be explored in the three Studies following this chapter). The idea that the Baptist could not only be included in such an iconological system, but in fact be integral to it, has never been raised, let alone examined in detail. However, a thorough, systematic survey of all extant works including the young Baptist reveals this aspect of his role in devotional art of the latter half of the fifteenth century to be highly significant. In this chapter I will examine the key trends and motifs of the boy Baptist’s depiction, several of which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapters. In addition to reviewing the Baptist as a representative of Florentine interests, I will also place his appearance within an iconographic and devotional system which centred on the Incarnation.
Though works where the boy Baptist is featured primarily as patron saint and protector of Florence were still produced in the second half of the fifteenth century, it can be observed that these were outnumbered by works whose primary message was the Incarnation.\(^1\) I do not mean to suggest that the one role (patron of Florence) precluded the other (witness to the Incarnation) entirely, but rather that the emphasis in the works I have examined shifts, from the former to the latter. This is partially attributable to the spread of the boy Baptist motif beyond Florence, to where patrons and viewers were less interested in seeing the Baptist as the protector of a powerful, somewhat fractious city-state, and more as a sort of universally appealing playmate of Christ, who could reinforce and help the viewer interpret one of the central mysteries of the faith. My focus on Florence in this chapter is entirely justified however – while the boy Baptist had spread to the rest of Italy and gained popularity elsewhere by the end of the fifteenth century, nevertheless the overwhelming majority of these works were produced in Florence.\(^2\) Many of the early (c. 1460-80) appearances of the young John from outside Florence, or those prolific creators of boy Baptist works who were not Florentine natives, may be traced back to Florence as well. For example, certain artists, such as Perugino, had spent some time in the city; others learnt from Florentine masters who travelled outside the city. Patrons may have had connections to Florentine citizens (and thus may have seen the young John in his “native” city, as it were). However, though Florence was the epicentre of devotion to and depictions of the young John, I will show that it was not the saint’s status in relation to the city that made depictions of him so popular, but more specifically, his ability to act as witness and adjunct to the Incarnation.

Of the nearly four hundred works I have identified, 23 are representations of the young Baptist alone.\(^3\) These comprise mainly portrait busts, some paintings (several of which I believe show evidence of having been cut down from larger works), and a relief tondo. The age of the Baptist when depicted individually like this ranges from childhood through to young adolescence. There are no examples that I have found of an infant Baptist depicted alone. Interest in the boy Baptist as a lone figure seems to begin as the saint leaves infancy and enters childhood, at the age of four or five. The genesis of most of the busts and tondi is traceable to Bernardo Rossellino’s workshop

\(^1\) See for example Jacopo del Sellaio’s full-length portrait of the Baptist as a young man, standing before the city (fig. 4.4), discussed in further detail below.

\(^2\) 72.6% – I. 2 in Appendix 1.

\(^3\) See I. 7, Appendix 1. Note that this number excludes fresco cycles.
(particularly active in the 1460s, with some of the artists who were associated with it working separately into the 1480s), or to the workshop of the Della Robbia, later in the century (c. 1480s-1500 and beyond). These groups of artists and works will be discussed in greater detail below. The duo of the young Baptist and Christ also received some attention in the second half of the fifteenth century, although perhaps not quite as much as one might expect. I have found only eight surviving examples of the two boys by themselves, of which five are recognisable as depictions of the *Encounter in the Desert.* Occasionally this moment, like the young Baptist as an individual figure, is severed from its narrative context, and appears in the background of a number of works depicting St Jerome in the desert. Works featuring the *Encounter*, which I will argue becomes interpreted as an embrace between Christ and John, form the subject of chapter 7 of this thesis.

Numerous examples exist of compositions containing only the Virgin and Child and the young St John the Baptist. This combination constitutes almost half of the total number of works examined. Of the 187 works I have found of this subject (featuring only these three figures), the vast majority are again from Florence, and the boom period for this motif appears to have been the 1480s. It is interesting to note that towards the end of the fifteenth century, examples of the Johannine *Adoration* occur which share many of the compositional elements of the earlier works, but which also include the figure of Joseph. The timing of this change is unsurprising, as the feast day of St Joseph was only officially introduced into the liturgical calendar of the Roman Church in 1472 by Pope Sixtus IV, and his feast day was not added to Carmelite breviaries until 1480. Often the boy Baptist seems to step in to fill Joseph’s position of closeness and familial representative to the infant Christ, even as Joseph becomes an increasingly common inclusion in compositions of the 1490s, which suggests that the

4 See I. 8, Appendix 1.
5 These originate with Perugino’s workshop, and will be discussed further in ch. 7 of this thesis. The three extant variations of this composition have not been included in the above figure (I. 8).
6 47.5% - I. 9, Appendix 1.
7 75.9% - I. 10, Appendix 1.
9 Olson (2000), *op. cit.* Olson also places the zenith of *tondi* featuring Joseph around 1490, which accords with what I have seen.
Baptist and Joseph somewhat share the duties of representing Christ’s earthly, Davidic heritage.

From these figures, it is evident that the Virgin, Child and young St John the Baptist represented an extremely popular combination of figures in the second half of the fifteenth century. Of course, within this large group, there is a great deal of variation in the works themselves, their composition and their iconography. The variations on the Baptist’s role in such works will be examined in detail and this and the following chapters of this thesis. For example, the Baptist might mirror the pose of the kneeling Virgin in an Adoration; often he interacts with the young Christ in some way – sharing either his martyr’s cross or a gaze or blessing with Christ – but often enough too, the Baptist is a silent spectator to the relationship between the Virgin and her Son. As I touched on in previous chapter, Filippo Lippi began the exploration of the multiple valencies and possible roles of the Baptist, but the artists and patrons who followed Filippo and the Medici were able to explore a wider range of interactions. So in compositions of the Virgin and Child, the viewer sees him variously as witness, playmate, representative of Florence and even, towards the end of the fifteenth century, as representative of all humanity. These (and other) types of Virgin, Child and boy Baptist images will be discussed in further detail below. However, besides the presence of the Baptist, I posit that what draws the vast majority of these works together is their shared focus on and use of incarnational iconography. This is true too for many of the works raised briefly above, and indeed many devotional works of the fifteenth century in general.¹¹

In the second edition of his book The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion, Leo Steinberg expands briefly on a few points salient to his discussion of the exposure and display of Christ’s genitalia, in a series of Excursuses to the original essay.¹² In Excursus XII, in the course of discussing the naturalism conveyed, but not always intended, by Christ’s precocity as a child, he mentions the newly identified subject or type, of “the Incarnation of Christ”.¹³ Though he does not

¹¹ In the 1996 edition of Steinberg’s book is a brief essay by John W. O’Malley, S.J., which addresses growing recognition of the centrality of incarnational theology in the Renaissance – and indeed, in many visual motifs previously understood differently. See Steinberg (1996), 213-216.

¹² Steinberg (1996), ibid.

¹³ Excursus XII, 121-129. He does not discuss it as a new type of image, but rather notes that increasingly (at his time of writing, works from the fifteenth century are being newly-identified as specifically depicting Incarnational dogma, where previously such a work might have been referred to as an Adoration. Steinberg (1996), 122. The point is also made in Steinberg’s original essay, but I find the statement of it in XII to be more cogent and precise. See also Steinberg (1983), 10-11.
devote a great deal of time to identifying the iconography of the Incarnation as a discrete image-type as such, he writes,

Such pictures project a new iconography that is neither iconic nor narrative, nor linked to a liturgical feast. They are historiated emblems designed to convey the central mystery of the Creed.\(^\text{14}\)

I posit that beginning in Florence, and spreading, by the end of the fifteenth century, to the rest of Italy, the boy Baptist became an essential part of this new incarnational iconography. What Filippo Lippi did with the figure of the independent young Baptist is analogous to the teasing out of a specific genre of Incarnation imagery from the more narrative or historical types of Nativity or Adoration images produced before the 1450s. As the depiction of the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation crystallised over the course of the fifteenth century, so too did the role of the boy Baptist in depictions of that mystery harden into a formulaic but nevertheless adaptable collection of traits, actions and motifs.

The boy Baptist – as Christ’s malleable shadow – could at once confirm the physical presence of Christ being a fellow child, a member of Christ’s contemporary circle, and as a mortal, and allude to the “futurity” so inherent in the very idea of the Incarnation of Christ.\(^\text{15}\) John can be at once the babyish playmate that the young Christ, depicted in a domestic setting, should clearly have, and also a harbinger of his “growing death”, as seen in several of the works examined in chapter 7.\(^\text{16}\) This central role of the Baptist in deepening and enhancing incarnational imagery has been overlooked by scholars – even by Steinberg who, though he mentions the Palazzo Medici Adoration as one of the Adoration-cum-Incarinations in Excursus XII, does not mention the Baptist’s place in that iconographical system, except inasmuch as he is employed as a “witness” to the moment.\(^\text{17}\) Aronberg Lavin does not mention this aspect of the Baptist’s potential roles, focusing instead on finding the narrative justification for particular compositions, rather than allowing the compositions themselves to suggest their own meaning. Aronberg Lavin does allow for the young Baptist to stand in for the moment of Christ’s Baptism as an adult, which I agree is part of the repertoire of roles assigned to the child,

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 125.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 128. This latter theme will be looked at in more depth in chapter 7 of this thesis.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 122.
but I believe that all scholars who have examined the young Baptist as an individual figure, and those who have covered the paintings I discuss in this chapter as a corpus, have missed the overarching theme of the Incarnation which is written so clearly through so many of these works. In this chapter and the next, I will address those components of the boy Baptist’s representation which allow him to become a harbinger and representative of Christ’s death, thus balancing his first moments of life with the knowledge of his eventual death. That the coming of Christ’s death is so inherent and inextricable from his miraculous birth and life is part of the fulfilment of God’s covenant with his people, older even than Christ and the Baptist themselves. I suggest that Christ and the Baptist together become the visual representation of the making and keeping of this promise of salvation.

The most popular age at which the Baptist was depicted in the second half of the fifteenth century was as a boy of perhaps four or five, up to the age of about twelve. In chapter 2, I noted that in three representations of the lifecycle of the Baptist dating from the second half of the thirteenth century to the early fifteenth century, the age of the saint at various significant moments in his life decreased, so that in the earliest scene of John preaching he appeared as an old, bearded man, but by the beginning of the fifteenth century, he was depicted at the same point in the story as a teenager. The question of age and narrative progression may be revisited briefly here, to make the point that in the second half of the fifteenth century, the distinctions of narrative accuracy and progression appear to have largely been set aside. In the works examined in this and the following chapters, for the most part the artists (presumably at the behest of their patrons) do not seem concerned with using age as a marker of the point in his story from which the figure of the boy Baptist has been plucked. That is, it does not seem relevant to the compositions under examination here whether the Baptist is pre-departure for the desert, or post – merely that the figure of the boy Baptist performs his necessary role as adjunct to Christ.

Nor does the camel-hair garment, of possibly heavenly origin (see ch. 1), indicate here the Baptist’s location in the series of events which make up his story. By the earliest reckoning of any textual source, the boy Baptist could not have taken up the animal-skin robe much earlier than the age of about seven, when by all accounts he is

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18 See table in Appendix 1. Grouped together, the categories of young child, child and older child – that is, those figures depicted as older than infancy but younger than pubescence – make up nearly 70% of those examined (69.94% - see I.11, Appendix 1, including a brief note on methodology).
firmly ensconced in his desert habitat. In works from the second half of the fifteenth century however, the skin is used more of a marker of the saint’s identity as the Baptist, more than as a signal of time already pent in the desert, or an implied visit from Uriel. Works from the 1460s and 1470s onwards routinely feature a very young Baptist – either as young boy or even as a toddler a couple of years older than Christ – wearing the camel skin. Occasionally he appears as a plump young boy dressed richly in jewel-toned robes of a biblical style, often in colours that match the Virgin’s garments. However, the vast majority depict him dressed either in an animal-hair wrapping, or in scraps of ragged clothing which with tattered edges allude to skin. Those attributes of the saint which were used or withheld so judiciously by the artists of monumental Baptist lifecycles before the second half of the fifteenth century, to mark the figure’s progress through a linear narrative, here shed their specific temporal significance, and become instead attributes only of identity. Hence in this and following chapters, it is quite usual to see John depicted at the age of five or younger, already clad in camel-hair and carrying a reed cross.

Some of the first works featuring the independent boy Baptist following Filippo’s Medici Adorations were not other painted panels, but a number of marble portrait busts by Bernardo Rossellino and his workshop.\(^{19}\) Though both Bernardo and his student and sometime-collaborator Desiderio da Settignano were both active in Florence years (in Bernardo Rossellino’s case, decades) before the appearance of the youthful Baptist in the Palazzo Medici Adoration, neither appears to have employed precisely the motif of the boyish Baptist before 1459, though both were to follow soon after.\(^{20}\) Bernardo, his brother Antonio and Desiderio produced portrait busts and carved devotional tondi featuring the boy Baptist from roughly the late 1450s up until about 1480.\(^{21}\) The precise purpose and commissioning details of these works are largely unknown. However, Arthur Coonin suggests that they seem most likely to have been

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\(^{20}\) This statement relies on the inexact dating of both Filippo’s painting and the busts, both of which seem to be datable only to within a few years, so conceivably there could be an overlap. However, scholars seem satisfied that the painting pre-dates the sculptures, by a period of at least five years.

\(^{21}\) The dating for these works has been drawn from a number of sources, including Coonin and Schulz.
linked to a surge in civic pride, in addition to religious devotion. He also mentions fourteenth-century Dominican writer Giovanni Dominici’s popular treatise on the education of children, which includes the suggestion that “the child [should] see himself mirrored in the holy Baptist”. However, Coonin seems more convinced that the sudden proliferation of Johannine portrait bust of children in the third quarter of the Quattrocento is due to civic concerns. He cites a number of roughly contemporary (if slightly earlier) texts which extol the importance of the “child” as the representative of the future of the family and the state, including treatises by Alberti, Palmieri and Rucellai.

However, Coonin fails to comment on the specific iconography of these busts and tondi, thereby overlooking a significant clue as to their purpose and use. Though he correctly notes it was hoped that, by gazing on the examples of holy figures before them, children might receive a transference of the qualities of those figures or consciously model their behaviour after them, Coonin does not elucidate further the specific iconography of the boy Baptist after whose image these works are modelled. I agree with Coonin that the initial popularity of young Baptist iconography in Florence might be related to feelings of civic pride. However, as I will show in this chapter, over the course of the fifteenth century as the motif of the boy Baptist spread to patrons and viewers beyond Florence, it is likely that religious devotion constituted the larger part of its success and proliferation.

Antonio Rossellino’s bust of c. 1470 (fig. 4.1), now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, has perhaps the most serious – even slightly sad – face of all the busts. By comparison, the mouths of Mino da Fiesole’s two near-identical busts from roughly a decade later (in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris – see figs 4.2 and 4.3) curve up slightly at the corners, though their unfocused gazes imply self-reflection. The ruminative gazes of these figures would seem to encourage a mirrored contemplation in the mind of the viewer of the tragedy of the Baptist’s fate, and by extension Christ’s, and the seriousness of the saint’s mission.

In this sense, these three marble busts, despite appearing not long after Fra Filippo’s Palazzo Medici and Camaldoli Adorations, do not represent the Baptist as Witness. Rather, they seem the first harbingers of what was to become an important aspect of the Baptist’s role by the end of the Quattrocento. The sadness and solitude of these figures render them reminders of the Passion, despite – or perhaps because of – the absence of Christ. I dispute the assumption that these busts are necessarily portraits meant to bear any sort of verisimilitude to a child, living or dead. Instead, whilst being beautiful and, one imagines, highly collectible objects in their own right, they speak much more evocatively of the absence of Christ in the realm of the living than subsequent paintings of the Holy Family with the young Baptist.

With his naked shoulders and vulnerable young neck on display, the lone Baptist of these busts offers an elegy on the fragility of his own body and again, by implication, Christ’s. He considers the absence of Christ – his counterpart in the Bible and in boyhood – and the viewer is encouraged to do the same. The boy Baptist of the Rossellino (fig. 4.1) and Mino da Fiesole portrait busts (figs 4.2 and 4.3) appears, from his features and small, rounded shoulders, to be roughly the same age as Fra Filippo’s Baptist. However, where Filippo’s Giovannino is just on the cusp of losing his baby-faced softness and full cheeks, the Baptist that Rossellino depicts has already shed it: he seems to be further along the path to the desert-hewn asceticism of his adulthood. The face of these figures has taken on a slightly pinched pensiveness: we see not a joyful child who plays with his cousin but, perhaps because by default the busts depict him as an individual figure, a solemn and contemplative Baptist – his asceticism in the making.

Rossellino, Desiderio and, roughly a decade later, Mino da Fiesole’s boy Baptists are all characterised almost identically; the rippling curls of their hair matched with the curls of the animal skin they wear, rendering each of them instantly recognisable. The artists appear to have all followed the lead of Filippo Lippi in crowning the youthful saint with a head of curls, which by the end of the century have become a standard component of his appearance, and an identifying characteristic. No biblical, apocryphal or private devotional text known to me specifically mentions the young Baptist as having curly hair, and nor is it an effect of the portrait busts’ possible

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26 Coonin and others refer to these works specifically modelled after the “likeness” or “distinctness” of individuals. Lavin (1970, 210) notes that this is partially what distinguishes them from their antique antecedents.

27 As discussed in chapter I of this thesis, Elijah (who may be regarded as a sort of prototype for the wild desert prophet John) is described in 2 Kings 5:8 as “…a hairy man…” Later in Zechariah 2:4 there is a
antique heritage, these having stiff, straight Roman haircuts. I suggest that this curly hair may be an economical but nevertheless effective allusion to the Baptist’s sojourn in the wilderness, and a means of rendering the young, open-faced Baptist a prototype of his older, wilder self. Each of the busts I have seen of the Baptist – and subsequently, all of the paintings known to me – depict him with gently curling hair (which reaches its follicular zenith in the long, flowing curls of Botticelli’s angelic Baptist). These busts, and Desiderio’s tondo of the young Baptist and Christ now in the Louvre, to be examined in chapter 7 of this thesis (fig. 7.7) include one curly lock of hair falling over the boy’s forehead, thus gently enlivening his otherwise static face. This particular feature of the Baptist’s representation, begun by Rossellino’s workshop in the late 1450s or early 1460s, seems to have been common to other sculptural forms (for example, the Della Robbia terracotta tondi) but the evocatively errant forelock appears not to have been taken up again.

Though none of the sculpted works of the 1470s and 80s precisely followed the iconography or composition of Filippo Lippi’s Wilderness Adorations, already certain elements of the boy Baptist’s visual characterisation were becoming standard. In an effort to distil the wildness of the older, eschatological prophet Baptist, the youthful Baptist was invariably depicted with curly hair, an apparently evocative symbol of the adult John’s more dishevelled appearance. At this point, the camel- or animal-skin garment slung about the boy’s body became standard as well, and not necessarily only for its potential as a marker of narrative time (indicating to the viewer whether or not the Baptist had gone out into the desert), but as a tool of identification for the child. Again, the concern of the artist – no doubt due to instructions from the patron – was not necessarily for biblical verisimilitude, but for an eloquence of form and significance. When Filippo isolated the young Baptist and placed him within a new narrative setting, he demonstrated the youthful saint’s useful mobility, which soon after was deployed in the manufacture of busts of the saint. It was immediately clear then that the boy Baptist en buste was a subject well-suited to the type of marble busts of young boys that Florentines placed in their homes during the fifteenth century, with hopes of exerting a positive influence on the children of the household. These fulfilled additional uses for

brief mention of prophets who take up “a hairy mantle” – however I do not believe either of these references or the later Gospel descriptions of the Baptist (discussed in detail in chapter 1), strictly speaking, refer to John’s hair.

28 Coonin and others have discussed the possibility of Florentine Quattrocento busts being related to the tradition of Roman portrait busts in memoriam. Coonin (1995), 61 and Lavin (1970), 209-210.
the patron: while Christ of course made a good model for any young boy, the young Baptist made an especially appropriate model for the young Florentine, who was expected to grow up not just a good Christian but also a good Florentine citizen.

John’s ability to appeal particularly to the Florentine patron and viewer ensured that this aspect of his role – representative and holy protector of the city – continued, even as artists and patrons began to explore other valencies of the saint’s character. Interest in the Baptist in the city of Florence insured that this aspect of his iconography remained significant, though as we will see, works from outside the city emphasised other aspects of the saint’s role not explicitly linked to his identity in Florence. Amongst many other devotional panels and *tondi* of the Virgin, Child and young Baptist, Jacopo del Sellaio also painted a full-length portrait of the saint as a young adolescent c. 1480, standing steadfast on a hill overlooking the city of Florence, clearly visible in the background (fig. 4.4). The Baptist appears here explicitly in the guise of patron and protector of the city, his head in close alignment with the landmarks of Florence’s highly recognisable skyline, including Arnolfo di Cambio’s clock-tower for the Palazzo della Signoria, Giotto’s campanile and not least of all, Brunelleschi’s cathedral dome (see fig. 4.7).

John is depicted in graceful *contrapposto*. His left leg, slightly bent and leading the eye down to an elegantly pointed foot, carries some suggestion of movement, especially in concert with the train of cloth that ripples gently in the same direction, but overall he seems poised, and less dynamic than other versions of the figure who actively play the role of forerunner. This Baptist is light on his feet, his limbs arrayed such that shapely arms, legs and torso are all displayed for the viewer. The Baptist’s right hand is raised in a gesture somewhere between greeting and blessing – considering his position between the viewer and the city; it would appear that he welcomes the waiting audience to Florence with good will.


30 See also the woodcut view of Florence attributed to Francesco Rosselli, known as the *Chain map*, which has been dated to around the same period (1471-1482).

31 The gesture of John’s right hand does not entirely accord with, for example, the definition of the greeting gesture in Baxandall, 67-70, and seen in for example Botticelli’s *Primavera*. The Baptist’s right index finger is slightly separated from his other fingers, so that it seems partially to point at the same time as the rest of his fingers curve back towards his palm. As Baxandall cautions, context is everything with such gestures, so the fact the a figure of the Baptist makes a gesture that does not just greet, but almost points, would seem significant. Eleonora Luciano in the Washington catalogue has interpreted the gesture as a more straightforward blessing, Boskovits and Brown, 634. It seems plausible in this instance that the
CHAPTER 4

The Baptist is depicted here in the moment of flux between childhood and manhood – for young men, in the indeterminate period of becoming both idolised and marginalised in Florentine society.\(^{32}\) John’s face retains some of the roundness of youth, and is yet smooth and hairless. However his body is on the cusp of manhood, as implied by the burgeoning musculature of his right bicep, bared as he gestures towards the city. The way this body is displayed to the viewer – not unclothed but nevertheless revealed – suggests all the more so that as the boy Baptist approaches manhood, his body might become a desirable thing of beauty. The robe he wears has more in common with the silken wrapping of, for example, Venus in Botticelli’s *Primavera*, than it does with the animal-skin garments of Fra Filippo’s young Baptist in the *Wilderness* Adorations, despite its frayed and tattered edges. The lightness of his robe serves more to cling to the sinuous kick of the Baptist’s right hip, redolent of the *contrapposto* torso of Verrocchio or Donatello’s young bronze *David*, and highlight the youth’s underlying body, than to perform the iconographic role of that desert-born clothing discussed above. Jacopo’s Baptist here is sophisticated rather than ascetic, as we understand from his clear position in relation to the contemporary city of Florence, rather than a fictive biblical wilderness.

The similarity between the figures of Jacopo’s John and Verrocchio’s bronze *David* (c. 1473-75, now in the Bargello, fig. 4.5) are, if not consciously deliberate, then by no means a coincidence.\(^{33}\) He shares surprisingly little with other roughly contemporary statues of the Baptist, such as Donatello’s marble John (fig. 4.6, c. 1455-60, also in the Bargello). Donatello’s young John is of a similar age to Jacopo’s painted version of the saint, or perhaps even younger than Jacopo’s, but is iconographically much closer to the adult ascetic version of the Baptist. Donatello’s marble figure of the saint is a rangier and more distracted apparition of the Baptist, whereas Jacopo’s John is self-possessed and a little fuller of figure. Both Jacopo’s John and Verrocchio’s David are young men with biblical significance, who have been co-opted as representatives of gesture is a combination of pointing, blessing and greeting, which is fitting given the Baptist’s role as guardian of the city and here, visually its gatekeeper.

\(^{32}\) Sources concerning masculine youth in Florentine art and culture were raised in the introduction to this thesis. In this section I will be referring to Trexler’s examination of the age group, c.f. 368-399.

the Florentine Republic. Both are fully present in their bodies, wearing the grace and youthful strength of their forms with a growing confidence. I suggest that John here is depicted close in age to Verrocchio’s David, that is, no longer a boy but not quite a man, with a soft, rounded face but a body on the verge of maturity.

The saint is depicted at an age of growing power, awareness of himself and his place in society, and potential, representing the embodiment of ideal Florentine qualities, including rationality, self-control, and Christian virtue. This latter trait goes without saying for an integral biblical character such as the Baptist, and in the calm, measured and graceful manner in which Jacopo’s John holds himself here, he demonstrates a mastery of his young body which demonstrates the former two qualities. His face is placid and gestures elegant – he betrays none of unchecked emotions or impulses to which his evident youth might give rise. In this sense, he is similar to Pat Simons’ characterisation of Donatello’s St George who, she notes, is picked out for his adherence to Salutati’s description of the virtuous Florentine: “…a Christian hero with classicized ancestors”. 34 We are informed, by the figure’s position relative to Florence, and by his reed cross, banderole, lightly waving hair, and the small bowl of water lying at his feet, that this is the Baptist. Yet his appearance is sufficiently refined, and his posture sufficiently antique, to suggest reference to classicised portraits of heroic manhood.

The Baptist here stands astride the threshold between boyishness and manhood, and between the biblical past and Florence’s contemporary present. For such an interstitial role the young John is perfect: his piety, self-control and self-effacement are all ideal Florentine qualities, and depicted as a youth, he embodies a perfect image of Florentine manhood (albeit an adolescent version thereof), one which combines the beauty of youth with the virtues of the perfect citizen. The boys and young men of Florence, as a group of not fully-determined social status, could be viewed as a dangerous one. 35 Organisations sprung up around the fifteenth century to engage, shape

34 Simons, 161.
35 On the troublesome position of young men in Renaissance Florence: Fulton, 31-32; Trexler (1980), 367-368. Much of this worry was related to the advanced age at which men married, relative to women – and the sexual energy and tension that thus had no officially acceptable outlet until often the age of 30 (Simons, 170; Trexler (1980), 379-382). The unofficial solution to this repressed energy created a swathe of social problems, examined in M. Rocke, Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Rocke also discusses perceptions of male beauty, and attitude towards boys and young men, in passim. For more on the Florentine fear of unsupervised and unchecked youth, see Trexler (1993), 113-124. For the gradual process of defining the self (particularly through literature and self-control) by wealthy youths, see M. B. Becker, “An Essay on
and occupy the young minds: confraternities and companies of fanciulli (and older boys), overseen by pious adults of the commune, directed their energies into plays and religious tableaux during public celebrations. Church schools educated the boys in scripture and moral lessons. Idealised imagery of Christian role models was a popular means by which fathers and city authorities hoped to inculcate the desired virtues into the youth of the city. That the Baptist is an adolescent, between boyhood and manhood and almost a biblical prophet, between desert and city, shows the process of “becoming” – the transition from the heedless abandon of youth to the careful control of the self which was so expected of adults (particularly those of the patrician class) – which the Florentines so admired. John, by virtue of his biblical story and the various elaborations thereon, easily embodies the sort of control, strength of character, and piety that were the ideal in Florence. However, it is worth noting that instead of depicting the saint as a haggard penitent, the viewer is presented with a familiar, modern-looking young man such as might be seen in, for example, a youth confraternity’s re-enactment of a holy narrative on a feast day.

This idealised representation of the Baptist is linked to the shimmering apparition of Florence visible in the background of the composition. There has been some suggestion that the version of Florence depicted in the background of the composition, though reasonably accurate to a contemporary topography of the city, in fact represents a perfected incarnation of the city as the new Jerusalem. If both entities appear in their most idealised, perfected form – John at the apex of youth, potential, reason and virtue, and Florence at the height of both Christian faith (neatly embodied by the highly visible Duomo) – the suggestion is that the city and Christian faith are inextricably linked. John’s inviting presence at the foreground of the composition renders him a gatepost, a welcome marker of what awaits in the shining new Jerusalem.

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36 Founded in 1410-11, the Confraternity of the Archangel Raphael is one of the most well-known examples of this kind of group. See R. Eisenbichler, The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411-1785, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, particularly the introduction, and pages 12-34 for the purposes of this thesis. On youth confraternities, see also I. Taddei, Fanciulli e Giovani: Crecere a Firenze nel Rinascimento, Firenze: Olschki, 2001, esp. 121-168. See Trexler (1993), 54-112 for religious (and lay-religious) activities for adolescent males in Florence.
38 Simons, 158-159.
39 M. Chiarini (ed. and cur.), Firenze e la sua immagine: cinque secoli di vedutismo (exh. cat.), Venezia: Marsilio, 1994, 62, figs 56 and 58 (entry by S. Blasio). See also Luciano in Boskovits and Brown, 634.
beyond. Along the path behind the Baptist, the picture plane is littered with symbols of the preparations necessary to enter the realm of this perfect city of God: directly before him lies a small bowl of water, an obvious reference to the rite of baptism. Next along the path to Florence awaits a small brightly-coloured bird – a goldfinch, with a splash of red on its forehead symbolic of the splash of blood it received when plucking the thorns from Christ’s brow. At the far left of the panel, at the first bend in the path that snakes through the landscape down to Florence, is an axe sticking into a tree stump, an allusion to the unworthy who must be culled, and the imminence of this winnowing of the unfaithful, seen previously in Fra Filippo’s Palazzo Medici Adoration. The implications are clear: the viewer must be baptised, and truly contemplate the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Further along the path is a curious figure – what could be a thin apparition of Christ himself. This shadowy figure, dressed plainly in a long, dark robe, and without a halo or other markers of status, presents a puzzle to the viewer. The identification of the figure as Christ has been advanced by Luciano, who notes the association of the young Baptist with just such a Christ figure in at least four other works by Jacopo, including a similarly-attired figure of Christ in the Encounter now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, which will be examined in further detail in chapter 7. If so, this small figure of Christ waits on the path to Florence for those who heed the Baptist’s lesson, take the necessary preparations, and are ready to proceed to the apparition of the new Jerusalem presented in the background. The identification of the figure waiting between John and the city of Florence as Christ also allow for the young Baptist’s gesture to take on some of the significance of “pointing out Christ with his finger”, the action accorded to him by Jacobus de Voragine in the Golden Legend. Thus the slight separation of John’s forefinger from the rest of his digits is revealed as a great subtlety on Jacopo’s part, as it allows for John’s gesture to be interpreted as both welcoming the viewer to Florence, and pointing the audience along the path to Christ. That such a nuanced expression of the young John’s polysemy is possible is part of the saint’s appeal to patrons, artists and viewers.

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41 Luciano in Boskovits and Brown, 634.

42 De Voragine/Ryan, 330. See also a more detailed discussion in ch. 2 of this thesis.
The young John is singled out by patron and artist for Jacopo’s *John the Baptist Before Florence* because of his resonance with Florentine viewers (though no commission details are known, one can only assume the patron of the work was a proud citizen of that city), and because, as I have shown, the natural associations between the Baptist and ascetism made him a suitable embodiment of treasured Florentine virtues, as outlined above. Whilst at times other biblical and Christian “heroes” such as David, St George and St Sebastian were employed for similar purposes, the characterisation of each figure was different. I have discovered in my survey of Quattrocento representations of the Baptist that very few “beautiful” Johns were produced – that is, literally stripped figures of idealised physique, like Sebastian or David. The figure of John in Jacopo’s painting is pleasant to behold, certainly, and so too are a many other examples of the young saint – see for example Benedetto da Maino’s handsome polychrome terracotta bust, c. 1480, now in the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston (fig. 4.8a and 4.8b).\(^43\) This bust represents the Baptist at probably the absolute zenith of adolescence, before he can be more accurately described as a man. Many of the works examined in this chapter (and the rest of this thesis) feature John as a boy (*fanciulli*) – here I would argue that he is *un giovane*, but not yet *un uomo*.

Benedetto’s Boston bust shares key similarities with an anonymous half-length sculpture c. 1480-90 now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 4.10).\(^44\) Both of these figures are markedly older than the Baptists depicted in the Rossellino and Desiderio sculptures. The anonymous sculpture appears to be almost a younger version of the Benedetto bust, and is depicted at maybe twelve years of age, whilst Benedetto’s Baptist is maybe sixteen years old – just about to take up the mantle of adulthood, and his biblical mission; an adolescent of a similar age to the figure examined in Jacopo’s Florentine portrait above.\(^45\) In both of these renditions, the figure is characterised through the use of long, unruly dark curls, and an animal-skin robe. Neither of these Baptist’s bodies seem to bear the traces of privations in the wilderness; however their

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\(^44\) The date for this anonymous work comes from the entry on the Museum’s website. This is in favour of the Fondazione Zeri dating for the work, the only alternative source I have found, which is much broader. See Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Saint John the Baptist.” [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/192362?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=13.155&pos=2](http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/192362?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=13.155&pos=2), (retrieved August 10, 2013).

\(^45\) I have included both a three-quarter and front-on view of Benedetto’s bust here as, to my mind, he appears a little younger in the front view, and this must be taken into account.
glimpses of their physiques visible to the viewer (in the form of their shoulders and chests), are slender in such a way that they suggest the still-unformed musculature of adolescence, particularly in the anonymous bust, who is scrawny in his youth. Nevertheless, these two works again demonstrate that even when the Baptist’s connection to the wilderness was not a primary message of a work, such a connection could be used to render him instantly recognisable to the viewer.

More than these similarities however, these two sculpted Baptists have in common a further feature which could appear to be merely a product of naturalism on the part of the artists, but which in fact demonstrates a deeper recognition of the Baptist’s iconography, and of his traditional role. Both works depict the Baptist with slightly parted lips. Further, each figure has slightly raised, finely-drawn brows, and the anonymous Baptist feature a faintly cocked head. These representations of the young saint eloquently communicate the Baptist’s relationship with the Word: he goes before the Word, and he tells others of the Word, and he denies that he himself is the Word. Through the static media of sculpture and paint, these two artists nevertheless give a sense of the speaking likeness; and significantly a likeness of a figure whose key role is to speak of another, to bear witness to his presence. This motif – of the Speaking Baptist – is present in many works featuring the young Baptist, even when it is not as explicitly noticeable as in these two examples. Further, in Filippo’s Palazzo Medici Adoration (and many other works besides) Christ points at his mouth, reminding the viewer that he is indeed the Word of God made flesh. As seen here, part of John’s depiction centres on his mouth as well, referring to the words he speaks testifying to the truth of God’s Word. This doubling of emphasis on the mouths of the two children again reinforces the link between them, and alludes to their biblical roles through subtle use of a naturalistic gesture or action.

A third portrait of the Baptist depicts the saint at a similar age as the previous two works, as a beautiful youth of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old. Raffaellino del Garbo’s exquisitely-executed painting (fig. 4.9), location unknown, is fully dressed as the Baptist, like the sculptures above, with long, curly hair, an animal-skin robe, and additionally, an unmistakably cruciform staff resting against his shoulder. The

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47 The Fondazione Zeri dating for this work is quite broad, c. 1485-1524. I am inclined to place the portrait between 1485-1500, as this is when I have found representations of the young saint were most
Raffaellino Baptist bears an additional flush of youth and health on his plump cheeks, perhaps making him a more modern imagining of the saint, close to Jacopo’s young civic hero. Raffaellino’s Baptist also has slightly parted lips and a lightly cocked head, but unlike the sculptures above has his hands clasped before him in an attitude of prayer. This representation of the young saint demonstrates John’s interiority, and gives a glimpse into his own private practice of contemplation and devotion. Here he is a more realistic role model for a young viewer, who could easily emulate his prayerful manner, than the wilderness prophet incarnation of the saint. Though the open mouth of his portrait of the saint is similar to those of the sculptures above, his role here seems to be less testamentary and more meditative, and as such here he is depicted as John the follower, rather than John the preacher. These are two sides of the same figure, related but slightly different in emphasis, demonstrating the polysemy of the young Baptist figure.

However, such image types – sculptures and paintings of the individual Baptist – constitute a very small proportion of the Quattrocento works which included the young Baptist. By far the most numerous examples including the young Baptist are depictions of the Virgin and Child accompanied by the young saint, in various capacities. Botticelli’s Louvre *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist* (fig. 4.11), likely from c. 1468, places the figures before a thicket of rose bushes giving way to slim tree trunks. The symbols Botticelli includes in this and similar devotional works are remarkably economical. Within the picture plane, the roses shut off depth, so that the viewer maintains their focus on the Virgin and Child. Symbolically, they suggest the *hortus conclusus* of the Virgin’s womb, which is all the more appropriate considering the closeness of the Virgin and Child’s embrace. The Virgin in this

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composition is seated, holding the infant Christ in her arms, the movement of her left arm suggesting that she intends to draw him closer into her embrace. Her right cheek brushes the top of his head, a motion which at once shows the viewer her fine profile and simultaneously suggests both the naturalism of a mother’s embrace and a reference to her spiritual marriage with Christ, elaborated on in the Song of Songs.  

Christ stands on his mother’s lap and reaches up to put his arms about her neck. The gaze on his face is absorbed and loving, as he looks up at Mary’s face. The pose of both Christ and the Virgin echo two Byzantine iconographic types – the Hodegetria and the Eleousa – whether accidentally or deliberately, and weave together both the regal aspects of the former with the more intimate, nurturing aspects of the latter. Despite the easy facility with which Botticelli communicates the closeness of mother and child, he has also made subtly clear the undertone of a more physical love – which in turn hints at the spiritual marriage of the Virgin and Christ – that runs through the bodies of both mother and child. Viewed again with this central iconography in mind, the backdrop of rose bushes seems even more pertinent a reminder to the text of the Song of Songs, and to the Virgin’s womb that is closed to all but Christ’s presence. The bodies and glances of mother and Child in this painting are totally absorbed in one another, forming a closed circle of loving intimacy which the viewer hopes also to find.

The Baptist’s role here is to engage the audience, as the Virgin and Christ do not acknowledge the viewer in any way. John is positioned slightly further back in the picture plane, but is brought closer to the audience by his direct, knowing gaze. He is characterised as the Baptist through his long, curly brown hair, animal-skin garment, and the thin cross he clasps to his chest. Botticelli’s Baptist does not bear the proclamatory banner of his master Filippo; however a possible reference to the saint’s relationship with the Word (and with his ministry of preaching) is suggested through his

50 For a more detailed discussion of the Song of Songs, see chapter 2 of this thesis.
proximity to a prayer book or Bible lying on a lectern at the foreground of the panel. This volume, couched on a sheer cloth that appears similar to the material that covers the Virgin’s head and is wrapped about the infant Christ’s body, is placed directly below the Baptist in a vertical line, establishing a clear connection between the two.\textsuperscript{52} Though at first instance the focus of the composition would appear to be on the body language of mother and son, closer inspection reveals a carefully nuanced network of allusive relationships which link each figure back to the miracle of the Word, represented manifold times through the iconography of the panel. Visual echoes throughout the composition make clear the repetition of these themes. The red cloth of Mary’s dress is visible beneath her cloak and appears pouched about her belly. The same red cloth appears to be wrapped about Christ, literally enfolding him in the stuff which covers her womb, again reminding the viewer of Christ’s issue. This same deep red cloth, articulated by darker shadows and folds, is wrapped about the Baptist’s young torso, suggest both ties of kinship, and the blood that follows both boys as they grow ultimately into martyrdom. The Baptist’s knowing glance at the audience seeks to confirm their understanding of all of this. He invites the viewer into the intimacy of the family scene, but also reminds them of Christ’s biblical role, through his own.

The young John is present in many devotional works in a similar fashion, as mediator between audience and Mary, and as an example for the audience to follow, in both a literal and figurative way. Sometimes the saint looks out at worshippers with a self-conscious or knowing glance. At others he appears absorbed in the adoration of Christ. In these latter cases he is often placed at a slight distance from the Virgin and Child to indicate that in some sense, he occupies a different level of meaning to the main figural group, as in the painting examined above. In a later Botticelli \textit{tondo} now in Piacenza, dated to around 1480, John kneels over the supine form of his cousin, a mirror of his kinswoman, Mary (fig. 4.12).\textsuperscript{53} This combines the popular figural group of the kneeling Virgin and reclining Christ, previously seen with the young John in Fra

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{52} The connection between the wrapping of Christ and the wrapping of the Bible or other holy books was suggested by Paul Hills in a lecture. P. Hills, “Clothing the Word: Filippo Lippi, Donatello and Bellini.” Lecture, The Power Institute and Sydney Ideas, University of Sydney, May 14, 2013. The idea is also examined briefly in P. Hills, “Titian’s Veils”, \textit{Art History} 29 (2006), 771–795, esp. 771-774.

\textsuperscript{53} Lightbown 2, cat. no. B27, 40-41; Mandel, cat. no. 59, 92; Zöllner, cat. no. 35, 208. The museum lists the date as possibly before 1477, but this does not appear to have been confirmed elsewhere. I note too that there has always been some question over this painting’s authenticity (as autograph, workshop and so on) but recent scientific analysis of the pigments (following the painting’s restoration in 2004) has shown it to be entirely Botticelli’s work. See D. Bersani, P. P. Lottici, A. Casoli, and D. Cauzzi, “Pigments and binders in “Madonna col Bambino e S. Giovannino” by Botticelli investigated by micro-Raman and GC/MS”, \textit{Journal of Cultural Heritage} 9 (2008), 97–102.
\end{footnotesize}
Filippo’s latter two Wilderness Adorations (though Filippo by no means invented this arrangement of figures). Two stands of tall rose bushes behind the Virgin and the Baptist allow only a glimpse of the watery landscape beyond, which itself references Christ’s Baptism in the River of Jordan, suggesting a similar “walled garden” effect as in the Louvre panel. The fissure between these two bushes serves to provide a light source to fall softly on the infant Christ, and to highlight the cross the Baptist holds. The link between the Virgin’s womb, as the walled garden of the Song of Songs, is made yet more explicit in this composition, as the roses that bloom from these bushes are a similar red to the Virgin’s dress, and that shade appears to deepen as the flowers blossom, suggesting a process of growth and becoming. Again, this red cloth springs forth from the Virgin’s waist, its folds suggesting a verdant effluxion, which seems to spread on the ground before, and on which again the Child rests. Christ gazes quite steadily and deliberately at his mother, and his gaze is returned – though the Virgin’s pose is one of passive Adoration, they are locked again in an unbreakable exchange of love and attention.

The Baptist here is characterised as slightly younger than in Botticelli’s earlier panels (and many of his later works featuring the young John). Botticelli and his studio seem to employ a wide range of figures of the young Baptist, but in general they appear to favour an older, pubescent or adolescent figure of the saint, rather than the plump young boy seen here. John kneels at Christ’s head, his bent form the third arm in a triangle of pictorial lines which presages Leonardo’s pyramidal compositions by a handful of years. The Baptist is again linked by implication of blood ties to the Virgin and Christ by means of the red cloth of his cloak. Otherwise he is clothed in a shaggy camel skin so deliberately revealed by the cloak thrown back from his shoulders that its significance is emphasised. Despite his plump young form, this is unmistakably the desert prophet of biblical import. His form, though not poised to enact the role of forerunner, is animated; his arms bent and his left hand lightly poised to swoop down and touch or bless his cousin. His young face is curious, intent on Christ’s form. His reaction to the sight of the infant Christ before him is one of interest and curiosity, rather than Adoration per se, though as stated his kneeling form echoes the Virgin’s. Here the Baptist seems young in spite of the very clear symbolism with which he is clothed, and the references to his future mission. The viewer is reminded that despite his

54 For more on this version of the kneeling Virgin, see Cornell, op. cit.
young age, this figure can indeed still be the Baptist, and that his Christological significance began even before birth, at the Visitation. This in turn serves to remind the viewer that the young Christ they see before them is indeed the Messiah, even as a newborn, a fact his precociously steady gaze and self-awareness underline. Here the contrast between the youth of the Baptist and the heavy-handedness of his iconographic characterisation works to the advantage of the composition as a whole, as it demonstrates the simultaneous precociousness of the two children, and inevitability of their futures.

This figural trilogy of John and Mary jointly kneeling in prayer and contemplation before the infant Christ was an endlessly repeated and enormously popular composition in Florence and beyond in the last decades of the fifteenth century. See for example three very similar works from Florence: first, Filippino Lippi’s Nativity-cum-Adoration of the Magi of c. 1475-80, now in the Uffizi (fig. 4.13), and two anonymous Florentine panels, location unknown (figs 4.14 and 4.15). These three panels each exhibit the same basic composition, and comprise most of the same elements – with the exception of the train of Magi seen in the distance of Filippino’s panel. The ruins of a stable at the right of the panel both provide visual structure, and suggest the narrative of the Nativity. The inclusion of a gilt Star of Bethlehem in the sky of each, and the presence of the ox and ass, provide similar visual cues. The ox and the ass in these works, an ancient and persistent feature of Nativity iconography despite there being no mention of them in Gospel accounts, symbolise the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the miracle of the Incarnation.

All three compositions stress the importance and miraculousness of the Incarnation of Christ. In the two anonymous panels, Christ’s deliberate gestures and

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55 For the Filippino Lippi, see K. B. Neilson, Filippino Lippi, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1938, reprinted 1974, 27-31; and P. Zambrano and J. K. Nelson, Filippino Lippi, Milan: Electa, 2004, cat. no. 36, 353-354. On the dating of the two anonymous panels: in the online database of the Fondazione Zeri, the dates of both are listed as 1400-1499, which is evidently too broad to be workable. As both of these are now lost, it is difficult to make any statements as to provenance or purpose, which might in turn give clues to a date for these works. To my eye, considering their very conventional use of Incarnation and Baptist iconography, I would place them after Filippino’s panel, in perhaps the 1480s. From Zambrano & Nelson (cat. entry, op. cit.), we know that there are a number of copies of Filippino’s composition still extant, which suggests to me that the easy formula he created here may have proved influential on other artists of his area and time. The use of gilt in fig. 4.14 makes the panel seem maybe a touch older than the fig. 4.15 (whose use of the Jerome motif maybe suggest familiarity with the composition from Perugino’s workshop, discussed in ch. 7 of this thesis, though the placement and scale of the figures here is reversed). However, the iconography of 4.14 is otherwise very staid, which does not suggest to me that it predates Filippino’s panel, and that rather the application of gilt was an individual choice on the part of the patron. 56 On the symbolism of the ox and the ass at the Nativity, see Schiller 1, 60-61.
actions communicate this unmistakably: in one (fig. 4.14), Christ points at his own mouth, as he does in each of Filippo Lippi’s three Wilderness Adorations. In third example, containing Jerome, Christ very deliberately takes the sheer cloth that is draped over his feet and around his body, and reveals his genitals to the Virgin and to the viewer. His revelation is so purposeful that its meaning is unmistakable: he wishes to impress upon the viewer the very truth of his complete, human body.\textsuperscript{57} As Steinberg argued, such gestures testify to the proof of the Incarnation – that God has truly become human, and is complete in all the parts of man. In Filippino’s panel, Christ’s chubby, infant right hand, dimpled at the wrist, clutches a goldfinch, brightly arrayed with a splash of red at its brow, as he blesses the Virgin and the audience with his left hand. This demonstrates Christ’s willingness to be sacrificed, and his knowledge of his forecoming Crucifixion.

The Baptist is characterised quite similarly in each of these three works. He appears as a child, between five and seven or eight years old, with a seriousness on his face which belies his age but befits the solemnity of his purpose, which is to bear witness to the incarnate Christ. By the 1470s-80s, the Baptist’s visual characterisation is all but set. Each of the three figures wears an animal skin and a reddish cloak and carries a thin cross. The two anonymous panels also include a banderole floating immediately next to John’s head, reading ECCE AGNUS DEI. These further underline their roles as witnesses to Christ’ Incarnation, as this is what he says to others within the Gospels, and to the viewer. Both Filippino’s Baptist and the boy John in the third panel gaze at the reclining figure of Christ before them, their hands clasped in an attitude of prayer. Such a pose serves as an example for the viewer and demonstrates John’s reverence and awareness of the miracle he beholds. In the second example, John looks to the Virgin as if speaking to her, rather than at the infant Christ. This too sets an example for the viewer, showing proper reverence to the Virgin.

In these three compositions, the Baptist is not explicitly representative of wilderness. This demonstrates that John’s characterisation as a miniature desert prophet through the use of the animal skin has, by this point, become more a means to identify the figure as the Baptist rather than to imply association with time spent in repentance in the desert. We understand this through the quietude of the figures’ poses, through their neat, healthy appearances, and through the placid, genericised landscapes depicted.

\textsuperscript{57} For this “self-revelation”, see Steinberg (1996), 33-36.
in the background of each panel, bearing no resemblance to a wilderness either biblical or contemporary. Rather, the Baptist here appears in the guise of witness, which in turn invites the viewer to follow his lead and also bear witness to the miracle of Christ’s Incarnation on earth. In each case, John is posed in a carefully static fashion, with his body focused on the act of being and of looking. The Baptist’s chief function in such a composition is to be present, and to watch; that is, to witness the verity of the incarnation. This shows the awareness of fifteenth-century patrons and artists to the variability of the Baptist’s role and to the different functions suggested by his characterisation in the Gospels and other texts. The fifteenth-century viewer understood that the Baptist’s role is complex, a thing of many parts and connotations and referents, and the range of imagery associated with the boy Baptist reflects this.

The very similarity of these three panels, and particularly of the characterisation of the Baptist within them, serves to demonstrate the popularity and effectiveness of such a composition. Many more examples of the Baptist represented and functioning in this fashion exist, constituting an important sub-genre of image type for both Baptist imagery and devotional iconography in the second half of the fifteenth century. This type of Baptist – the boyish figure who appears in an Adoration with Christ and the Virgin, adoring the Child but also exemplifying the ideal response for the viewer to have to the apparition of Christ’s infant body – was one of the most common Johannine image types in the second half of the fifteenth century. This pose – that of the silent Witness – is as common and as closely tied to the visualisation and understanding of the Baptist figure in fifteenth-century art and culture as the pose of the forerunner. Filippino Lippi’s version of this basic composition, including the boy-Baptist-as-witness, may have been one of the most influential examples. This composition appears to have been replaced towards the end of the fifteenth century, and into the sixteenth century, by a version of the same basic compositional and iconographical elements influenced by both Leonardo da Vinci (as will be examined in the following chapter) and, beyond the scope of this thesis, by Raphael in the first decades of the sixteenth century.

The use of the goldfinch, raised briefly in the discussion of several of the works above, warrants further examination. The Baptist frequently appears in conjunction with a number of other symbols which relate to either aspects of John himself, or of Christ’s future. In a sense, the Baptist himself becomes a cipher for certain elements of Christ’s story and mission, and is in turn added to the array of symbols which the patron and artist can choose to employ in an image of Christ. The goldfinch is one of the most
common of these; that is, a symbol which relates specifically to Christ, but with which the Baptist frequently appears, and with which he can been seen as having some kind of relationship. While it is mostly Christ who holds the bird (and of course, the goldfinch appears in many compositions of the Virgin and Child without the young Baptist), there are a few examples where the goldfinch accompanies the Baptist, or where the young saint plays with the bird, which constitute a rare transference of a usually Christological symbol onto the boy Baptist.

In an anonymous Umbrian artist’s *Virgin and Child with Two Angels and the Young St John the Baptist*, now in Vaduz (fig. 4.16), Christ holds the goldfinch, but also chinchucks the young Baptist who looks up lovingly into the Child’s face.\(^{58}\) In this dense composition, the exchange between Christ and the young Baptist – here depicted as a very young boy, of perhaps four or five years – forms the key action. The Virgin and Child appear seated before a cloth backdrop, flanked on either side by two prayerful angels. Christ sits upright in his mother’s lap, as the Virgin keeps a protective hand on his shoulder. In his left chubby fist, Christ holds a goldfinch. His hand with the goldfinch clasped tightly within it is held near his chest, signifying the great importance of this symbol. Christ is determined to keep hold of the bird, clenching it in his fist despite its beating wings of protest. With his other hand, he reaches down to the waiting Baptist, who looks up adoringly at his cousin and Lord, and performs the gesture dubbed by Leo Steinberg as the “chin-chuck”.\(^ {59}\) He takes the young Baptist’s chin in his own hand and tilts John’s face toward his own.

As Steinberg has demonstrated, this is a gesture familiar from ancient art which designates the two figures as lovers.Performed by Christ to the Virgin, as is common in Renaissance art it shows God singling out his mother as his mystic bride, the spouse of the Song of Songs and personification of the Christian church. For Christ to perform the gesture on John is extraordinarily unusual. The use of the gesture here applied to John demonstrates the multi-layered nature of the Baptist’s role in devotional works, particularly as a child. As titular saint of Baptism, John can represent the church itself, as he stands for the formal ritual of entering Christ’s fold. Thus the gesture in this sense represents the spiritual marriage of Christ and God’s chosen people, transferring the Virgin’s personification of the Christian church onto John. Furthermore, the intimacy of

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\(^ {58}\) Again, the only dating available for this anonymous work is from the Fondazione Zeri, which places it c. 1480-1525.

\(^ {59}\) Steinberg (1996), 3-6 and 110-118.
the gesture also suggests the mystic marriage between Christ and the individual soul, with the boy Baptist standing in for the viewer, or evoking the child figure of the soul. By chin-chucking John, Christ nominates him as his mystic bride, and the expression of awe and pleasure on the child Baptist’s face is evidence of his joy at their union. In this composition, the young saint is representative both of the Church, and of the viewer and humanity as a whole. As Steinberg highlights a number of examples of Christ chin-chucking the Virgin, so too do a number of examples represent this gesture directed at the boy Baptist — but never the adult Baptist. The intimacy of the gesture seems only to be compatible with the very young John, almost of an age with his infant cousin. To my knowledge the gesture between the two children has never been commented on.

The goldfinch here – and indeed, the system of other interlocked symbols present in the Umbrian composition – work together to signify Christ’s acknowledgement and acceptance of his own death. This is chiefly communicated by Christ’s trapping of the bird with one hand, representative of the Passion, and by his intimate gesture to the Baptist recognising for whom he makes this sacrifice. Between these two gestures, the crux of the composition’s meaning emerges – Christ’s Passion, and his early, prescient acceptance of it. The Baptist holds his cross at an awkward angle, which mimics the length and position of Christ’s arm. The cross here, originally reed, is unusually solid, and positioned across the Baptist’s chest, all the better to make it unmistakable. In addition to the layers of significance added to the boy Baptist by the chin chucking motif, the saint also functions here as a harbinger of Christ’s death on the cross – the miniaturised version of which John holds – but the easy closeness of the two infants, and John’s facial expression, impart a tone of fulfilment, acceptance, eagerness and ecstasy.

In a panel by Mariotto Albertinelli however, it is the boy Baptist who holds the goldfinch (location unknown, fig. 4.17).60 The viewer is granted a close, intimate view of the seated Virgin and Child, with the young Baptist placed in the corner of the frame. The background is dispensed with in the form of a few folds of cloth. Mary’s robes and shawl are only just visible, the latter appearing to wrap around the Child she holds in her arms. The haloes of all three figures are thin gold wires, and even the Baptist’s

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60 For Albertinelli, see L. Borgo, “The Works of Mariotto Albertinelli”, Ph.D diss., Department of Fine Arts, Harvard University, 1968, cat. no. 30, 362-364. This does not appear to be exactly the same painting as the work found in the Fondazione Zeri database. However, the iconography of the Virgin and Child’s embrace, the presence of the Baptist and the bowl of water and goldfinch are the same. It is worth reading Borgo’s commentary on this work (and on Albertinelli in general). Based on Borgo, a date towards the very end of the fifteenth century seems plausible for this work.

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camel hair robes are only hinted at. The majority of the composition is filled with the face and hands and limbs of the three figures, the focus being on their human bodies, the Virgin’s reaction of delight to her son, Christ’s arm, its pale flesh cutting across the shadows of the Virgin’s torso, reaching around his mother’s neck, and the Baptist’s gaze, seeking permission and approval, up at the Virgin. The Baptist holds a small bowl of water, like the one that lies on the ground before the figure of the adolescent Baptist in Jacopo del Sellaio’s Florentine portrait of the saint (fig. 4.4). On the edge of the bowl, a goldfinch is perched, seemingly poised to drink from the bowl. With his right hand, the Baptist points at himself, like Fra Filippo’s Baptist does in the Palazzo Medici Adoration. Between the boy John’s presence, his gesture and the bowl of water he holds, it is clear that baptism is a central referent of the iconography in this panel. Added to the Passion symbolism of the goldfinch, I would suggest however that the focus of the composition is on the Baptism of Christ, rather than on the rite of baptism as a means of entering his fold.

The key to approaching this message is the combination of the bowl of water and the bird, ready to drink. In each of the four Gospels, the Baptism of Christ is recounted with almost identical wording (with the exception of the Gospel of John):

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11).

...And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22)

I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God (Jn 1:33-34).

The Baptism of Christ constitutes a significant marker in the narrative of Christ, for the Holy Spirit descends on him and the voice of God the Father is heard confirming the Christ is his Son. It represents the first occasion that all three elements of the Trinity appear on earth together and confirms Christ’s identity as the Messiah. The event is significant for the Baptist as well – being the person who administers the rite of baptism, and thus precipitates this miraculous meeting of the tripartite Godhead. At this point, the lives of the adult Christ and Baptist intersect in a momentous fashion, and
their paths do not cross again – John goes to his death at Herodias’ court, and Christ goes ultimately, willingly, to his own. Albertinelli’s painting however does not depict the narrative moment of the Baptism of Christ, instead showing the infant Christ Child, and an almost identical (albeit with a profile in reverse), very young Baptist.

The choice to reference so clearly the eventual Baptism of Christ in a depiction of the two principal actors as children calls for careful examination. Many devotional works featuring the young Baptist with the Virgin and Child make similar references, either through the same combination of symbols (Christ and boy Baptist, goldfinch and water) or through other, broader means, such as careful placement of a body of water in the landscape, or of the cross the Baptist carries, or the inclusion of a dove, to convey the same meaning. To include the Baptist, and the twin references to two significant moments in Christ’s life (and in salvific history as a whole) – his Baptism and Passion – in a depiction of the Child, makes use again of the futurity of the infant Christ. The Baptist, when he and Christ were both still in utero, leapt in recognition of Christ during the Visitation. The Baptist has the knowledge of who Christ is before it is confirmed by divine decree, and in fact the Fourth Gospel begins with John’s recognition of Christ, highlighting the importance of John’s role as witness. To include the Baptist, and furthermore a reference to the Baptism, draws attention to the foreknowledge of Christ’s death that exists even at the moment of his birth. Even as a child – with the young John as his playmate – his eventual death may be prefigured. The presence of the young Baptist in this depiction of the Virgin and Child reminds the viewer of the two children’s next meeting, where Christ’s Messianic nature is confirmed. Such complex foreshadowing however exists in balance with the appeal of viewing the close relationship of the Virgin and Child, so that the viewer can at once delight in seeing Christ as an infant, and yet also keep in mind the adult Christ, and his Passion.

Further interest in Christ’s babyhood, juxtaposed against the knowledge of his adult years, can be seen in representations of the Madonna lactans.\(^{61}\) Megan Holmes has observed that the popularity of this motif lapsed from roughly 1440 to the 1470s

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due, the author suggests, to changing notions of decorum and a concurrent trend for increased naturalism.\textsuperscript{62} Even when it returned to “mainstream” religious art, never again reached the same level of favour as in the late Trecento and first decades of the fifteenth century. Tellingly, Holmes writes that the lactans, as a devotional type, appears to have been supplanted by the kneeling Adoration, of the type examined in this chapter and the previous. The boy Baptist appeared across both image types (an other besides), showing the adaptability of the figure and the varying roles he was able to play in different compositions. An example of the Madonna lactans which speaks eloquently of the simultaneous vulnerability of the infant Child and Godhood of Christ, is a Botticelli workshop tondo of the Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist, location unknown (fig. 4.18).\textsuperscript{63} Again, the Baptist has a multifaceted role in this composition, which ultimately returns to the miracle of the Incarnate body of the infant Christ, and the viewers’ own relationship to it. The Baptist’s ability to act as proxy, in addition to his biblical and thematic significance, helped ensure his popularity as a key actor in such devotional works.

Here, as in other late-Quattrocento examples of the nursing mother, the central figural group of the Virgin and Child dominates the composition. The Virgin sits on the edge of an elaborately detailed polychrome marble bench, which through its proportions and grandeur suggests the seat of an enthroned Virgin. The modelling of the Virgin appears to have given the artist some difficulty; with the tendency towards the slim gracefulness of the limbs often imbued by Botticelli appearing incompatible with an effort to imply monumentality and stability in the lower half of the Virgin’s body. Mary’s head is lowered towards her son, and her finely-drawn hands reach around his form to clasp him protectively to her torso. Christ’s body is slightly awkward in its diagonal spread across the Virgin’s lap; his legs tangled under one another and his mother’s arm. This may be a result of the artist trying to inscribe simultaneously a sense of infant vulnerability and divine strength on the same body. Christ’s gaze is intently focused on his mother’s breast. His right hand pushes up the cloth of her dress, not

\textsuperscript{62}Proving this point constitutes the substance of the second half of Holmes’ article. However she makes a summary of the statement at Holmes (1997), 178.

\textsuperscript{63}This tondo, location unknown, does not appear in any catalogues on the artist that I have seen. However, for notes on other Botticelli works featuring the Madonna lactans and a Baptist of a similar age to the painting examined above, see Lightbown 2, cat. C30, 132; with a younger figure of John, but probably less closely connected to Botticelli’s own hand, Lightbown 2, cat. C39, 137. The date suggested for this work by the Fondazione Zeri is c. 1480s-90s, which seems likely based on Botticelli’s known uses of the motif.
revealing any of her skin, but through the wrinkles and folds in the cloth that this movement generates, clearly demonstrating to the viewer his intentions, but not yet suckling. Withholding the action may be related to the impulse Holmes identified, to imbue the body of the Virgin with decorum even as its revelation to the viewer was implied.  

Through the act of nursing, both Virgin and Child are changed. The Virgin shows humility, in offering nourishment from her own body. It is worth noting here that although it was well-recognised in contemporary literature that moral qualities could be passed through the milk from breast to child, the practice of wet-nursing was very common in Quattrocento Italy. Nevertheless, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the very class-based nature of such relationships between women and families, the idea of the Virgin engaged in nursing her son at her own breast appealed as a devotional icon in fifteenth-century Florence. Christ, through being nursed, is demonstrated to be truly mortal, in need of nourishment and the protection of his family at a young age. This very vulnerability in turn highlights the very miraculous nature of his Incarnation, that the divine would manifest in so weak and fallible a body. Furthermore, the implication of needing succour and truly inhabiting a mortal body, is that such a body, inevitably, can and will perish. By being shown the infant Christ helpless, suckling at his mother’s breast, the viewer is able to comprehend the completeness of Christ’s Incarnation and the Virgin’s role as intercessor, and reflect further upon the consequences of that Incarnation. As increasingly in the fifteenth century patrons and artists focused on those most human, tender and natural moments of religious stories, motifs such as the *Madonna lactans*, already popular in the fourteenth century, received renewed attention. This is already seen in images where the Virgin shares an embrace with the infant Christ, but is perhaps exemplified by such images as the workshop Botticelli *tondo*.

Botticelli and his workshop produced many *tondi* of the *lactans* motif, also including the young Baptist; examples can now be found in Baltimore, London, Rome, Turin, and a further was offered to the National Gallery in London in 1900. The *lactans* motif appears often in *tondo* format – the paintings’ likely destinations within the home demonstrating the appeal of such iconography to the private viewer. The appearance of Christ’s kinsman, who shared such an intimate relationship with the Child, seems to

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64 Holmes (1997), 178-179.
65 Ibid., 187-191.
66 Steinberg (1996), 131-133.
67 Olson (2000), 83-86.
fit well with the Virgin’s humble action of nourishing her own child. It recalls the many representations of the *Visitation*, where the children met even before birth, the many parallel representations of the birth of both Christ and the Baptist, and even such scenes as the Salimbeni fresco of the Virgin attending John’s birth. The birth of the Baptist was a popular motif for the *desco da parto*, small painted bowls or salvers given to women for childbirth. The young Baptist is very closely linked with the domesticity of home and hearth, and of women and childbirth, due to the detail and many sources for his infancy narrative, and his importance in and close association with Christ’s. The appearance of the Baptist in the Botticelli workshop *tondo* does not seem out of place, due to both his visual history in Virgin and Child imagery in the second half of the Quattrocento, and due to the attention paid to the saint’s birth and infancy narratives in various textual and visual sources.

The Baptist’s particular involvement in this *tondo* demands closer attention, however. He is present in the composition, but separated from the main figural group by the large stone ledge on which he leans. Furthermore, while mother and Child are absorbed in one another, presenting a perfectly complete compositional group, the Baptist’s attention is entirely directed *towards* the Virgin and Child with no reciprocity. This suggests that he represents the viewer in that both are gazing upon the vision of the Virgin and Child from outside, and from a different level. Nevertheless, the saint is also accorded the privilege of witnessing the intimacy of Mary and Jesus, and within their space, is positioned within touching distance. However, in keeping with the Baptist’s polysemic possibilities in so many of the devotional images examined thus far, the young saint also embodies the intrusion of the future – and Christ’s fate – into the circle of motherly protection represented by the Virgin. By depicting the Baptist as much older than Christ here (far more than the six months or so suggested in the Bible), the differences between their two stages is greatly emphasised: the Baptist wears his hair robe and his cross, characterising him as having already adopted his role as desert prophet. This clash of two time scales has the effect of dragging Christ forward – we are immediately reminded that Christ must age, and must leave his mother’s side sooner rather than later. Furthermore, as Christ’s dependence on his mother’s milk signifies that he inhabits a mortal body, the Baptist here also functions as a representative of the

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Passion, neatly foreshadowed in this composition by the parallel lines of Christ’s body and the thin cross which John holds. The Baptist is another reminder that the eventual end of Christ’s mortal life is the Crucifixion. The resulting juxtaposition between the babyhood of the infant Christ and his simultaneous Messiah-hood with all that it portends is the symbolic undercurrent of this composition, with the Baptist both representing and directing the viewer.

In this chapter I have examined several image types that feature the young Baptist, and symbols or motifs that are often associated with him. In this chapter I have examined several types of work which feature the Baptist alone, including images of the young Baptist as a representative of Florentine ideals of male youth, which seem closely related to Filippo Lippi’s use of the young Baptist figure in the 1450s and 60s. These images lend themselves to a consideration of the place of youth and “Christian hero” role models in Quattrocento Florence. Such images – those that are explicitly patriotic, and also contain the young Baptist – demonstrate to the modern viewer the link between civic pride and Christian faith. However, in examining a wide array of images, it is clear that the resonance of the young Baptist with viewers extended far beyond Florence. The popularity (as evidenced by the large numbers of examples still extant) of such images leads back to the Baptist’s inherent capacity to act as witness. Whatever the primary Christological message of a work, the inclusion of the young Baptist served to assist the viewer in understanding and approaching the Virgin and Child. The Baptist’s privileged proximity to Christ is clearest of all in the rare examples of Christ chin-chucking the young saint, but also in compositions where the Baptist is afforded a glimpse into the intimacy shared by mother and Child. As the Baptist is allowed to share in the closeness of the Virgin and Child, so too is the viewer. This gives a hint of what was to become the most fascinating and compelling of the young Baptist’s many roles: his ability to act as representative for the viewer, and thus of the whole of humanity. This role, and his continuing importance in compositions whose central focus is the Incarnation of Christ, will form the subject of the next three chapters of this thesis.
CHAPTER 5
LEONARDO DA VINCI'S VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS

In the 1480s, one of the most influential representations of the youthful Baptist was produced. It was painted outside Florence, for Milanese patrons, but by an artist who had been steeped in the visual and cultural traditions of Florence during a period when the cult of the Baptist was experiencing great popularity and representations of the saint as a youth were rapidly proliferating. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks* was to become an extremely celebrated and influential work – particularly in the representation of the young Baptist.¹ In this chapter, I will discuss the two versions of

the Virgin of the Rocks, with a particular view to examining how Leonardo both builds on, and yet departs from, established iconography for the compositional group of the Virgin and Child with young Baptist. The Virgin of the Rocks panels were produced for the lay confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Milan, a confraternity whose focus, not surprisingly, was the “birth without stain of sin” of the Virgin.² The original contract for the work, dated 25 April 1483, seems to have been quite specific in its stipulations relating to subject matter and format. However, Leonardo’s finished work appears to many to have been at odds with the patrons’ wishes, and there has been much discussion of the Paris version’s surprising imagery in relation to the contract, inasmuch as one might expect the focus to have been entirely on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. Following my discussion of the permutations of the Virgin and Child with the young St John the Baptist group, I contend that, iconographically the Virgin of the Rocks conforms remarkably closely to what was rapidly becoming a pan-Italian visual language for Incarnational symbolism, which was of course not what the confraternity had asked for. As noted in the previous chapter, during the course of the second half of the fifteenth century the young Baptist motif spread in popularity to regions beyond Florence, and concurrently began to lose some of its civic Florentine connotations. In this study, I will examine Leonardo’s use of the young Baptist as the representative of humanity: the final step in the process of John’s becoming, from biblical saint, to civic icon, to devotional witness.

Leonardo arrived in Milan from Florence around the end of 1482 or the beginning of 1483, after having trained in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio.³ The artist first approached Ludovico Sforza, who was then Duke of Milan, and soon to become ruler of the city, with the hopes of becoming a military engineer or, as almost an afterthought, a court painter. The association was almost certainly brokered by


³ Zöllner (2003), 64.
Lorenzo de’ Medici, which proved the value of being connected to the Medici family – in Leonardo’s case, through the art world of Florence which was still closely tied with Medici tastes and fortunes.\textsuperscript{4} In Milan, Leonardo set up shop with the portraitist Ambrogio de Predis, an artist already well-known to Ludovico.\textsuperscript{5} Their first commission in 1483 was for the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, based at the Franciscan church of S. Francesco Grande, and whose membership included some of the city’s most elite citizens.\textsuperscript{6} The commission was perhaps meant to forge a relationship with the nobles that made up the confraternity, in hopes of future commissions, and to impress Ludovico Sforza sufficiently to take on the still-young artist as his official court painter, although there is some suggestion that Ludovico himself recommended the artists to the brotherhood.\textsuperscript{7}

A contract dated 25 April 1483 lays out the stipulations for the commission, which included a large retable with a carved \textit{predella} and an altarpiece featuring the Virgin, finished with jewels and gilt, designed to house a wooden statue of the \textit{Immacolata}, to be revealed once a year at the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.\textsuperscript{8} The painting submitted by the artists is remarkable for being, if one examines the original contract, so far from the patrons’ wishes, and yet of such attraction to them that a long legal dispute finally elicited a second version of the composition from Leonardo and assistants as long as 25 years after the original contract was drawn up (fig. 5.1).\textsuperscript{9} The reasons for the dispute will be examined below, though scholars have not yet managed to reach a consensus on the ensuing legal battle which led to the second \textit{Virgin of the Rocks}. The two versions, though clearly related, must be treated individually and with some care.

To complicate modern examination of the two altarpieces, they have fared very differently since they left Leonardo’s studio, and are now in virtually incomparable states of repair. The earlier Louvre version was transferred from panel to canvas in

\begin{itemize}
    \item\textsuperscript{4} Syson & Keith, 20.
    \item\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 21.
    \item\textsuperscript{6} Zöllner (2003), 64. Marani also goes into detail about the original specifications and conditions of the contract, such as who was to advise on intellectual matters, the purpose of the work, and its probable original arrangement and use – see Marani, 128-137 for these details, further discussion of the iconography of the two panels follows 137-147.
    \item\textsuperscript{7} Zöllner (2003), 64.
    \item\textsuperscript{8} Zöllner (2003), 77-78. Hannelore Glasser also examines the commission, the original contract and the subsequent litigation in great detail in H. Glasser, \textit{Artists’ Contracts of the Early Renaissance}, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977, 208-270. However, scholars such as Zöllner (2003, 224) reject Glasser’s theory of the circumstances of the second version of the painting.
    \item\textsuperscript{9} For an examination of documents pertaining to the two different versions, see Cannell and Gould, \textit{op. cit.}
\end{itemize}
1806, has been poorly retouched in several places, and has suffered unfortunate yellowing of its varnish. By contrast, the London panel has recently been cleaned (in 2009 – see fig. 5.2), and the difference between the two versions is now striking. The Paris version looks dark, smoky and distinctly yellowed, while the London version shows extraordinarily cool, bright and acidic tones. No suggestion has been made that the National Gallery went too far in its restoration of the Virgin of the Rocks in their collection, however such a question has been raised by French authorities in response to the 2011 restoration by the Louvre of Leonardo’s Virgin and Child with St Anne. Two members of the committee that oversaw the process quit in protest at what has been called an “over-zealous” clean, resulting in tones that are now “too bright”. Evidently, opinions vary wildly on what we now think a Leonardo “should” look like, making comparisons between restored and untouched works even more difficult.

It is well beyond the purview of this thesis to evaluate the cleaning or decision-making processes of either museum, but it is certainly worth noting that it is very possible too much store has been set by Leonardo’s chiaroscuro and sfumato, and the mellow, harmonizing tones often written of as so pleasing, and so essential to Leonardo’s practice. In his Codex Urbinas or Treatise on Painting, Leonardo does discuss the relative difficulty of using colour, line and shadow in painting, and while he states that shadow is more difficult to employ correctly than line, he does not discount either colour or line entirely from the work of a competent painter. Thus one cannot use the artist’s words to justify the view that the extremely shadowy Louvre version is

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10 This damage is described in Zöllner cat. XI, but is plainly visible to the naked eye during even a cursory examination. Luke Syson, who oversaw the restoration of the London panel, delicately calls it “sadly damaged” (Syson & Billinge, 451). In Syson & Keith, he goes into more detail as to the nature of the damage and how it probably occurred, 164-165.

11 Fig. 5.2 graphically illustrates the difference between a cleaned and an uncleaned Leonardo. I was lucky enough to be admitted to the restoration room of the National Gallery in November 2009 before the painting had returned to public view, and see the London Virgin of the Rocks freshly restored, without glass and under natural light (which made a tremendous difference from the Paris version). Elena Greer of the National Gallery kindly supplied me with x-rays and file material from the gallery’s archives, and I was able to speak to the chief restorer Larry Keith about several matters, including the type of gilding used on the haloes and martyr’s cross. On the restoration of the panel, see L. Keith, “Leonardo da Vinci’s “Virgin of the Rocks”: treatment, technique and display”, National Gallery Technical Bulletin 32 (2011), 32-56.


13 For examples of this school of writing, read Kenneth Clark’s work on the artist – this is not to criticize his scholarship, but certainly a lot of his visual analysis of Leonardo’s paintings focuses on his sfumato and twilit tones.

truer to Leonardo’s vision than the brighter, more colourful London panel. Rather, it is necessary to approach the analysis of Leonardo’s works as they appear today with extreme caution, considering the collections and hands they may have passed through, and even Leonardo’s own actions in preparing them.¹⁵

Setting aside such observations, the iconography of both versions can nevertheless be evaluated comparatively. The first Virgin of the Rocks (fig. 5.3) was likely finished by December 1484, when the artists involved in the commission (Leonardo and his associates, the brothers Ambrogio and Evangelista de Predis) were paid virtually all the remainder of the sum agreed upon in the contract.¹⁶ What happened next is not entirely clear – a second version of the painting was begun around the mid-1490s, following the failure of the arbitration process, and the final payment for this version was not made until 23 October 1508.¹⁷ The authorship of the second version is still up for debate, with scholars in disagreement about Leonardo’s level of involvement in its execution. Even why a second version was made remains unclear: Syson & Keith summarise the various versions of events submitted by scholars to date, alongside photographs showing the sort of final arrangement of altarpiece, ancona and statue that might have been intended.¹⁸ However, no scholar has been able to solve the problem decisively. It is possible that the artists themselves sold the first version to a higher bidder than the confraternity, who did not pay the artists the entire amount agreed upon in the contract, and whom the artists deemed to have severely undervalued the finished painting.

While a legal dispute between the confraternity and the artists (Leonardo and Ambrogio – Evangelista having died early in 1491) drew out into the beginning of the

¹⁵ The famous example is Leonardo’s fresco for The Last Supper, for which he used such an unconventional (and ill-advised) preparation that the work had begun decaying off the walls of the refectory even within the artist’s own lifetime (see Marani, 228-229). While neither Virgin of the Rocks has fared as badly as The Last Supper, to be sure, I was so struck by the extreme difference between the yellowed Paris version and the newly-cleaned London version, that it occurred to me that building an argument on the brightness or darkness of one or another version would be almost entirely fruitless. For example, Kenneth Clark in the second edition (1980) of his volume on the artist advances the extraordinary assertion that the Louvre Virgin of the Rocks must have been painted in Florence (before ever the artist went to Milan), saying he knows this beyond doubt “by its twilit tones and delicate naturalism” (Clark (1980), 49-50). He believes Leonardo took this very Florentine picture with him to Milan as proof of his skill, and to show to prospective patrons. This theory has not received support from other scholars, and may serve as a warning about reading too absolutely the value or meaning of the supposed “darkness” of Leonardo’s works.

¹⁶ On the Paris version, see Marani, 128-137, Syson & Keith cat. 31, 164-168; and Zöllner (2003), cat. XI, 223-224. Date in Syson &Keith, 170.

¹⁷ Marani, 136-137; Zöllner (2003), 229.

¹⁸ Syson & Keith, 164-170; see also Zöllner (2003), 223-224.
following century, it seems clear that the artists involved in the execution of the first *Virgin of the Rocks* knew they had produced something of extraordinary artistic merit and monetary value. Most of their side of the dispute concerned what they felt to be a paltry and insufficient bonus, considering the quality of the work they had produced, and the cost of the materials involved in producing the work.\(^{19}\) However, from the confraternity’s perspective, there must have been a strong argument against paying more than the amount agreed to in the original commission, as the painting the artists had produced was so far from the stipulations of the contract. The ownership of the first version, and how exactly it came to be in French hands, is not entirely clear – it seems most likely that the artists themselves held onto it throughout the legal process, and sold it to a (thus far unidentified) French buyer. There is some suggestion that this first version passed through the hands of several wealthy princes, and even that it was confiscated for the collection of the French king as early as 1517.\(^{20}\) However, before one even addresses the second version, one must examine the first, for its iconography is far removed from the stipulations of the confraternity’s contract, and yet proved to be suitable, even appealing, enough to the confraternity for them to endure a lengthy litigation process with the artists.

The confraternity’s contract stipulates, that, amongst other things:

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\text{…On the middle panel is to be painted on the flat surface Our Lady with her son and the angels all done in oil to perfection with the two prophets painted on the flat surfaces in colours of fine quality as specified above… Also, in the place where the infant is, let there be put gold worked to look like *spinnchristi*.}^{21}\]

One can easily see that the first version of the altarpiece, and even the second with its hastily-inserted halos and gilded martyr’s cross, does not fulfill the vision that the patrons had for their commission. In the contract there is no mention of John the Baptist, and certainly not of an infant figure of the saint, unless one considers his presence to partly fulfill the demand for “the two prophets”. There is also only one angel in the finished painting, and he is drawn into the main figural group as a central

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\(^{19}\) Marani, 136-137.  
\(^{20}\) Kemp (2006), 74; Marani, 138-139.  
\(^{21}\) As quoted in Zöllner (2003), 77-78. See also Glasser for a very detailed discussion of the problems that arise when translating the original contract, as well as an excellent general discussion on the terms of the contract. Glasser, 234-241.
character in quite an unanticipated fashion. Other details, such as the brocade that was meant to feature on the underside of the Virgin’s cloak, and the halo or aura of gold that was meant to surround Christ, are also missing from the finished painting. Marani has suggested that such differences may have been agreed upon verbally, without revisions to the written contract being recorded.\(^{22}\) While it was not unheard of for such verbal agreements on subject matter to be made, it seems unlikely that any verbal agreements would directly contradict stipulations made out in the written contract, or that the written contract would not have made provisions for such details to be agreed upon subsequently, in a verbal fashion.\(^{23}\) However, as Kemp has noted, it may be possible that the *Virgin of the Rocks* panel was to be positioned within an elaborate carved wooden setting, which featured a statue of the Virgin adorning the structure.\(^{24}\) This has been further explored by Syson & Keith, who offer a number of examples of similar structures wherein the painted panel acts as a screen for a gilded statue of the Virgin, which is revealed as the true iconographic and devotional heart of the whole carved altarpiece.\(^{25}\) This does, as Kemp suggests, leave room for the possibility that the iconography of the panel was thereby freed up for a more emotive exploration of the general theme of Virgin and Child.\(^{26}\)

Nevertheless, the modern historian is left with an image which appears to have elaborated on the agreed-upon theme in perhaps unexpected ways – and the subsequent legal troubles and existence of the second version of the painting certainly seem to hint at difficulties with the first. Various attempts have been to interpret the painting in some way that references the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Such theories have gained varying degrees of traction. Syson for example cites various biblical passages which can be linked with elements of the image with reasonable certainty.\(^{27}\) However, while some of these may justify the Virgin’s ethereal beauty, the body of water in front of her or the rocky outcrops behind, they do little to make sense of the iconography of the composition as whole. Especially worth interrogating is the fact that while the Virgin forms the apex of the roughly pyramidal construction of the group, it is the

\(^{22}\) Marani, 136.

\(^{23}\) For an examination of the nature and writing of contracts for artistic commissions in Renaissance Italy, see M. O’Malley, *The Business of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. For verbal contracts and verbal amendments to written contracts, when deciding upon subject matter between an artist and patron, see 166-169.

\(^{24}\) Kemp (2006), 73.

\(^{25}\) Syson & Keith, 168, figs 80 and 81 on 169.

\(^{26}\) Kemp (2006), 73.

\(^{27}\) Syson & Keith, 169-170.
interaction between Christ and John that is the focus of the composition, and it is this interaction which does not figure anywhere in the commission documents for the work.

Similarly, various attempts have been made to justify or explain the particular collection of figures in the composition based on various extra-biblical texts Marani advances the view, popular amongst scholars before Syson & Keith, that one of the possible reasons a second Virgin of the Rocks was painted was at the behest of the confraternity themselves who, upon seeing the panel turned in by Leonardo and the de Predis brothers, deemed it too far from their original wishes and contract, and possibly too unorthodox, to be acceptable. Marani proposes a source for Leonardo’s composition that was deemed “semi-heretical” which, if such a source had indeed been used, would be extraordinarily inappropriate. The usual evidence given for this view is not only the very existence of a second version of the panel, but the small but important differences in iconography between the two. However, it is worth noting in response to this theory that most of these changes (which will be explored in further detail below) mainly made the hierarchical relationships between the figures more straightforward, and did not substantively alter the main themes or message of the altarpiece. As Syson has noted, for all the scholarly interest in the work, its meaning is “surprisingly neglected”.

What I wish to propose here is both new to scholarship on the paintings and yet anticlimactic: I suggest that Leonardo learnt and borrowed from his Florentine masters, and wove together existing symbolic and compositional patterns. The result is a work that focuses on the infant Christ’s Incarnation and on his issue from the Virgin, who is in turn, the perfect vessel as ordained by the Immaculate Conception, which is a slight shift of emphasis from what one imagines the confraternity had in mind. This is, as we have seen, the underlying message of so many devotional works of the Quattrocento, and would continue to be after the dissemination of the Virgin of the Rocks’ composition, though Leonardo’s work did have a seemingly immediate influence on

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28 Marani, 137-140, 147-149.
29 Ibid., 139. See also Piccaluga, op. cit. There are numerous problems with this argument, the chief being the idea that Leonardo would have been allowed to use anything but a text of utmost orthodoxy as the basis for a painting to hang in a prominent church in Milan, but also including the difficulties inherent in knowing securely that Leonardo owned or had read the text (the evidence cited by Marani and Piccaluga of the “Libro dell’Amadio” in Leonardo’s personal library is inconclusive at best) and again, the fact that the Virgin of the Rocks is by no means a direct illustration of the text. On the text itself, the Apocalypsis Nova, see A. Morisi-Guerra, “The Apocalypsis Nova: A Plan for Reform”, in Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period, M. Reeves (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 27-50. The text as outlined here sounds extremely unlikely as a source for Leonardo’s painting.
30 Ibid., 164.
that of his peers. The execution of this program is in Leonardo’s work rather remarkable, for its scale and the deft ambiguity with which he weaves together his figures’ polysemic identities. Nevertheless, the Virgin and Child – particularly the Paris version, but also the London panel – fit into a larger trajectory of devotional art within Quattrocento Italy. I will also demonstrate that the infant John’s presence here is essential to the legibility of the composition’s message.

The central figural group of Christ, the Virgin, the Baptist and an angel is enclosed by a rocky backdrop, which shelters them and forms a dark, warm and unmistakably womb-like space, which references the cleft rocks described in the Song of Songs. We can be assured of Leonardo’s intentions here as the tonal differences between shadows in the rocks and across areas such as the Virgin’s dress have remained consistent across the two versions, and throughout the restoration process, implying that Leonardo, rather than the ageing process, created deep pools of shadows into which the depths of the work recede, and out of which the brightly spot-lit faces of the figures emerge. The link to the wilderness here is familiar from many representations of the young John, and despite the botanical accuracy of Leonardo’s plant studies in the foreground of the panel, the overall sense is not of a recognizable location, but of a generalized “wilderness” setting, one which incidentally returns to something closer to the biblical desert reading of wilderness, rather than the forest wilderness of the earlier Quattrocento works.

There are few markers of time and scale. The glimpse of rocks and water visible in the upper left corner of the painting do little to suggest any continuation of space and time beyond the figures in the centre of the composition. The two clothed figures – the Virgin and the angel – wear generally classical or biblical robes rather than specifically contemporary clothing, further contributing to the timelessness of the composition. The lack of these markers precludes the suggestion that the Virgin of the Rocks is in any way an illustration of a specific textual narrative, and instead denotes the composition’s release from the bonds of a specific textual precedent. This is consistent with the many devotional works examined in the previous chapter, and even with the Wilderness Adorations in chapter 3. Whilst particular figural motifs may have had a beginning in

31 For further discussion of this background and Marian references, see Emison; and Kemp (2006), 75-76. The disengagement or relative passivity of the Virgin in Leonardo’s work has been the subject of a very interesting exploration by Rona Goffen, who examines the ideal of motherhood and the relationship of a mother to the most precocious child of all time. See Goffen (1999), op. cit. “O my dove in the clefts of the rock, in the cavities of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely”, Song 2:14.
the Nativity, or the Adoration of the Shepherds or Magi, over time such arrangements become divorced from their narrative context, and form a more general site for the interaction of devotional figures. The dark wilderness that forms the background of the Paris Virgin of the Rocks brings to mind the subdued reverence of Fra Filippo’s Wilderness Adorations, or of Leonardo’s earlier St Jerome. There is the same sense that these figures have gathered here for a moment outside of time and narrative, in order to enact their prophetic roles within Christian eschatology.

The Virgin forms the apex of a roughly pyramidal structure, her face and the top of her left hand seemingly spot-lit. A deep blue cloak falls from her rounded shoulders, leading the eye to her hands, both performing significant actions. With her right hand, the Virgin gently urges the Baptist towards Christ, above whose head her left hand hovers protectively. Following the chain of hand gestures, the viewer encounters the angel at the right of the composition, who looks meaningfully out at the audience whilst pointing very deliberately at the Baptist – a curious transference of one of the Baptist’s own most characteristic motifs. The third hand in this sequence of gestures is Christ’s own. Leonardo’s Christ is an infant with dimpled legs and a perfectly rounded chubby cheek, but he sits up quite steadily and gazes seriously at the Baptist, offering John his blessing with his right hand. The solidity of this Christ figure also suggests something of the “Herculean” power and strength that expresses his godhood. The angel’s left arm gently supports Christ’s back, but this Christ is in no way a helpless, newborn babe. Rather, both Christ and the Baptist, though visually represented as charming babies, are given the gazes, gestures, and powerful interactions of their much-older selves. Leonardo imbues the infants with precocity, divinity and futurity, even at a very early age.

The Virgin kneels before the infant Christ, and the Child sits up alert, focused on his cousin. There are several subtle references to Mary as the mother of Jesus, and which circle around the notion of his issue from her womb. The rounded swathe of gold drapery alludes to the roundness of her abdomen and womb (as in Leonardo’s preliminary drawings for the painting, worked on over a number of years), her gaze is tender, and her hand hovers protectively over the hand of her son. The angel at the Virgin’s left hand, who directs a very deliberate but nonetheless impenetrable gaze at
the audience, has often been identified as Uriel, in an effort to link the combination of figures to the apocryphal story of the angel leading John out into the desert as a boy.32

However, as Syson rightly points out, even according to the inverted pictorial hierarchy subscribed to by Leonardo, this figure is not given the identifiers of an archangel and performs a different role – perhaps that of an intercessor within the composition who guides the audience, a role often occupied by the young John himself.33 Even the gesture of the angel – a very static, deliberate pointed finger – raises issues beyond its peculiar iconographic significance. Though the hand seems painted almost verbatim from a sketch of the same gesture by Leonardo (now in the collection at Windsor Castle), recent examination of the painting has shown the hand to be a later addition to the painting, raising the question of whether it should even be included in an interpretation of Leonardo’s scheme.34 Combined with the angel’s gaze, which looks directly out of the realm of the painting and connects with the audience, I am inclined to believe that even if the angel’s hand is a pentimento, that Leonardo nevertheless intended for the figure to function as intermediary between the figures within the painting and the viewers beyond. By very clearly transferring this role to the angel, the young Baptist has been explicitly relieved of this responsibility, implying that Leonardo had another role in mind for the child.

With John thus stripped of his usual role as instructor to the audience, the question of how else Leonardo wished the figure of the infant saint to be read arises. As many have noted, the Baptist is unidentified in this composition by anything other than the role he plays – he has no animal-skin robe, no martyr’s cross, no banderole bearing a proclamation, and he does not perform his customary actions of running, pointing, or leading the audience to the Holy Family.35 In the Palazzo Medici Adoration the self-consciously performative, narrative action of John looking back over his shoulder to summon Benozzo Gozzoli’s Cavalcade of the Magi, so carefully representative of its contemporary audience quite conspicuously made the youthful John the intermediary

32 As previously noted with other texts and paintings, to interpret the Virgin of the Rocks as a direct illustration of a passage from the Protoevangelium of James, where the angel Uriel is first mentioned in this capacity with the Baptist, one would have to ignore the absence of Elizabeth in the painting, which no Leonardo scholars have elected to comment on. Aronberg Lavin is as to be expected a proponent of the view that the Virgin of the Rocks illustrates exclusively the Protoevangelium. See MAL 1955, 96-97. I note that Snow-Smith identifies the angel as Gabriel, but gives very little justification for this. Snow-Smith, 135.
33 Syson & Keith, 165.
34 Ibid.
35 See for example Marani, 138 (on the distinction between the young Christ and John); and Syson & Keith, 165.
between viewer and Holy Family. In the *Virgin of the Rocks*, both literally and figuratively the young John has moved closer to the central group of the Virgin and Child, joining in their active relationship. Despite the proximity of the Virgin and Child, and the Virgin’s uppermost, central position in the compositional structure of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, it is the interaction between the infant John and Christ that draws the viewer’s attention most. The charge of their intense, locked gazes across the dark, receding vacuum in front of the Virgin, is reinforced by the angel’s pointing finger, and is in fact the central pictorial vector of the panel.

John is represented by Leonardo as the youngest version of the saint (outside of a scene specifically dedicated to the Baptist’s infancy) seen thus far. Though his body shows a little of the Herculean strength with which Christ is characterised, Leonardo has nevertheless added several touches which vividly evoke babyhood, such as the dimples at the saint’s wrist, the heavy roundness of his cheeks, typical of a baby’s pout, and the fuzzy areole of hair through which the infant’s scalp is visible, indicating that his hair has not fully grown in yet. Many of these traits also apply to the infant Christ, making their appearances significantly similar. In choosing to represent John as an infant Leonardo has achieved several outcomes for this painting. First, he has undoubtedly called to the mind of the viewer echoes of such stories of the saint’s childhood as are related in Luke and in apocryphal and devotional texts. While he does not illustrate these texts in a literal sense, instead, like the artists examined previously in this thesis, he effectively draws on the store of knowledge and associations – or intertextuality – that each viewer might have. By not restricting his composition to any specific narrative, the artist is able to create a timeless moment which contains all other narrative moments, but is not bound intractably to one alone.

Thus the viewer can recall John leaping in his mother’s womb at the presence of Christ in Mary’s, or the viewer may remember the many illustrious privileges and prerogatives listed by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Legenda Aurea*, or any number of moments from sermons and other texts might collapse into the non-specificity of Leonardo’s collection of themes and figures. A number of scholars have also noted that St Francis, the founder of the confraternity’s order, was viewed as an *Alter Joannes*. The Baptist was a namesake of Francis, whose civilian name was Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, and in early, influential biographies of Francis, writers drew a specific link

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36 See for example Snow-Smith, 139; and Zöllner, 74.
between the two saints, emphasising similarities between St Francis’ family and John’s. Thus, it has been argued, the young Baptist’s presence in the composition could be a representation of the founder of the patrons’ order. Whilst I do not think this is the only, or even the chief reason for his inclusion here, this particular resonance of the Baptist would have added a pleasant and highly relevant layer of meaning to the painting for the intended viewers. It must be noted that by the 1480s, at least in Florence where Leonardo first trained and worked, the inclusion of the young Baptist was rapidly becoming standard in compositions of the Virgin and Child, and for the depth he added to such devotional works, rather than for any specific connections either to the city, or to other saints. The suggestion that John is present primarily as a representative of St Francis must be firmly rejected, in favour of an understanding of the nuanced role he could play in such compositions.

This deliberate referential ambiguity is a common tool of Leonardo’s: whilst the dramatic backdrop of the Virgin of the Rocks might remind one viewer of the Song of Songs and make a particularly Marian reference, it could also be read as a reference to the wilderness or desert into which John retreated as a youth, and from whence he returned to join Christ at adulthood. Indeed, scholars have often recognized this multivalence of Leonardo’s symbols, usually deemed subtlety on his part to match the subtlety of his application of shadows and line. Leonardo’s immediate predecessors also allowed a similar multi-layered reading of their images of the youthful Baptist, as I have shown. This is not just a common tool of Leonardo’s but, as has been discussed in chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, one common to many of the artists who have used the young John in their compositions. His ability to call to mind many referents for the viewer is what made him suitable both for a portrait glorifying the citizens and achievements of Florence, as in Jacopo del Sellaio’s painting (fig. 4.4), and also much more intimate devotional images which were meant to appeal to the viewer for use during private prayer, as in Albertinelli’s Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist (fig. 4.17). The lack of visible or usual markers in Leonardo’s works, such as the martyr’s cross for John, or a halo for Christ, might be unusual for the time, but reliance

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37 Snow-Smith, 139.
38 I note that Végh does a good job of placing the John-Francis connection into perspective within the iconography of the whole painting, whereas for example Snow-Smith rather overstates this aspect of John’s role, without providing very convincing evidence for many of her statements.
39 Zöllner for example seems inclined to recognize both meanings as possible for Leonardo’s rocky cliffs.
on the viewer’s knowledge of the multiple meanings and associations of a particular figure was not.

Leonardo’s execution, and the undoubted beauty of such parts of the paintings as the Virgin’s head, I believe has led observers to assume that the paintings’ compositions must have been far more innovative than they in fact were. Rather, I contend that Leonardo built upon iconographic combinations and image types already seen in Florence, where he trained as a young artist, and combined them in a complex and subtle fashion. For example, the use of the infant Baptist as representative of mankind was foregrounded by the many Florentine works where a youthful version of the figure acted as intermediary between audience and Madonna, or showed his devotion to the Virgin and Child in an exemplary fashion that the audience could follow. The execution of the exchange between Christ and the infant Baptist is deft and nuanced, allowing for deepening understanding of the significance of both children’s’ gestures as contemplation of the work continues.

Syson has explained the Baptist’s striking nakedness by identifying the Baptist as a representative of all of mankind, going naked before the Lord. 40 Others are largely silent on the subject of why the Baptist, whose iconography as I have shown had become all but set for at least Florentine artists of the latter half of the fifteenth century, should appear here without his usual identifiers. Rona Goffen, in discussing the restraint with which Leonardo usually identifies his holiest subjects, notes that the artist’s Virgin and Child are mostly recognizable simply because they are themselves. 41 I am inclined to believe that the Baptist is identifiable here without the signifiers of animal-skin and cross, simply because he is there. By the 1480s, the relationship between the young Christ and the young John, while not yet as ubiquitous as it would become by the end of the fifteenth century, would certainly have been a familiar enough motif that it could be assumed that viewers would recognize the two children. Leonardo, in building on the traditions of Florentine works, could depict the very privileged, close relationship of the young Baptist and his cousin Christ with such understatement simply because the Florentine art world had already established that if any figure was worthy (and likely) to approach Christ at his youngest and most vulnerable, it was the young John. Leonardo was able to explore the subtler dynamics of the relationship of the young John and Christ Jesus, because the existence of that relationship had by this point become a

40 Syson & Keith, 171.
41 Goffen (1999), 37.
familiar part of the visual canon of representations of Christ, not just in Florence, but in other parts of Italy too, as shown in Chapter 4. However, the gestures of the two children then become doubly significant, not just for their symbolic meanings, but as a means to distinguish the two infants from one another, amongst the ambiguous visual hierarchy Leonardo has devised for the figural group.

However, with great economy, Leonardo has imbued the gestures of both children, as well as their relative states of dress and undress, with symbolic significance. As Steinberg has noted, the nudity of the infant Christ could be taken as a sign of naturalism on the part of the artist or, as he has argued persuasively, part of a system of signs that prove to the viewer the completeness of the infant Christ’s mortal incarnation. In the Paris Virgin of the Rocks, Christ is visibly nude, without even a trace of gossamer cloth about his hips, but his left leg, which is so deliberately crossed over his right, ultimately shields the sight of his genitals from the viewer outside the painting (fig. 5.4). John, by contrast, is both clothed but revealed – a skein of the lightest silk is visible around his body, almost only discernible around his torso and beneath his clasped hands where highlights catch the edge of the cloth, but present enough to signify the idea of being clothed and to mark a point of difference with the gloriously untouched, unconcealed body of Christ (fig. 5.5). John’s legs are arranged in a kneeling position, his weight bearing forwards onto his left foot, adding an air of eagerness and beseeching to his clasped hands. Between his legs, just discernible in the shadows, are his genitalia – just visible to the viewer, but not highlighted, as Steinberg has noted that Christ’s genitalia so often was in Quattrocento art.

The implications of John’s clothed but naked body must be balanced against those of Christ’s naked but concealed one. As near-identical infants, the revelation of one child’s body and the concealment of the other depends upon the likeness of the children, to eventually emphasise the great disparity between one, the greater, and the other, the lesser. The two children’s gazes are fixed entirely upon one another: the Baptist sees the Lord, and Jesus in turn blesses him. Within the realm of the painting, John can see Christ’s genitalia. He can see before him the proof of the completeness of the Incarnation. That it is not shown to the viewer outside the painting is immaterial – because John here has become, instead of the figure who invites the viewer into the

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42 Zöllner notes that the beginnings of this position for John may have come from the marble retable by Mino da Fiesole in the Fiesole cathedral, ca. 1464-66. See Zöllner (2003), 67, ill. on 77. As shown in chapter 4 of this thesis, Mino da Fiesole and his clients also appear to have exhibited a keen interest in the young St John.
painting, the very representative within the painting of the viewers themselves. The viewer – humanity – goes naked before the Lord. John, on his knees before the muscular, Herculean form of the infant Christ, prays fervently before Jesus, his hands reaching forward even as they are clasped in prayer. Christ, in his wisdom and generosity, blesses the figure of John, bestowing his favour on all those he represents. I am inclined to combine this John with the touches of water throughout the composition and read him as a representative of those who have been baptized, and have entered the Church – those people may approach Christ, lay themselves bare before him, and receive his blessing. John, despite (or perhaps because of) his place in the wilderness, represents the cleansing touch of baptism. This is how he is able to represent humanity before Christ.

Christ, as an infant, is by implication close to the Virgin, as the viewer’s mind readily focuses upon the vessel from which the Child has sprung. Here the iconography of the composition returns to expand upon the importance of Mary and of her Immaculate Conception. In the Paris Virgin of the Rocks, an intricate system of echoes between landscapes, figures and meanings circulates throughout the whole composition. The figures are positioned within a dark, hollow space, sheltered by the impassable cliffs of the rocky landscape, which could also allude to the impenetrable walls of the hortus conclusus, a symbolic imagining of the Virgin’s womb. This reminds the viewer further of the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception within the sanctified space of Anna’s womb. At the centre of the space – already womb-like in nature – is the Virgin, and at the centre of her figure is a dark, hollow space, across which the exchange of gazes between the Baptist and Christ occurs. The composition is filled with a series of concentric, circular spaces which evoke the chain of vessels which have led to Christ’s Incarnation: first Anna, then the Virgin. The most important interaction in the painting uses as its site the empty space at the centre of the Virgin, in turn at the centre of the protective rocky walls of the composition.

Visually, the theme of the work is the duality of concealment and revelation – the darkness of the shadows juxtaposed with the brightly-lit faces of the figures, the openness of the space in which the main figures are arrayed before the viewer, compared with the high walls of rock behind them, the concealment of Christ’s body to the viewer outside the painting, but his relative openness to the Baptist within the

43 On the Marian symbology of the composition, see particularly Snow-Smith; Syson & Keith, 169-170; Végh (throughout); and Zöllner (2003), 67-74.
composition. Each of these depends in turn on the wall and the void. At its heart, the painting echoes at every stage the inner sanctum of the Virgin’s womb, with her person forming the protective layer, neatly acted out in her gesture of protection over her son’s head. The Virgin’s vessel-like nature is of course only permissible, for the commissioning confraternity, due to her own Immaculate Conception. This is not explicitly illustrated in the *Virgin of the Rocks*, but despite the importance of the interaction between Christ and the Baptist; there are references to the Virgin, her cleansed nature, and all she represents throughout – and indeed, central to – the whole composition.

The second version of the composition (fig. 5.6), now in the National Gallery in London, shares the same figural group, but nevertheless also incorporates a number of small but significant changes from the Paris original.44 Theories abound as to why exactly a second version of the *Virgin of the Rocks* was painted. Furthermore, whilst the provenance of the London panel is relatively straightforward, having come directly from the Chapel and Church for which the work was originally intended, it is not entirely clear what happened to the first (Paris) version in the aftermath of the legal trouble between the confraternity and the artists. However, what has been agreed upon amongst scholars is that Leonardo was less involved in the execution of the second panel than the first.45 Furthermore, due to the nature of the changes from first to second – namely, making the iconography generally clearer-cut and more legible – makes it tempting to believe that the changes were proposed by the confraternity, or completed by the de Predis after Leonardo was no longer associated with the work.

This theory seems very credible, particularly for the purposes of this thesis. It would be extraordinary if Leonardo, acknowledged within his own lifetime as an artist of superlative grace and talent, had been asked to simplify his interpretation of the theme of the Immaculate Conception, and apply the usual gilt halos of quotidian sacral acknowledgement – and furthermore, if he had refused. Leonardo may have been contractually obliged to begin a second version of the panel (for not fulfilling the terms of the contract with his first version), and started it in hopes of receiving the payment for his work he thought he deserved, but baulked at the changes demanded of him by the confraternity, leaving de Predis and whatever assistants he could find to finish the

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44 See Syson & Keith, cat. 32, 171-172; and Zöllner (2003), cat. XVI, 229.
45 Though the degree of involvement suggested varies from scholar to scholar, it is universally recognised that the London *Virgin of the Rocks* was not all Leonardo’s own work, and that traces of other hands may be detected.
panel as best they could.\textsuperscript{46} This would also account for the technique used for the gilt heightening on the halos and martyr’s cross. During the recent restoration of the London panel, chief restorer Larry Keith discovered that the technique used was the application of tin which was then coloured gold, a technique more often used in polychrome sculpture, rather than painting.\textsuperscript{47} This would seem to support the theory that it was de Predis rather than Leonardo who applied the gilding.

Marani has even suggested that the prominent figure of the infant John the Baptist may have caused most of the confraternity’s outrage at the first \textit{Virgin of the Rocks}.\textsuperscript{48} However, in chapter 4 of this thesis, I demonstrated that between Fra Filippo’s use of the young Baptist figure for the Medici family in the 1450s and 60s, and Leonardo’s use of it in the 1480s, the Baptist figure had begun to shed its associations as purely a civic emblem, and had begun to take on far broader appeal in a number of roles related to Christ’s Incarnation. These works were beginning to be produced outside Florence by the 1480s, but even within Florence, the use of the young Baptist as witness to the Incarnation, playmate to Christ, and representative of the Passion were beginning to outnumber those where his primary function was representative of the city. For the composition of the \textit{Virgin of the Rocks} to have been acceptable not once but twice to the members of the Milanese confraternity, we must assume that the young Baptist could be understood as relevant to viewers beyond Florence.

On the balance of the evidence, particularly with the documents now available to scholars, it seems likely that the main cause of the legal tussle between the artists and the confraternity was simply money. It seems the artists felt that they deserved more for their finished work than had either been agreed in the contract, or than the brotherhood had actually paid out, and so probably withheld the panel (possibly selling it on to another interested party in the meantime) until the confraternity agreed to pay them more. When Leonardo and the surviving de Predis, Ambrogio, wrote to Ludovico Sforza to complain of their miserly treatment at the hands of the confraternity, they stated that they had been grossly underpaid because none of the members truly understood art, “because a blind man cannot judge colour”.\textsuperscript{49} Clearly, the artists felt their work had been drastically under-valued. Nevertheless, iconographic changes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[46] The London panel has been attributed variously to Giovan Antonio Bottraffio, Marco D’Oggiono, de Predis, and so on. See for example discussion in Marani, 140-142. Syson for his part labels both versions “autograph”, with conditions, in Syson & Keith, 172-174.
\item[47] Larry Keith, pers. comm.
\item[48] Marani, 138.
\item[49] As quoted in Bambach, 231.
\end{footnotes}
between the first and second versions are visible, whether or not they were part of the
disagreement between the two parties, and certainly warrant investigation. It was felt
necessary, by whomever and for whatever reason, to adjust the hierarchy portrayed
between the figures, and to make their heavenly status clearer to the viewer. Whilst the
basic composition of the painting was evidently deemed acceptable by the confraternity,
its subtlety and air of mystery apparently was not, and so the London Virgin of the
Rocks, though without substantive differences, is rather more straightforward than its
Paris counterpart.

The Virgin of the London panel is larger than her Paris precedent, and thus has a
more solid and dominating presence in the London composition, already directing
further attention to her as the titular figure of the commission. The modeling of her face
appears more solid and polished, with her head presenting as a fuller three-dimensional
object in space. Both of these observations must be made carefully however,
considering the difference in condition of the two versions. The pointing gesture of the
angel has been removed, allowing for the interaction of the Virgin’s hand and the top of
Christ’s head to take place uninterrupted. Christ has also attained an even more
monumental stature in the London version; his limbs ripple with a weighty muscle-mass
more in keeping with conventional depictions of his divine greatness than the (relative)
babyish vulnerability of his body in the Paris version. The Baptist has increased in size
overall, and been brought closer to Christ. He is more explicitly identified in the London
version: the sheer sash tied around his midsection is clearer here, and could stand for
both his customary animal-skin garment and his banderole, and a long, unmistakable
martyr’s cross leans against his right shoulder. This careful and very deliberate
identification may be in order to distinguish him more precisely from the precocious
Christ and to ensure that the viewer does not place the two on an equal footing. Even the
angel in the London Virgin of the Rocks has been given this same explicating treatment:
the figure is more placid and passive, no longer engaging the audience, but rather
occupies more space, has a pair of wings, and gently mirrors the Virgin’s figure with
softer versions of both her pose and the colours of her raiment. Even the landscape of
the London panel participates in the iconographic program of the composition more
legibly: see for example the quite unambiguously literal shapes of the rock formations –
the opening above John, the phallic shape above the Virgin, and the two shapes

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50 Ames-Lewis notes this modelling of the Virgin’s head is one of the ways to distinguish this painting as substantially later than the Paris version. Ames-Lewis (London: 1989), 43.
combined above the angel, present in the Paris version but made clearer in the London painting.

Both the Paris and London versions of the Virgin of the Rocks are extraordinary works, for the unity with which every element of the compositions is linked to every other, and the way in which every figure and geological feature serves to underline the works’ central theme. The panels are also both of a scale unprecedented for this iconography – the Paris version (followed by the London version) marks an early and notable use of iconography more common in private devotional works than in large-scale public altarpieces. However, as I have shown, Leonardo’s use of each particular figure – the Virgin, Christ, the young Baptist and the angel – is not entirely new. The existence of the two versions of the painting have perhaps allowed speculation that the first was rejected for some startling reason, when it now seems likely that the artists withheld the Paris version, as they bartered with the patrons of the work for more money. The whole of the composition is at once masterfully arranged, but also far less controversial than scholars have at times imagined. The similar, if slightly diluted, iconography of the second version confirms the roles of all figures, including that of the young Baptist as representative of humanity before God.

Leonardo’s use of the infant Baptist as a proxy for humanity in the Virgin of the Rocks had some influence on the artist’s peers and successors. The “humanation” of the Baptist will be explored further in the following chapter, with particular reference to the alternating concealment and revelation of his – and Christ’s – genitalia. In the present chapter, I will finish with a brief examination of the influence of the Virgin of the Rocks’ young Baptist in a visual sense. The Baptist’s bent right knee, resting on the ground and often highlighted with a bright light along the length of the thigh, appears in many late Quattrocento compositions, and becomes a very recognizable pose for the Baptist; one common enough to almost warrant a place amongst the other markers of the figure, such as his curly hair and animal-skin robe. Whilst in many compositions the pose is merely used as a quotation of Leonardo’s Baptist, in others it takes on some of the iconographic significance of the Virgin of the Rocks figure. For the former type, I will examine an enameled terracotta tondo from the workshop of the della Robbia, who worked in medium which was relatively cheap and reproducible. For the latter, I will refer to a painting which reverses Leonardo’s figure, and in so doing paradoxically makes John’s role as representative of humanity all the clearer.
Several of the iconographic features discussed thus far, including the pose of John the Baptist from the *Virgin of the Rocks*, converge in the enameled terracotta *tondi* that emerged from the della Robbia workshop. As the cheaper alternative to the painted altarpiece, terracotta devotional *tondi* were produced, copied and disseminated widely, with the greatest centre of their production being the della Robbia workshop in Florence. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of these (often-replicated) objects is the *tondo* now in the Louvre (fig. 5.7), made c. 1500. The *tondo* now in Paris is one of the later works from their atelier. Numerous earlier examples of works featuring the young Baptist accompanying the Virgin and Child had been produced by the della Robbia and their assistants from around the 1480s. These works are not necessarily particularly innovative iconographically, but are instead useful objects to consider for the way in which they demonstrate the popularity of certain motifs and image types. The Paris *tondo* combines the kneeling form of the Virgin with the peeping faces of the animals, the sleeping figure of Christ with a hand on his mouth, and a young Baptist whose position is a quotation – albeit slightly cramped due to the circular format of the work – of the young John in the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

The della Robbia figure is more upright and less beseeching than his Leonardo predecessor, and here is outfitted in many of the identifying accoutrements of the Baptist figure accumulated over the course of the fifteenth century, including the animal-skin robe and the unruly hair. However, the positioning of the legs is unmistakably Leonardo’s – the right leg is planted knee-first into the ground, giving stability; the left is bent and suggests, just barely, forward movement, lending an air of agency and activity to the otherwise static form of the young saint. Combined with the other details of the composition – especially the distinctly mid-Quattrocento kneeling Virgin, clearly inspired by such figures as Fra Filippo and Botticelli’s Adoring Virgins – the overall effect is one of modest devotion, rather than of grand mystery, as in Leonardo’s Immaculate Conception-themed work. I see no suggestion here that the young Baptist is meant to act as representative for humanity – rather, he is probably here because by the turn of the fifteenth century, it was *de rigueur* for devotional compositions to include a youthful version of the saint. No doubt the patrons asked for a

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52 See for instance numerous examples now in the Bargello in Florence, and examples now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, and the Collezione Simonetti in Rome.
version of the figure from the work of the very popular Leonardo, or from one of the many other works which immediately featured a derivative of it. The della Robbia tondo combines many devotional elements which would, by 1500, have been readily recognisable to the viewer, and would constitute an easily-followed guide to devotion. The della Robbia tondo is but one demonstration of the influence of Leonardo’s visual forms, and shows that though his figures could be visually copied, their intended significance was not always transferred across to the new work.

By contrast, in Bastiano Mainardi’s panel painting of the *Virgin and Child with the Archangel Gabriel and the Young St John the Baptist* (fig. 5.8), location unknown, Mainardi has reversed the position of John, but increased the extent to which he functions as the “everyman” in approaching Christ. 15 The Virgin sits in the corner of a large, gracefully-appointed room, whose furnishings and decorations are simple but imply quiet prosperity. Her large figure dominates the room. Although she is seated, she is much larger even than the archangel Gabriel who waits at the left of the composition, watching the interaction between Christ and John. Christ’s wispy hair and little limbs suggest infancy, but the seriousness of his face and the surety with which he bestows a blessing on the Baptist demonstrate his precociousness. At the top of the panel, directly in line with the infant Christ, is a dove, with a concentrated spray of gold rays emanating from beneath its belly. Above even this is a series of gold rays which make reference to God the Father, out of the frame of the image. The inclusion of the young Baptist, and lack of explicit depiction of God, suggests that this devotional image looks forward to the Baptism, where John is privileged to witness the confirmation of what he knew in the womb; that is the Messiah-hood of Christ. However, whilst this future event is heavily prefigured here, the image has other resonances as a more straightforward depiction of Christ and his vessel the Virgin, whose frame visually supports his.

The characterisation of the young John makes his identification in this image as the Baptist reasonably clear. His hair is long and curly, he is dressed in an animal skin, and he carries a thin cross and a banderole. The banderole he appears to present to

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53 The literature on Mainardi is extremely limited. For some background information on the artist, though none specifically on this work, see A. G. M. Assonitis, *Bastiano Mainardi: Painter of Altarpieces in Renaissance Tuscany*, Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2011, esp. 12-14. See also a list of paintings likely by Mainardi, which Assonitis offers some comments on, in B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Florentine School*, 2 vols, London: Phaidon, 1909, reprinted 1963, 1, 125-128. Again, this painting is not listed (as its location is unknown) but Berenson gives some idea of dates and subject matter. Given the unknown location and lack of details on this work, I must abide by the Fondazione Zeri suggestion for dating here, which is quite broad: 1475-1513.
Christ, as if John offers Christ recognition of his true status in return for the blessing he bestows. His pose is activated by his alternating bent knees, implying the forward motion suggestive of his forerunner role, and constituting an exact repeat of the Baptist’s pose in Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, albeit seen here from behind. Despite the precision with which the boy’s identity is conveyed, and the references elsewhere to his future administration of the rite of Baptism to Christ, the reverence with which John approaches Christ also presents him as a role model for the contemporary worshipper. With his back to the audience, he invites the viewer to join him, and to follow his example in approaching Christ with the offering of recognition and praise for him as the Son of God. Where in Filippo Lippi’s Wilderness *Adorations* the boy Baptist’s gestures and glances to an unseen audience outside of the frame, suggested that he was inviting followers to join him in his approach to Christ, here the space at the front of the wide, open room, and the Baptist’s genuflection, invite the viewer to copy the boy John. In Mainardi’s panel, the Baptist has become both the intermediary between audience and Madonna and the representative of the viewer within the realm of the composition itself. Here again, the artist is dependent on the polysemy of the Baptist figure, allowing the composition to be contemplated on a number of successive levels. Mainardi’s use of Leonardo’s Baptist figure shows recognition of its evocative qualities: of forward motion, of obeisance, of prayer and of devotion.

In conclusion, the chequered fate of Leonardo’s original commission for the *Virgin of the Rocks* has overshadowed both the composition’s innovation and its orthodoxy. Between the Paris and London versions one can find a nuanced representation of some of the central mysteries of the Christian faith, including both the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception and Christ’s Incarnation. As an adjunct to the visual exploration of both of these themes, the infant Baptist represents both the customary futurity of Christ, and the presence of the viewer themselves. From communicating with the audience outside of the painting, the Baptist has become an embodiment of the faithful, representing their approach to Christ. This has been achieved partially through the interaction between Christ and the infant John in the composition, and also through the Baptist’s characterization here, naked and humble before the infant Lord. The repetition, with subtle changes, of the original Paris composition in the second, London version confirm the roles of all involved, as a more straightforward iconographic system is put in place. In this Study I have discussed Leonardo’s further exploration of the role of the young Baptist, building on the examples of primarily Florentine works seen in the
previous chapter, and examined two examples of artists following in the letter and spirit of his composition. In the following Study, I will examine further evidence of John’s use as witness to the Incarnation and his increasing closeness with the infant Christ.
As has been shown by Leo Steinberg, one of the most ineluctable symbols of the completeness of Christ’s Incarnation on earth was Christ’s genitalia – exposed, hinted at and otherwise drawn attention to in visual art. Steinberg has deemed this the *ostentatio genitalum*, or the self-conscious display of Christ’s genitals, similar to the *ostentatio vulnerum* of his wounds. This chapter examines the little-noticed or commented upon phenomenon of the exposure of the infant Baptist’s genitals, as a pendant motif to the display of the infant Christ’s. Although uncommon, such exposure is nevertheless striking and deserves analysis. In this chapter will consider the young Baptist’s role in images whose focus is the display of the infant Christ’s genitals, which is a permutation of Steinberg’s original theory on the motif which has hitherto not been explored. Further, I will then examine a number of examples where the Baptist’s concealed or revealed genitalia also contributes to the message of the work, in addition to or in place of Christ’s own exposed manhood. As will be seen, the meaning of John’s exposure as a compositional element may be fluid and changeable, dependent on the surrounding iconography. This chapter’s investigation will shed light on a feature of devotional iconography which has been thus far overlooked, which will in turn deepen our understanding of the motif of Christ’s exposed genitalia.

The Baptist is of course present in a large number of works whose compositional and iconographical centre is the display of Christ’s complete manhood. These demonstrate the orthodoxy of the motif as part of the iconographic system of devotional

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2 Steinberg (1983), 1.
works, and also the Baptist’s commonplace participation in scenes of adoration of the Christ Child’s body. As a testament to the symbol’s orthodoxy and ubiquity in Renaissance art, I note that Christ’s exposed genitalia has featured already in a number of works examined throughout this thesis. These include for example the Botticelli Piacenza tondo, where the infant Christ gazes directly up at his mother with his right hand very deliberately touching his genitals (fig. 4.12), and Fra Filippo’s Palazzo Medici Adoration, where they are visible through the cloth of the infant Christ’s wrapping (fig. 3.6), as well as others besides. A further example is a large tondo of the Nativity from the workshop of Filippino Lippi, location unknown, which incorporates the young John, the Holy Family (in the form of a large, quite impressive figure of Joseph next to the Virgin), and a pair of shepherds in the background (fig. 6.1).  

The infant Christ, reclining against a sack, touches his genitals with his left hand. The Virgin looks on with an expression of restrained joy, Joseph with indulgent affection, and the young Baptist with something approaching keen interest. The young Baptist here is attired fully as we have come to expect by the end of the fifteenth century, with characteristic dark curls, a thin cross and the animal skin robe. His role here is to render further witness to Christ’s Incarnation – and, taking into account the significance of the infant Jesus’ gesture of self-touch – his full inhabitation of humanity. The Baptist is afforded a place adjacent to the Holy Family, visually integrated by his comfortable position, leaning into Joseph’s lap to look over his legs to the infant Christ and his display of his manhood. In the upper right hand corner, the shepherds are engaged in what looks to be a lively dispute over the veracity and importance of what they witness, with the shepherd on the left disbelieving the assurances of the shepherd on the right. The young Baptist however has no such difficulties in accepting the godhood of the child before him; rather he has been admitted into the inner circle of the Holy Family through the strength of his belief, his kinship with Christ and their shared, intertwined futures.

In many instances of the display of Christ’s genitalia, the young Baptist appears to be actively engaged in looking at the proof of Christ’s humanity before him, with his pose indicating his interest, as in Botticelli’s Piacenza tondo (fig. 4.12) and the example above. In some works he is very clearly positioned to receive the best view, with his

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3 Zeri lists the work as autograph, but Zambrano & Nelson attribute it to “Maestro di Memphis”. See Zambrano & Nelson, cat. R29, 610. Zambrano & Nelson do not suggest a date for this tondo (nor do they list a location), so here I will follow the Fondazione Zeri, placing it c. 1480-1510.

4 For “Images of Self-Touch” see Steinberg (1996), Excursus XXIX, 180-184.
head and eyes facing in the relevant direction, staring directly at Christ’s exposed genitalia. In others, he is positioned along the same compositional line as Christ’s deliberately displayed genitals, implying a close connection between the two symbols, even as the Baptist may appear to gaze elsewhere (often up at Christ’s face), as in two examples which will be examined below (figs 6.2 and 6.3). The logic of such an arrangement is two-fold. First, a significant part of the Baptist’s biblical mission is to act as witness of Christ’s Incarnation, and to confirm both his Messiah-hood and humanity. Second, as we have seen, the young Baptist was often used either as an intermediary between the audience and the Virgin and Child, or increasingly, as a representative of the audience themselves, culminating in his role as representative of the whole of humanity itself in the *Virgin of the Rocks*. In the works I will discuss next, I do not believe that his representative role is so grand or as broad as in Leonardo’s work, but that rather his gaze both seeks, on behalf of the audience, and confirms – as witness – the evidence of Christ’s complete Incarnation.

John’s role of witness to Christ’s humanity, in the form of his exposed genitalia, is well in evidence in a pair of *tondi* which use the Baptist’s familiar “ECCE AGNUS DEI” banderole to great testamentary effect. The first is a *tondo* of the Holy Family by the School of Filippino Lippi c. 1480-1510, now in Lima (fig. 6.2). The second is a slightly ovoid *tondo* by Signorelli c. 1491-94, now in the Musée Jacquemart-André, featuring the Virgin, Child and young St John, with an older figure on the right of the composition who remains unidentified (fig. 6.3). In both of these compositions, John is depicted as a young boy, of perhaps five or six, dressed in a readily identifiable fashion as the Baptist. In both works, he interacts with a willing Christ: in the Lippiesque *tondo* Christ appears to have taken possession of John’s cross and happily raises his hand in blessing of the Baptist who kneels beneath him. John’s face is tilted upwards, allowing him an unobscured view of Christ’s exposed genitalia. Beneath Christ’s body, which stands on his mother’s lap, the Baptist’s banderole unfurls, underlining what the Baptist

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5 Date from Fondazione Zeri.
T. Henry and L. Kanter, *Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings*, New York: Rizzoli, 2002, Pl. IX, 118-19 and cat. 35, 187; and T. Henry, *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012, 71. A few relevant notes on the Signorelli: the painting was originally a circular *tondo*, but was altered to its present ovoid shape in 1914, according to Henry & Kanter, 187. The identity of the older man is unclear – apparently, he is most likely to represent a shepherd, as there is no precedent or other evidence for Joseph being depicted this way in Signorelli’s art – see Henry & Kanter, 118. I note here also that Henry (in 2012) deduces that the painting was probably made for a Florentine patron, considering the presence of John. However, as I have shown, particularly by the 1490s the figure of the young John was not restricted only to Florence.
and the audience see – that is, proof of the completeness of Christ’s Incarnation in human form. The Virgin’s hands are about her son’s waist, and she appears to have quite deliberately raised the cloth of her cloak which wraps around Christ’s body, in order to show John – and by extension, the viewer – proof of her son’s true manhood. The liveliness of Christ and his left hand firmly grasping John’s cross imply his joyful acceptance of his fate, offered by the Baptist who kneels below. The angel at the far left of the composition appears to gaze past the Virgin, on whom the other angel’s rapt attention is fixed, to the waiting audience beyond in the manner of the young John in Filippo Lippi’s Camaldoli Adoration, seeking to confirm the viewer’s understanding of these facts. Here John’s biblical role combines with the symbol of Christ’s Incarnation, reinforcing with his proclamation that here is both the man and the God.

In Signorelli’s tondo, the banderole has moved even closer to Christ, who grips it in his right hand, and even closer to his exposed genitalia. The tone of this composition is more intimate, but less joyful, than that of the previous painting. Nevertheless, the young Baptist has his role to play here too, which is to bear and pass on to Christ the written confirmation of his identity, which unfurls directly next to the infant Christ’s genitals. Both the Baptist, on the far left of the composition, and Christ, standing on the edge of the Virgin’s lap closest to John, appear to look at the Virgin for her reaction. The Virgin, whose body forms a large, dark expanse which occupies much of the interior space of the tondo, holds up her left hand. The placidity of her face would suggest that her hand could not be taken to mean alarm. It could be either a gesture of acquiescence to her child’s wishes, or one of warning, cautioning him to wait. Standing on the edge of her knee, the infant Christ’s left leg is raised, his thigh foreshortened with some success, and his foot poised to step forward towards John. The Baptist’s attention is directed to the Virgin, as the apex of the composition, though he is positioned very close to the infant Christ’s body. Here he functions as the harbinger as much as the forerunner, declaring quite literally that despite the infant that he and the audience see before them, here indeed is the Lamb of God. This is not a particularly unique use of the Baptist, or of incarnational iconography as a whole, but worth mentioning here for its very demonstrative use of the Baptist, the banderole – so often used to identify the Baptist as much as the Christ to whom it refers – and the motif of Christ’s exposed genitals.

7 On the subject of such hand gestures, Baxandall notes that raised hands signify speaking of a holy matter or devotion, but surely the figures in this tondo already make the holiness of the subject clear. See Baxandall, 65-67.
I will briefly raise here two more examples of the young – in these instances, almost infant – Baptist working in concert with the symbol of Christ’s displayed genitalia. These both coincide with a very common role of John’s, that of witness and example to the audience. Both Mantegna and Marco Palmezzano’s Holy Family panels (figs 6.4 and 6.5 respectively) make use of a regal, standing figure of the infant Christ, proudly supported by the Virgin, to construct a composition around the ostentatio genitalium of the infant Lord. In the Mantegna panel, the expected humility before Christ has been dramatically deepened into open-mouthed awe on John’s part, at the Herculean figure of Christ at the centre of the composition. The young John here bears a striking resemblance to Christ, sharing similar facial features, though the Baptist’s slightly coarser features give him a few years over his cousin, and perhaps also by comparison imply the superiority of the Christ Child. The young Baptist is identified as such by means of his presence in the family scene: Joseph flanks the Virgin on the left of the panel, Anne on the right, and the young John occupying the lower right hand corner of the painting. He bears no cross or banderole (although the small, blank piece of paper he carries in his hands could be a reference to the banner), and appears to be as nude as his cousin, though we do not see the lower part of his body.

The compositional and devotional centre of the panel is the sight of Christ’s penis, which is very clearly uncircumcised. The infant Christ’s hips are framed by the Virgin’s hands as she presents him to the audience. The unadorned, stripped quality of the Baptist (that is, he is presented as any normal boy) abides well with the central theme of the work, which is the humanity of the Holy Family thus presented. The Virgin is dressed in contemporary clothing in light, bright colours, but there are no gold-embroidered borders to her robes, nor indications of holiness elsewhere in the form of haloes or gilt rays. Similarly, the precise details of the Baptist’s later mission are not alluded to here – only his primary action of witnessing. The very simplicity of the composition and characterisation of its figures has the effect of reminding the viewer simultaneously of both the humility and glory of the holy figures. Thus Christ need be

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8 For the Mantegna, see A. de Nicolò Salmazo, Andrea Mantegna, Milan: Rizzoli/Skira, 2004, cat. no. 49, 247; and J. Martineau (ed.), Andrea Mantegna, Milan: Olivetti/Electa, 1992, cat. 51, 225-26 (entry by K. Christiansen). I note that although most authors appear to regard the work as autograph, it is not in Lightbown’s 1986 “complete catalogue” of the artist, even under other attributions etc. For the Palmezzano, see A. Paolucci, L. Prati, and S. Tumideri, Marco Palmezzano: il Rinascimento nelle Romagne, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2005, 30. From the authors’ discussion, though they do not give a specific date for the work, it is likely to be dated at around 1500, or c. 1493-1509. The inscription at the bottom of the Palmezzano is a transliteration of the artist’s name in Hebrew letters (many thanks to the Reverend Heath for the translation).
garbed only in his own miraculous humanity, emphasised by the quiet pride of Mary and the awe of John, to impress upon the viewer the Incarnate Child’s greatness, with the most telling proof of that Incarnation at the very centre of the painting.

In the Palmezzano, the Holy Family is placed between a curtain backdrop (though an attractive waterside landscape is visible in the background) and a ledge, on which the infant Christ stands.9 Joseph here takes the role of looking out at the audience and seeming to engage their attention, whilst the Baptist and the Virgin both gaze at the statuesque, contrapposto figure of Christ, who is beautiful, gracious, and completely nude. Thus as in, for example, Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*, freed from his common responsibility of inviting the audience into the composition, the Baptist can act as example to the audience, and quite clearly, witness. His act of witnessing the full, complete Christ – including his obvious genitalia, fully moulded with chiaroscuro shading and attention to depth – is emphasised by the diagonal line which has at its uppermost point the Virgin’s finely-drawn face, which leads to Christ’s with an almost identical expression of beatification, and finally, to the Baptist’s upturned features in the lower left-hand corner of the composition. His inferiority to the full-length figure of Christ is clear in this sense, but also his position of looking up at the divine, which is the position the audience also takes. A viewer of such a devotional work at home would likely be kneeling, either on the floor, a cushion or a prie-dieu, or in church hearing a sermon or receiving the sacrament, would certainly be either on their knees or placed well below clergy. The difference in height and placement between the very young John – perhaps four or five years old – and Christ, who stands elevated on the stone ledge in the foreground, one foot raised even higher on his mother’s hand, emphasises not only the divinity of Christ, but the humility of John. This humility is a fitting example to the viewer, who is acknowledged by Joseph, but led by the Baptist.

The same qualities that made the young Baptist a suitable adjunct to the many devotional works discussed elsewhere in this thesis also made him an imminently useful component of the iconographic structure centred on the display of Christ’s genitalia. Both the increased sense of naturalism present in many of these images and the theological resonances of the motif are supported by the inclusion of the young Baptist, who appears as a family member or youthful companion to the infant Christ, reminder of the Child’s futurity, as mediator with or example to the audience, or as witness to

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9 On the use of the framing/elevating device, see Ringbom, 42–45 (though he discusses chiefly the half-length portrait and the use of the plinth or window ledge).
Christ’s Incarnation. The numerous examples which use the display of Christ’s genitalia as a primary symbol of the Incarnation and include the young Baptist show the effectiveness of both motifs as part of a repertoire of devotional imagery. As has been shown over the course of this thesis, the young John’s ability to function as part of this system of devotional symbols had, by the 1480s, begun to overtake his resonance as primarily a representative of Florence or Florentine interests.

However, there is yet more to John’s role in the visual elaboration on the theme of the Incarnation. Next I will examine a number of images where John’s own genitalia is visible, for as Steinberg has proved, naturalism is not the only, or even the chief, explanation for such compositional choices. I wish to move now into the uncharted area of the exposure of the young John’s genitalia, which I will show becomes part of the arsenal of devotional iconography and testamentary proof of the Incarnation of Christ. The use of this motif is complex and governed by relativity to Christ’s own body. The concealment and exposure of Christ and John appears to work in tandem, and in pendant form constitutes further proof of Christ’s greatness, manhood and unblemished Incarnation. There are a number of works from the end of the fifteenth century where the young John’s genitalia are visible, but Christ’s are not. These are not structured the same way as Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks – that is, set up to imply that John is the recipient of this view, on behalf of the audience. Rather, the authors of these works contrive to suggest that the exposure of the Baptist’s genitals, whilst Christ’s are simultaneously withheld from the viewer, is significant. The following discussion will explore the implications of this equilibrium of exposure.

Lorenzo di Credi, a member of Verrocchio’s circle, painted numerous devotional tondi in his career, many featuring the young St John the Baptist accompanying the Virgin in her adoration of Christ.10 Most of these follow much the same format, with a large, kneeling figure of the Virgin (whose head often shows clearly the influence of Leonardo, Verrocchio’s star pupil) on the right of the composition, a reclining Christ, and on the left, a figure of the young (usually infant) John. These latter figures are often influenced by the prevailing pictorial trends of the day – in several examples of such tondi for example, a Virgin of the Rocks-style figure of the Baptist is used. By Olson’s

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criteria, these would appear to be the ideal, or perhaps typical, examples of devotional imagery produced in Florence for display within the home. Yet close examination can reveal a symbolic motif if not unorthodox in nature, then at the very least unusual. Lorenzo appears to have experimented somewhat with the pictorial device of uncovering the Baptist’s genitalia, whilst shielding Christ’s from view through the pose of the infant’s body, or allowing only the merest glimpse of the divine manhood to be available to the viewer. In two tondi of similar composition, one with the Virgin, Child, young St John and an angel, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (c. 1485-90, fig. 6.6), and another with just the three main figures, now in Rome (c. 1490, fig. 6.7), the exposure of the Baptist’s genitalia is contrasted with the concealment of Christ’s.

There are two ways one could read the exposure of the Baptist’s genitalia in these works. The first reading of the motif deals with apportioning the shame of original Sin only to the Baptist, but never to the infant Christ, and involves a complex system of concealment and revelation. In both of Lorenzo’s tondi, the Baptist’s privy parts are cast in shadow, while presentation of Christ’s are largely withheld. In the Rome tondo, the infant Christ’s legs are posed so that his penis is very nearly visible to the viewer, and the Child’s body is flooded with light. Darkness shrouds the Baptist’s hips, while his sheer, gossamer wrap creeps up his body to uncover his genitalia, and does nothing to conceal his body from view. The implication here is that while the young Baptist’s body carries the touch of Original Sin, which leads to shame of the naked human form, the infant Christ’s body does not carry such a mark. While Christ’s body, unblemished, is by implication completely nude in Lorenzo’s tondi, the Baptist’s shows that humanity is conscious of the shame of the naked body, like Adam and Eve knowing that they are naked, and sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves. The Baptist, though his position amongst mankind is highly vaunted, is still mortal, and human – which echoes a number of Gospel references:

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” (Mt 3:11)
“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Mt 11:11)

11 See Olson (2000), ch. 4, 83-105, on setting and function.
12 For the New York tondo, see Dalli Regolli (1966), cat. 127 (fig. 167), 159-160. For the Rome tondo, see Dalli Regoli (1966), cat. 33 (fig. 72), 117.
This inference is supported by the frugal characterisation of the young figure as the Baptist — here he is more human child than desert prophet, retaining only the thin cross of all the Johannine trappings in the Rome tondo, and no distinguishing Baptist features in the New York tondo at all.

By exposing the body of the greatest of mortals next to Christ, Lorenzo suggests that the body of Christ, by comparison, is all the more glorious. The full glory of that infant body need not even be displayed, for the viewer may understand the Child’s greatness purely through the implication of the Baptist’s humility. The artist here has very delicately articulated the mortal shame of the infant Baptist, through the use of shadow, without detracting from the worth of the figure as an example for the viewer to follow. Such a subtle deployment of the motif of the infants’ nudity implies the existence of levels of decorum operating on the holy bodies, whereby John’s ignominious nudity is balanced against his importance and usefulness both biblically, and between composition and audience. The significance of each body is underlined by its relationship to the viewer: Christ is nude, but his genitals are shielded from our view, and the Baptist is rather unsuccessfully clothed, thus emphasising further his nakedness.

In a large tondo by Perugino or a follower c. 1495-1510, now in Berlin, both children approach the central Virgin figure from the sides of the composition, each supported by an angel (fig. 6.8).\(^{13}\) All eyes within the composition are on the Virgin’s face, and her reaction to the infant Christ, who is held in a seated position by the angel, and offered to his mother. The Child is completely naked, and very babyish in his round plumpness, save for the deliberation of the gesture he makes with his left hand, touching his mouth. His genitals are almost obscured from the viewer by his crossed right leg — we see the beginnings of a pudenda but not the whole of his manhood. John, by contrast, is depicted as an older boy of maybe five or six, standing tall of his own accord though an angel places his hands on the child’s shoulders to steady or encourage him. His main identifying characteristic in a visual sense — other than his very presence in such a scene, which by this point is probably sufficient evidence for the audience to conclude that such a figure represents the Baptist — is the long, thin cross he clasps in his hands. Otherwise, he is wrapped in a sheer cloth which surrounds his protruding belly and flanks his thighs, and almost — but not quite — covers his genitals. Instead, they just slip

into view, their exposure seemingly incidental coupled with his wrapped torso, but of course deliberate on the part of the artist, or his patron’s specifications.

The Baptist’s clothed-but-naked mien is in contrast to the infant Christ, who is naked-but-obliterated. While the implication here could be one of decorum–as in, while it is of no matter if we have visual access to John’s parts, Christ’s are more significant–here I believe this careful juxtaposition of exposure and concealment is again related to the Baptist’s burgeoning role as the representative of humanity, and echoes the implications of the same concealed-Christ and revealed-Baptist as in the Lorenzo tondi above. If we recall Steinberg’s illuminating discussion of the subject, as well as the canon of theological thought on the subject besides, it is only the taint of sin which makes man ashamed of his nudity. Steinberg argues that the infant (or adult) Christ’s nudity is never sinful, because he was conceived without original Sin, to the unblemished Virgin (who was herself either conceived without sin, or sanctified at the Visitation due to the presence of Christ). The Baptist’s uncovered genitals are exposed rather than displayed proudly, as Christ’s so often are. Again, the decorum of the above works comes into play, as the Baptist gives no cues that he is ashamed of his genitalia, but the significance of his revealed body, and the Christ Child’s concealed one, cannot be overlooked. In this tondo, the contrast of the Baptist’s nudity with Christ’s relative decorum only highlights the human—and thus shameful—nature of John’s exposure.

However, an alternate—and in fact, entirely opposite—reading of the Baptist’s naked body, in concert with Christ’s, is also possible. One could advance the argument that, in fact, John’s nudity is a mark of his likeness to Christ. That is, because in the Bible and other texts, and in Christian thought, John is so often posed as an Alter Christus (to the point of having to explicitly deny that he is the Messiah in Jn 1:9-21), that he might partake of some of the shamelessness of the infant Christ’s demonstratively and theologically significant nude body. The contrast between the nudity of Christ and the nudity of John is subtle and nuanced, to be sure, and the nudity of the young Baptist is not so common a motif as to have been codified to the point of Christ’s own. An examination of the two infant bodies in the work of Perugino can illuminate the matter to some extent. Such an examination into the nudity of the young

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14 Steinberg (1996), 18-19.
15 For Perugino, I have consulted Scarpellini (1984), op cit., and the following sources for the purposes of this investigation: V. Garibaldi, Perugino, Florence: Octavo, 1999; V. Garibaldi, Perugino, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2004; and V. Garibaldi and F. F. Mancini, Perugino: il divin pittore, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2004. Also of interest, considering the high volume of works produced in Perugino’s workshop, of
Baptist has never been undertaken – I do not believe it has ever been identified as a specific motif, or probably marked as anything that might have greater significance as a compositional feature beyond perceived Renaissance naturalism.

Perugino produced a large number of devotional works featuring the Virgin and Child, or these two central figures surrounded by a variable cast of other family members and saints. The Virgin and Child were often depicted with the young Baptist, with the two children depicted at such a close age that the pair are actually reasonably close to their Lucan infancy narrative types. In works of the Madonna, Perugino and his workshop appear to have conformed quite closely with the devotional imagery popular at the end of the fifteenth century, from depicting the two in contemporary domestic settings, to the use of the usual arsenal of Christological symbolism, including frequent – but not exclusive – display of the infant Christ’s genitalia. In such works as the *Madonna with Child* c. 1470-73 now at the Courtauld Institute in London, the display is underlined – literally – with the use of a sheer cloth, drawn by the Virgin beneath her child’s genitals, as the precocious infant stands tall on a stone ledge (fig. 6.9). By contrast however, in a c. 1495 panel now in the collection of the Bank of Umbria, the Virgin just as deliberately shields the Child’s genitals from view, placing her hand over his body in a very protective manner (fig. 6.10). This same gesture is repeated in a number of other panels where the Virgin and Child are accompanied by other saints, chiefly female. On the whole, in depictions of the Virgin and Child by Perugino, the motif of the Christ’s deliberately displayed genitalia appears to predominate slightly, however there are plenty of instances of the Child both covered and uncovered.

Accompanied by the young Baptist however is another matter, and here a curious pattern begins to emerge. Perugino produced a number of compelling examples of the Virgin and Child with the young St John the Baptist. In the first of the artist’s experimentations with the youthful Baptist figure included in a Madonna composition, c. 1480-85 and now in the National Gallery in London, the full-length Christ Child stands on small plinth at the foreground of the image, while the Baptist stands stiffly and respectfully off to one side (fig. 6.11). The self-aware Christ, who regards the Baptist

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**Footnotes:**

16 Garibaldi (1999), cat. 1, 97; Scarpellini (1984), cat. 7 (fig. 10), 70-71.
17 Garibaldi (1999), cat. 42, 117-118; Scarpellini (1984), cat. 67 (fig. 111), 90. On the gesture of protection, see Steinberg (1996), 73.
18 Garibaldi (1999), cat. 15, 105; Scarpellini (1984), cat. no. 37 (fig. 52), 80.
thoughtfully, is proudly naked, with the Virgin’s hands positioned just-so as to not obscure the view of his complete genitalia. The Baptist’s genitalia are also visible here, though seen here through a thin veil of fabric which does nothing to hide his body from view. As in the paintings examined above, the Baptist’s privy parts are cast in shadow, in contrast to Christ’s pristine, pulchritudinous alabaster body. However, the genitalia of both young bodies are visible here, suggesting their kinship in humanity, a theme which will be explored in further detail below. By contrast, in a c. 1495 panel now in Frankfurt both children, alike with their rounded heads and in their affection for one another, are covered – the Baptist incidentally by his position just behind the Virgin and Christ, deliberately, by Mary’s large protective hand (fig. 6.12). Finally, in the Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist and an Angel (Madonna del Sacco), c. 1500, Christ’s private parts are just obscured by means of his right thigh, whilst those of the infant Baptist, entering the composition from the right in a mirror-image of the Baptist’s pose in the Virgin of the Rocks, are visible between his legs, again shrouded in shadow (fig. 6.13).

The alternate revelation and concealment of the two infants’ parts in the oeuvre of Perugino appears to be governed by a complex code, which at all times ensures that the maximum possible glorification of Christ’s miraculous Incarnation in human form is supported by all elements of the composition. Upon observation, it becomes clear that whenever the infant John and infant Christ appear in a composition together, Christ’s genitals are never exposed, unless the Baptist’s are too. I make a number of stipulations here because the formula only works if all of these conditions are filled: the presence of both children, as infants. Exceptions occur when the Christ appears without the infant John, or where the two are both depicted as adults (as in the several Baptism of Christ panels by Perugino), but the rule as written holds true, as far as Perugino’s extant works have been catalogued. The symbol of the Baptist’s exposed genitalia is almost unnoticeable at first, but once highlighted, is persistent throughout Perugino’s oeuvre.

In Perugino’s work, as Christ’s genitals are never revealed without the concurrent exposure of John’s, I am inclined to read their fellow nudity as a sign of the pair’s kinship. This system relies on the growing strength of the Baptist’s role as representative of humanity. In both the London and Frankfurt paintings, the two children

19 Garibaldi (1999), cat. 33, 114; Scarpellini (1984), cat. 57 (fig. 90), 87. A near-identical mirror image of the composition, possibly by an assistant, is now in a private collection in New York. See Scarpellini (1984), cat. 155 (fig. 251), 115.
look very similar. Their likeness begins with their youth, continues with their physiognomy, and extends to their characterisation with cloth wrappings and gestures. Whilst the Baptist in each instance is more clothed than the Christ Child, the folds of drapery about their shoulders are echoes of one another, and their body language is, if not mirrored, then at least reciprocal so that the two children clearly acknowledge and interact with one another. The points made above about the shame attendant to the Baptist’s body, implied through the deployment of shadows and other indicators of humility, still stand here. However, in the environment of Perugino’s composition, the shadow cast over the Baptist’s genitalia in the London panel (fig. 6.11) is used more to ensure that by contrast, Christ’s genitalia which are bathed in light, are completely understood by the viewer to be the more glorious body parts.

The tandem concealment and revelation of the infant Christ and John’s bodies here echoes the reciprocity of meaning which flows between the two bodies, displayed side by side. John, as previously mentioned, partakes of the decorum which ensures that the display of Christ’s body is, as Steinberg has noted, never unseemly. From his Christ-likeness in the Bible, to visual representations of the young saint, he shares some of the holiness of the Child through his close proximity to Christ, both figuratively and here, literally. Similarly, the revelation of the infant Christ’s manhood in conjunction with John’s may be read as reinforcing the point made by the ostentatio genitalium in the first place – that is, that the deliberate display of Christ’s genitals demonstrates that the Triune God is truly incarnate in human form, and fully partakes in the bodily experience of humanity. By placing the naked body of the infant Christ next to the body of the young John, similarly exposed, the veracity of the Incarnation of Christ is confirmed. The equivalence between the two children, so helpfully established by their parallel narratives in the Gospels is continued visually, and is used here to prove the completeness of Christ’s human body, which the viewer can verify themselves as being just like another mortal body. However, it is clear that Perugino has worked to maintain a sense of hierarchy in these compositions. In the London panel, for instance, the young Baptist stands to the side of the painting, partially in shadow, placed well below the level of Christ, who is elevated on a stone ledge, and proudly displayed by the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, the visual confirmation of the humanity of Christ, and its kinship with an undoubted human child, is only made possible by the parallels between the two figure of Christ and the Baptist, and furthermore, by the saint appearing as an infant
beside the baby Jesus, emphasising their parity as far as possible. This use for the Baptist, whilst rare, is extremely significant.

Perugino’s frequent use of the ostentatio genitalium appears to have inspired at least one other anonymous Umbrian artist, who based a small canvas now in the Basilica di S. Pietro in Perugia (fig. 6.15) on a pair of figures from Perugino’s Family of the Virgin, c. 1492-1502 (fig. 6.14). In Perugino’s panel, at the foot of the podium on which the enthroned Virgin is seated, sit two infants – two of the many children in various states of undress throughout the composition. Neither of the pair is readily identifiable, except inasmuch as they could not be Christ, for he is held in his mother’s arms above, nor is either the Baptist. Nor are these children putti, angels or cherubim – though they exhibit a seriousness and gravitas far beyond their years. Garibaldi has identified the two as (piccoli, obviously) Simon and Thaddeus, which may be decipherable from an inscription on their thin gold haloes. These two, like all but one of the children in the painting, are deliberately exposed to the viewer – and the infant whose genitalia the viewer cannot see, is naked below the waist but facing away from the viewer. Christ, seated in his mother’s lap, is entirely nude – with no wrappings, to indicate his unselfconsciousness. The others are all also revealed in some way, whether by the lengths of cloth tied around their torsos that do nothing to conceal their privy parts, or by means of lifting their robes quite deliberately, to expose themselves. The effect is one of almost ostentatious nudity on the part of the children; and of pervasive naturalism, which creates a tone of domesticity (combined with Mary’s attendants
relatives) which is at odds with the aloof and regal Virgin seated on her throne. The dissonance is pleasing however, showing the Holy Family overrun with small children of assorted fates and salvific roles.

The implication of all the infant nudity in this painting is similar to that of the concurrent, shared nudity of the infant John and Jesus in the London panel above. Featured in this composition are various members of the Virgin’s family, including Anne, Joseph and both James the Greater and Lesser.\(^{24}\) Anne stands behind Mary’s throne, both hands resting on the Virgin’s shoulders, indicating Mary’s descent and alluding to her Immaculate Conception. Furthermore, by including members of various other branches of the Virgin’s family, Perugino emphasises both the earthly lineage of Christ, and the holiness that pervades the family that was fit to produce the human Christ Child. The nudity of the numerous children in the composition functions much like the shared nudity of Christ and John in the National Gallery panel, where the other children partake of Christ’s holiness and the untainted nature of his body, and Christ’s humanity is demonstrated repeatedly in his likeness to the other children in the painting. This altarpiece, with its focus on the humanity of Christ, multiplies the effect of the shared nudity of Christ and John, and thus reinforces the proclamatory effect of the confirmation it offers of Christ’s Incarnation.

The anonymous Umbrian artist who followed Perugino’s composition however has chosen not the separate figures of the infant John and Jesus to elaborate on, but the two children at the base of the podium, whose poses he has copied very closely. The Perugia panel shows Christ as an infant, and the Baptist as a toddler. In this later version, Christ looks thoughtful, and perhaps a little downcast. The Baptist puts one arm around his cousin, and with the other appears to pull Christ’s diaphanous wrap closer about the child. The image is almost a genre depiction of one child comforting another, except for the unobtrusive signals that these are children like no others – each child sports a ghostly halo, and the Baptist’s ubiquitous cross leans against his shoulder, with a spindly banner unfurling its proclamation in the upper right corner of the painting. The two children are also both quite naked below the waist, and appear to direct sad-eyed glances at one another’s genitalia: perhaps the two are confirming one another’s bodily, physical presence, or perhaps the mirroring by John of Jesus is reversed here, and Christ, seeing John’s examination, conducts his own. Their mutual examination appears to

\(^{24}\) Scarpellini (1984), 105-106.
confirm that the two of them are indeed both sharing the physical, human condition, and furthermore, considering the identity of these two children, the air of unmistakable sadness is appropriate, for the audience is as aware as the children of how the lives of Christ and the Baptist end. As Christ’s nudity imbues his body with Eucharistic significance, so too does John’s exposed body take on the significance of ritual sacrifice. Here, the confirmation of real, physical bodies is used as the final piece of evidence that seals Christ and John’s fates: as mortals, we know that despite their very young ages, these two children will grow, and die. However, the viewer also knows that this sacrifice was both willing and necessary, allowing them to contemplate the inevitability of the children’s fates, whilst giving thanks for the magnitude of the sacrifice offered by Christ.

In this chapter I will examine one more example of work which features the uncovered bodies of the two children, and which furthermore incorporates a deliberate reference to the futurity of the pair, beyond what is always attendant in depictions of the two. In a tondo by Piero di Cosimo now in Strasbourg (fig. 6.16), the motif of the Baptist’s exposed genitalia reaches its zenith and natural conclusion; that is, it is posed in contrast to the propriety and significance of Christ’s own revealed manhood. There is a clear contrast between the lit and shadowed genitalia of Christ and the infant John respectively, but there is also recognition of the kinship the two share, extended to their dual exposure. The Virgin and two infants are set within a rolling landscape dotted with ascetic figures – on the left of the composition, the penitent Jerome, and on the right, St Anthony. The Baptist and Christ are placed on a stone ledge at the bottom of the tondo, with Christ standing to receive John, and John kneeling with his legs arranged much in the same way as Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks Baptist. The infant John has a rough cloth draped around his body which, whilst it may not be an animal skin, contrasts with the shiny, patterned silk of Christ’s own sash. The Baptist’s activated pose here suggests that he has just come to rest, and laid down his cross – wrapped in a banner – at Christ’s feet, as if from a long journey. This is supported by his symbolic link with the ascetic saints in the background of the composition. Although the Baptist is, by any measure

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25 On the Eucharistic nature of Christ’s naked body, see Steinberg (1996), 135-139. On the nudity of Christ before the Passion, see also S. L. Smith “The Bride Stripped Bare: A Rare Type of the Disrobing of Christ,” Gesta 34 (1995), 126-146, esp. 130-133.
and according to any text, to young to have yet returned (or even left for) the desert, he is depicted here in such a way that clearly foreshadows his much older, desert prophet self.

The two children reach for one another, Christ’s hand of the Baptist’s cheek, and John’s hand on Christ’s arm. Their gazes are locked on one another. This motif – the *Embrace* – will be examined in detail in the following chapter. Here, it suffices to note that the children are depicted as close, loving companions. The Virgin supports this exchange, with a hand on each child, eyes downcast, and an expression of gentle sadness on her face. Whilst her left hand sits on Christ’s hip, her right hand appears to draw back the infant Baptist’s coverings to expose him. Whilst the Baptist’s genitals are cast in shadow however, Christ’s are bathed in light, creating a very clear visual distinction between the two. This seems a similar distinction to that made by Perugino – the implied cast of shame on the Baptist is contrasted with the implied purity of Christ’s body. What is significant here is the Virgin’s *ostentatio genitalium* of not Christ, but the Baptist – which informs the viewer that both bodies must be read symbolically. Here, with the visual proximity of the two infants, there is also a sense that the Virgin deliberately exposes the Baptist to prove, by comparison, that Christ’s Incarnation as mortal is indeed complete. The Virgin shows us that Christ’s body is the same as the Baptist’s, who performs here as a tiny desert saint, bringing to mind the adult Baptist’s fate – beheading and martyrdom. The final implication of the Incarnation of Christ in human form is that such a body must die – by inhabiting the human body fully, Christ is able to be the Messiah, who takes on the mortality of humanity, and dies for its sins. This inescapable conclusion is reinforced by the presence of the Baptist, and the parallels of his body with Christ’s.

Christ’s nudity in Renaissance art has been largely unravelled by Steinberg, who rightly identified the display of Christ’s genitals as a symbol of the complete Incarnation of the divine in human form, with all of the frailties and possibly contentious parts of that body intact. As another such symbol of Christ’s Incarnation, and supporting component of the iconographic structure used to depict it, naturally the young Baptist coincided with many depictions of the revealed Christ. However, further to a supporting role in the *ostentatio genitalium* of Christ, I have shown that sometimes the Baptist’s own body was revealed in a similar fashion, though with different implications. In the previous chapter, I began to consider the implications of the Baptist’s visible genitalia in Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. There the visibility of John’s body was very carefully
balanced against the deliberate concealment of Christ’s, implying an exchange between the two figures that took place only within the realm of the composition. The infant John’s nudity in the *Virgin of the Rocks* can be understood as a form of symbolic stripping or material abasement, of humanity shedding his earthly trappings to go naked before his lord. Elsewhere however, as examined in this chapter, the significance of the Baptist’s naked body is not always clear-cut. In this chapter, I have explored the possibilities of the multiple, linked meanings of the exposed body of the Baptist. The display of the infant John’s genitalia, whilst it required careful navigation of the hierarchical relationship between John and Jesus, could be used to reaffirm the very purpose of Christ’s *ostentatio genitalium*, by confirming Christ’s humanity through the shared exposure of the infant bodies. As in the Bible, through his association with Christ the Baptist receives some of the positive connotations of Christ’s proudly displayed genitalia, further linking the two visually. A relatively rare, but nevertheless persistent motif, with careful observation it is clear that the infant Baptist’s uncovered body occupied a significant role in incarnational iconography. In the following chapter, I will examine the final step in the infant Baptist’s process of becoming stripped of Florentine significance, and instead becoming primarily a signifier of Christ’s miraculous Incarnation, and of the Passion.
Since Filippo Lippi’s Medici Adorations had introduced the figure of the independent young saint to devotional imagery, the young Baptist figure by the end of the Quattrocento had become ubiquitous in devotional imagery of the Virgin and Child. Similarly, from first appearing a part of a politically- and personally-motivated pictorial system based solely in Florence, the boy Baptist in the second half of the fifteenth century became increasingly important to images that expressed one of the central mysteries of faith – Christ’s Incarnation. As shown throughout this thesis, the young Baptist moved ever closer to the Child, and became the close companion of the infant or young Christ. In this final chapter, I will examine those images which focus on the two protagonists’ moments of greatest intimacy: that is, depictions of their Encounter – nominally in the desert, but in fact in a moment outside time and specific place, familiar from many devotional works – and their Embrace. A small but compelling group of works, these images are both emotionally affecting to the viewer, and as I will show, theologically complex, offering interpretation on a number of levels. Such images again display the polysemy that made the young Baptist so suitable for so many images, for he carries with him symbolism of both birth and death, Old Testament and New Testament, wilderness, baptism and, perhaps most significant of all here, echoes of the spiritual marriage between God and humanity. The motifs of the Encounter and the Embrace have been remarked upon occasionally throughout scholarship, but never studied in a cohesive fashion, and never to my knowledge connected.

There has been some suggestion that the motif of the Embrace between an infant John and Jesus was introduced to late-Quattrocento or Cinquecento Italian art by Leonardo da Vinci in the form of a work, now presumed lost, whose composition
survives in a number of extant works from Northern European artists. The best-known of these, including examples now in the Art Institute of Chicago and the Royal Collection in Brussels, appear to have originated from the studio of Joos van Cleve, a painter from Antwerp who was active in the early to mid-1500s. Though this particular group of works certainly suggests a familiarity with a Leonardesque model, the timing of the artist’s use of the Embrace motif implies that Leonardo’s version of it was not known until at least after the turn of the fifteenth century, and it is not certain whether Joos worked from a drawing or more finished work. A drawing which seems to match the basic composition of the later Flanders works, now in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, dates from Leonardo’s workshop around 1500. In this chapter however, I will demonstrate that not only do examples of the infant children embracing exist from before 1500, but also that they are descended from a different visual source than the workshop of Leonardo.

The earliest surviving representation of the Encounter between a youthful John and Jesus, which incorporates an embrace between the two, is from a triptych c. 1404-1415, by late early fifteenth-century Marchigan artist Giovanni di Corraduccio, now in the Pinacoteca Comunale in Trevi. A scene on the upper right wing of the triptych depicts John and Christ meeting as children, and embracing one another in greeting (fig. 7.1). This meeting clearly occurs in the desert, with high, barren hills visible in the background, with little plant life. To the right of the young John and Christ, the Virgin and Joseph stand, the Virgin motioning towards their embrace. The two children are depicted as maybe five years old, and the Baptist (on the left) appears to be distinguished from Christ (on the right) by a rough robe tied around his waist, which may be the animal skin. The Baptist is also slightly bigger than Christ, which is most likely a reference to him being the older of the two by

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1 On Joos van Cleve, see J. O. Hand, Joos van Cleve: the Complete Paintings, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 95-99, and cat. nos 80-84 (and variants), 164-166.
2 The drawing is Studio of Leonardo da Vinci, The Virgin and Child with a child and a cat, two studies of a child and a cat, and the Christ child and infant Baptist embracing, ca. 1500, pen and ink over red chalk with touches of wash, 20.2 x 15.1 cm, Windsor Castle, inv. no. 12564 (RL). In K. Clark with C. Pedretti, The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, London: Phaidon, second ed. 1968, 107-108. Clark and Pedretti note that the version now in Windsor Castle is a studio copy of Leonardo’s original drawing. It seems possible the copy could have been made by Cesare da Sesto, who copied other related drawings (see inv. nos 12565 and 12566).
six months, according to the Bible. Given the setting and presence of Mary and Joseph, this scene depicts the apocryphal narrative of *The Encounter on the Flight to Egypt*. In the lower panel of the wing, Corraduccio has depicted the Last Supper, with an embrace between Christ and John the Evangelist as the other apostles look on, waiting to hear who will betray Christ. At the heart of the middle panel of the triptych, amongst other scenes, is a depiction of the Passion, with the left wing including scenes of the Annunciation of the Virgin, Christ in the Temple, and the Flight to Egypt.

The purpose of illustrating the embrace in the scene above, is to provide parallels between Christ’s early, precocious forbearance and magnanimity, and those same traits in the adult Christ – with the added circularity of Christ directing both of these loving embraces to “Johns”, with the first being his kinsman, and the second being his most beloved apostle (Jn 13:23). Though the donors for this work are known, due to an inscription commemorating them (Cicco Urighi and Jacobuccio di Mattia), little is known about the impetus for the individual scenes included. The size and location of the work, in Santa Croce in Trevi (which was attached to a nunnery), make it likely to have been an altarpiece, perhaps for a private chapel. Although we cannot deduce from whence the inspiration for this individual scene came, we may nevertheless note it here as an early example of narrative illustration of the *Encounter*, and one which depicts not only the meeting in the desert, but also conflates this narrative moment with the motif of an embrace between Christ and the Baptist. In the various works examined in this Study however, the same moment has been isolated from its narrative surrounds, and eventually from any sort of background information, to form a devotional motif of its own.

A number of artists isolated the interaction of the young John and Jesus at the Encounter, and transposed the pair into various compositions featuring other figures or narrative threads. A number of these inserted the young Christ and Baptist into paintings also depicting various desert penitents, several of which will be examined here. The implication of the Encounter depicted changes depending on the surrounding imagery of the work, showing that the motif of the Encounter could be effectively isolated from its own original narrative setting, and adapted to suit the purposes of other narratives or compositions. Perugino and his school painted several panels that set an Encounter between the young Christ and Baptist in the background of a painting of St Jerome in the

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4 The identification of John as the apostle Christ embraces was made with the help of Ailish McKeown and the Reverend Kate Heath.
desert with his lion (figs 7.2 and 7.3). These paintings constitute a unique use of the young John, as he and the young Christ are not exactly the central feature of the composition, and nor does an Encounter between the two feature in any textual source relating to Jerome. Nevertheless, a small group of pictures bringing together the two moments, both taking place in the desert wilderness, appear to have sprung up, and been popular enough to warrant several (extant) copies.

The desert depicted in these compositions fits what I have described as the more fifteenth-century conception of “wilderness”, rather than the barren aridity of a more literal desert, although the strangely elongated roundness of the boulders and trees do contrive to suggest at least a sense of exoticism which distinguishes the setting from a contemporary Italian landscape. Jerome’s time in the desert was marked by strict privations and penitence – of the sort, in fact, recommended by the Baptist in his thundering address to the Pharisees and Sadducees of Matthew 3:7-12. The link between the Baptist and Jerome is very clear – the Baptist being the prototype, as it were, for all desert ascetics who followed him. This parallelism between the Baptist and many other desert saints has been commented on before, in the instance of Saints Francis, Antony, and Jerome. In Jerome’s famous dream, wherein he encountered Christ, the vision he had was of a fearsome and unrelenting Christ the Judge. This version of Christ is a long way, spiritually and visually, from the babyish figure of Christ in the background of the Perugino Saint Jerome panels, who appears to walk and gesticulate like a tiny rhetorician.

The iconography of this composition, and the appearance of the miniature Encounter behind Jerome, must be unravelled spatially. In the foreground of the

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6 Writing on a much later *St Jerome* (by Alessandro Allori, ca. 1606), Pilliod notes that the simultaneously rocky and lush landscape of the composition may represent a conflation of both Jerome’s stint in the desert, and his final years in the more environmentally hospitable Bethlehem (Pilliod, 5-6). I believe that a similar conflation may have occurred here (though of course Perugino’s works came before Allori’s) – see also my discussion in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis on the conception of “wilderness” and “desert”.

7 On Jerome in the desert, See Rice Jr, 7-11.


9 For the dream of Jerome, immediately preceding his penance in the desert, see Rice Jr, 3-4.
composition, the viewer is presented with the penitent Jerome, accompanied by the lion he healed so carefully and which became his companion. Jerome is depicted as an old, bearded man, his robe pulled open at his chest, his hands outstretched and his gaze cast heavenward. Following his line of sight, one can see that he prays before a crucifix, hung high on a tree before him. His face and figure are wrought with mental anguish as he repents, prays and contemplates Christ’s crucified form. Reading the background of the composition, one can see in the distance at the right a (contemporary) city, with a winding path up to Jerome’s retreat clearly visible. On the left hand side, behind Jerome, the viewer sees the comfortable amity of the young Christ and John, the two with hands on one another’s shoulders and mirrored body language. With the penitent Jerome as the fulcrum, we see the modern world on the right – where Jerome and the viewer have come from – and on the left, where Jerome hopes to go, into a close relationship with Christ. Though his back is turned on the children, showing no sign that he is aware of their presence, Jerome’s link to John through their shared identity as desert saints, suggest that with his work of prayer and repentance, he might too follow the Baptist’s footsteps, and complete his journey to Christ. Each section of the composition has been seamlessly integrated: the present of Jerome’s penance, the past of the city and the timeless future, represented in the frozen moment of Christ and John’s Encounter. The didactic message of the composition is clear, and evidently proved sufficiently successful to be repeated a number of times by Perugino’s workshop.

A panel attributed to Jacopo del Sellaio includes an Encounter in the background of a composition featuring three penitential saints (fig. 7.4). This panel features, from left to right, the young Christ and John in an embrace, a penitent St Jerome praying before a model of the crucifixion, with his lion roaring next to him, the Vision of St Bernard of Clairvaux and a penitent Mary Magdalene. These figures appear within a small, crowded space, somewhere out in the foothills, with a few ruined stone structures serving as backdrops. None of the saints appear to acknowledge one another, or even be aware of one another, including Bernard and the Magdalene, who are positioned facing one another. This lack of interaction suggests that the artist has placed the figures together for their common themes, without any suggestion that they occupy one

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10 The story of Jerome healing the lion can be found in the *Golden Legend*. Jerome’s vita is De Voragine, vol. 2: 597-602.
11 Details for this work come exclusively from the Fondazione Zeri online database. Though Mackowsky has identified several representations of Jerome as being Jacopo’s, this painting does not appear in any of the literature I have found. The Fondazione Zeri database places the work at 1470-93, and the location of the panel is unknown.
continuous narrative in space or time. Jerome, Bernard and the Magdalene all pray fervently for forgiveness and the love of the lord. They are fine examples for the viewer to follow, and their dedication is clear – each figure, although particularly Jerome and the Magdalene – have the privations of their desert penance writ large upon their frames and faces, each wracked with true repentance. Bernard appears healthier and heartier than his counterparts, but the viewer is clearly informed that he has nevertheless also been rewarded for his dedication (visible before him in the shape of the book on his lectern), with the vision of the Virgin reaching out to him from the sky.

The Baptist, though young, is also clearly marked as a true desert penitent, wearing a thin, ragged robe of animal skin, and with sinewy limbs to match Jerome’s. If he were to stand at his full height, he would be taller than Christ, who is depicted here quite unusually plainly and with little to indicate his status and true identity. However, the Baptist crouches – perhaps on the point of collapse – and leans against Christ for support, his right hand reaching out plaintively to grasp Christ’s robe. The young (perhaps early adolescent) Christ in turn embraces his cousin, his right arm around his shoulders, places a steadying hand beneath John’s elbow, and leans his face against the top of John’s brow. His expression is one of quiet, a foil to John’s overwrought, tearful face. Though smaller and perhaps younger than his cousin, Christ here is mature and immeasurably wise. He appears to comfort John, giving the loving support which the other saints so fervently pray for. John’s sorrow reflects his awareness of his and Christ’s future suffering and death, whilst Christ’s equanimity shows greater maturity. He accepts the inevitability and necessity of their fates, and offers comfort to his mortal relative. John, as the only figure here to have contact with the true Christ, represents the endpoint of what the other saints seek. In Perugino’s depiction of Jerome, the audience could deduce that Jerome was at a turning point in his devotion – having left the city – but he was still yet to truly join with Christ. Here however the embrace between John and Jesus makes the closeness of that desired relationship much clearer.

In a small panel painting probably by Jacopo del Sellaio from the 1480s (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin), Christ and John encounter one another in a wooded landscape (fig. 7.5). The artist depicts the two meeting as adolescents on the verge of manhood,

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with shapely long limbs but smooth, unbearded faces, in a forest wilderness not unlike the wooded setting of Fra Filippo’s Medici *Adorations*. The shift from the sort of desert depicted in Giovanni di Corraduccio’s earlier Trevi altarpiece, and even in the School of Perugino panels, demonstrates the mutable conception of “wilderness”, which I discussed earlier in chapter 2. This “desert” is even less barren than Fra Filippo’s; filled with plants, grazing deer and a small spring in the lower right-hand corner of the composition. Yet it seems likely that the scene is supposed to be read as an *Encounter*, considering the gravity of the pair’s gestures and faces, and the presence of the Virgin and Joseph, moving slowly into the composition from the upper left, ass in tow. The artist perhaps illustrates the pseudo-Cavalcan version of the *Encounter*, which in the author’s text takes place in a more happily-appointed imagining of a desert than the barren landscape the Gospel writers implied, and other artists have pictured.\(^1\) However, in this work it is clear that the artist considered the interaction between John and Jesus to be the primary focus of the composition, and little attention is paid to fleshing out the narrative significance of the Holy Family. Here John and Jesus are much older than in any retelling of the *Encounter* I have come across – including the various Apocryphal texts, the pseudo-Cavalcan *vita* and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Again, it seems that whilst the patron or artist might have taken some inspiration from existing written texts offering a version of these events, the visual rendition has been altered to suit an agenda not entirely supported by textual tradition. Like many other images featuring the young John and Christ, Jacopo’s *Encounter* is not only an illustration of a text, but goes further to constitute an original devotional representation of its own.

It is possible of course that the forest setting for the *Encounter* was specified by the patron, or even that, as scholars have noted, Jacopo “inherited” his predilection for a dark, mysterious wooded interior from Fra Filippo, in whose workshop the artist may have spent some time – assuming that Jacopo did indeed produce this work.\(^2\) Visible at the front of the stand of trees are some stumps much like the hewn trees Fra Filippo used to illustrate Matthew 3:10, which suggest a certain amount of influence from Filippo to

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\(^{1}\) Visible at the front of the stand of trees are some stumps much like the hewn trees Fra Filippo used to illustrate Matthew 3:10, which suggest a certain amount of influence from Filippo to

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\(^{1}\) For example, John describes how in the forest he saw “alberi freschi e gli uccelli cantare” and “belli fiori”, Cavalca, 279.

Jacopo. The lack of spatial depth also calls to mind the decorative effect of, for example, Botticelli’s *Primavera* in the Uffizi, or Uccello’s *Hunt in the Forest*, c. 1470, now in the Ashmolean.\footnote{For the *Primavera*, see Lightbown 2, cat. B39, 51-53; Mandel, cat. 58, 92; and Zöllner (2005), cat. 37, 210-213. For Uccello, see F. and S. Borsi, *Paolo Uccello*, trans. E. Powell, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, English ed. 1994, 266-274, and cat. 34, 340-343; A. Padoa Rizzo, *Paolo Uccello: Catalogo completo dei dipinti*, Florence: Cantini, 1991, cat. 23, 124-127; also Kemp et al., below.} All of these works employ a rhythmic use of line and movement to distribute the eye evenly across the composition, and a level of attention to detail in the form of flowers, trees and other foliage, which imparts a tapestry-like finish. The similarity with particularly Uccello’s *Hunt* may suggest that the painting was originally to be used as a *spalliera*, a possibility supported by the rectangular shape and proportions of the work.\footnote{On Uccello and *spalliere*, see M. Kemp, A. Massing, N. Christie, and K. Groen, “Paolo Uccello’s ‘Hunt in the Forest’”, *Burlington Magazine* 133 (1991), 164-178.} This would place the work again within the domestic (or at least, non-religious or –sanctified) sphere, and whilst not a devotional work of the likes of the numerous *Madonnas* examined thus far, would make it subject to interpretation chiefly through private contemplation, rather than a direct connection with the bible or liturgy.

The adolescent figures of Christ and John meet in a densely-wooded space. A path runs through the forest and along the front of the composition, which sets the forest itself and its inhabitants back from the viewer slightly. Jacopo has made no space for the meeting within the forest as such. In fact, in order to make it clear that the scene is not posed for the viewer’s benefit, but rather caught in passing, the artist has placed a (relatively) stout tree-trunk between the viewer and the figures of Christ and John, which cuts across their joined hands. Others are placed in front of the resting deer and the Virgin and Joseph. The effect is to invite the viewer to consider the scene as if they had stumbled on it in the forest themselves, unlike the more formally posed apparition of Fra Filippo’s Palazzo Medici *Adoration*. The figure of John is youthful, but the firm set of his jaw implies the seriousness and maturity of the Christ’s older kinsman, here in his guise as wilderness prophet. His pose, in contrast with Christ’s, is full of movement and confidence. He appears as the more literal forerunner of Fra Filippo’s Camaldoli *Adoration* or the Gospels, with his entire body slanted towards Christ, and his open stance, uplifted back foot and the long diagonal formed by his outstretched left leg and body, all suggesting swift movement and vigour. This forest then is the Baptist’s wilderness: despite the presence of the Virgin and Joseph, relegated to the side of the
composition, the forest is John’s domain, and he appears to be in control of the *Encounter* with Christ.

Christ’s stance, gestures and youth combine to render his figure somewhat difficult to read. He is portrayed as slightly younger than John, his full, rounded cheeks retaining an air of youthfulness, particularly in comparison to John’s more angular face. He is poised and graceful, with his left foot firmly planted, and his right extended and pointed, giving length and elegance to his limbs, which are otherwise concealed by his long robe. With his right hand he reaches out and shakes John’s hand firmly, a depth of shading at the underside of his sleeve indicating the fully-developed musculature of his upper arm. This gesture then has some strength, and is one of the few horizontal pictorial lines in the composition which is otherwise governed by multiple vertical strokes. Christ places his left hand on his breast however, and it is this gesture which is most difficult to read. According to English preachers of the 1520s, whom Michael Baxandall assures us are an acceptable resource for decoding the human bodies of Quattrocento Italian works, such a gesture indicates “gentilnes, myldeness, or humylyte”.\(^{17}\) Gentleness and mildness could certainly be applicable to this calm, quiet apparition of Christ, whose placidity is made all the clearer through contrast with the dynamism of the almost-adult Baptist.

Or Christ could refer to himself, merely drawing John’s attention to himself, confirming his presence in the scene and the interaction. The clearer, and more significant gesture, is the handshake the two share, which signals their mutual recognition of one another, and their future missions, which are indicated in symbols lying everywhere in the composition. To the left of Christ, a pair of deer are visible, one waiting placidly, with all the self-possession of the still Christ, and the other drinking from a pool of water. These deer resurrect the ancient Christian symbol, less popular from the Middle Ages onwards, of the soul thirsting after God, an image from Psalm 42: “As the hart panteth after the water brooks [fountain], so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (Ps 42:1).\(^{18}\) To the right of the Baptist, a small bowl of water lies on the ground near his outstretched left foot, with a pair of tree stumps directly behind it. Further to the right, at the edge of the panel, a small stream of water babbles from a rocky formation, flows across the foreground of the composition, and into the pool from which the deer

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17 Baxandall, 61-65.
18 The motif was also a very Early Christian symbol often used to refer to baptism, and to adorn baptismal fonts. See R. M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010, 231.
drinks. The references to the Baptist’s mission, and to Christ’s future, are clear and legion. The most significant symbol in the composition, and reference to the future, is in the form of the cross shape the figures’ handshake makes with the tree trunk between them. Reinforced by the Baptist’s long, cruciform staff, which John holds at an angle next to the trunk, the cross shape thus formed is an unmistakable reference to the future passion, and one which the two youths make willingly, and deliberately. This portentous meeting in the forest wilderness confirms their mutual recognition of and respect for one another, their foreknowledge of their fates and future events, and their acceptance of their respective missions. The artist has extended the significance of the Encounter beyond that of a simple narrative moment, into a visual representation of the relationship between the two kinsmen as they grow into their future missions. Despite the inclusion of Joseph and Mary, the interaction between John and Jesus extends far beyond the boundaries of any textual source for the meeting.

The Baptist’s slanted upper body, combined with his outstretched hand, could add a further layer of meaning to the interaction between the two, and their relative positions. The implication could be of a lord receiving his courtier – here, Christ receiving the fealty and obeisance of the Baptist. Here the setting of such a work would assist in understanding its purpose: if it were indeed a spalliere piece like Uccello’s Hunt, it could well depict the biblical figures in a somewhat contemporary guise, as many such panels depicted other courtly activities. The form of Christ, so static and upright, compared with the form of the Baptist, could perhaps be viewed as more authoritative, in that it is the Baptist who comes to Christ, rather than Christ approaching the Baptist. With his left hand, Christ gestures to himself, which would seem to underline him as the most important figure in the composition. The possibility of this contemporary reading of the gestures within this composition would mean an interesting transposition of the Encounter motif, already transported from its desert setting into a more familiar, contemporary wilderness setting, to reflect the loyalty expressed by underlings to their lord. This would be for contemporary viewers to understand the relationship of devotion and authority, and would by implication, despite the wealth of the patron, place them as Christ’s sworn courtier. This also fits the understanding of Christ as a prince not just in heaven but on earth as well.

19 Kemp et al, 167.
An example of the Encounter which develops even further the emotive possibilities of the motif can be seen in Filippino Lippi’s sketch now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (fig. 7.6), where the artist has worked primarily on expressing the poignancy of the interaction between the two youths, rather than on a narrative setting or other messages. This small, fluid and incredibly intimate drawing shows Christ as the senior party of the exchange, older than the Baptist and by implication more mature. John and Christ are represented full-length, both hovering on the cusp between adolescence and adulthood (between perhaps 18 and 20). In contrast to both of Jacopo del Sellaio’s Encounters, here it is John whose face is more boyish, and Christ’s that bears the traces of a beard, appearing slightly older. The pair are delineated in pen and ink, with no indication of setting or background. Both figures carry the implication of movement: John’s bent knees and flexed calf muscles suggest that he steps towards Christ, whilst Christ’s limbs are largely obscured by flowing drapery, heavily sketched in pen and ink, with pen marks showing Filippino’s desire to resolve the shape and size of his torso. Trailing draperies and the lines of cloth that pull against his knee suggest his forward step as well, making the palimpsest where the two meet a crest of opposing movement. John’s posture is slightly bowed, his shoulders dropped, and his animal-skin robe, though described with delicate pen marks to show the tufts of hair, are drawn in lightly. Christ, by contrast, is a forceful figure, whose heavy garments and the heavy lines used to delineate them ensure that his is the dominant role of the composition.

The Baptist’s face and head, in contrast to his well-muscled calves, are youthful, and his hair is so short is seems shorn, the light feathery strokes at odds with the curly mane so often assigned to the saint by Filippino’s contemporaries, and by the artist himself elsewhere. This close-cropped hair contributes to the impression of the saint’s youth, particularly in contrast to the long flowing curls and the suggestion of a beard on Christ. His expression, with up-turned brows and timid mouth and chin, are contrasted with the more masculine, steadfast profile of his cousin. Christ’s face, tilted towards his cousin, bears a steadfast, set expression. Curiously, Filippino appears not to have drawn

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20 The attribution here comes chiefly from the museum itself – I can find no mention of the drawing in Zambrano & Nelson. However, it is attributed to Filippino in G. R. Goldner and C. C. Bambach, *The Drawings of Filippino Lippi and His Circle*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997, cat. 92, 296. The notes mention Aronberg Lavin’s insistence that such an *Encounter* motif is based on the pseudo-Cavalcan (although they do not make this distinction) *vita*. As I have shown throughout this thesis, there are numerous problems attendant with trying to link such works to one specific textual basis.

21 See for example Filippino’s *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist* in London’s National Gallery.
in a halo for Christ, while the Baptist’s head is encircled by a thin ring, matched in weight by the long cross leaning against his shoulder. The pair’s eyes are locked, their foreheads about to touch. The interaction of their hands and forearms may have given Filippino a little difficulty; the position of Christ’s hands shows little to no foreshortening or regard for a consistent arm length. The heads and hands of the two kinsmen are expressive crux of this Encounter composition.

The Baptist’s right hand comes up on the outside of Christ’s body. His fingers are drawn in lightly, giving the gesture little strength. Combined with the expression on the Baptist’s face, his overall attitude is slightly tentative, as if appealing to Christ for something, his entire body slightly bowed. Christ however seems to move in a diagonal line past the Baptist. Though his hands, placed against John’s right shoulder, could imply that he offers comfort to his cousin, I suggest that, taken in concert with the direction of his feet – and thus his line of movement, directly across the Baptist’s path – and his bowed head, suggests he moves past the Baptist, determined. Viewed in this light, this Encounter’s reversal of the pair’s correct Biblical ages becomes a statement on the maturity of each, as we see how they respond to their respective fates. Christ is depicted as older and by implication wiser than John. His figure, posture and face are already those of a man, while the Baptist, despite his long figure, is suspended in the perpetual boyhood of the rounded face, slight features and exposed neck. Christ, conceived with the knowledge of his own mission and purpose on earth, came into his inheritance of maturity and wisdom immediately. Whilst the Baptist still struggles with his foreknowledge of the suffering he is to endure, Christ has already accepted his own fate and his future Passion, and strides manfully towards it. He gently pushes the Baptist aside, and thus moves purposefully, a fully-conceived and –realised figure in space, who renders those around him and even his setting, pale and unsubstantial by comparison. Filippino’s Encounter, though ahistorical and atextual by any measure, nevertheless depicts clearly those known truths of the faith – Christ’s wisdom, willingness and power. The Baptist here, representative of Christ’s family and even of humanity, can only plead with an implacable Redeemer.

Desiderio’s Louvre tondo (fig. 7.7) c. 1460-64 predates by several decades the more numerous incarnations of the Christ Child and boy Baptist in terracotta, from the workshop of the Della Robbia brothers, and many of the works examined in the current
Yet it is only possible to properly examine the relationship examined in this *tondo* following demonstration that the Encounter motif could exist independent of its usual narrative setting. The two are depicted here as children of perhaps the age of ten, close to the Baptist in Filippo Lippi’s *Wilderness Adorations*, perhaps demonstrating Desiderio’s immediate predecessor and source for young Baptist iconography. Desiderio’s *tondo* is framed at a short distance, the round format enhancing the feeling of intimacy between the two children and the closeness of the viewer, and suggesting that facilitating the viewer’s focus on this emotional relationship was more important to Desiderio or the patron than the inclusion of narrative or background details. Desiderio has used the three-dimensional depth available to him in this carved *tondo* to place the Baptist closer to the viewer than Christ. The Baptist is portrayed in profile, with his face more volumetrically complete than Christ’s, who faces frontally to the viewer. Though both the literal and figurative hierarchies of the *tondo* place the viewer closer to the Baptist, it is clear that Christ is intended to be the focus of attention and contemplation.

The Baptist places his right hand on his own chest, the placement of his forefinger and middle finger over his robes seeming to imply that he points at himself. This is a reversal of his more customary literal and often visual gesture at Christ. He is echoed in this by Christ, who places his hand on John’s chest, and seems to confirm the saint’s gesture. The slight tilt of the Baptist’s jaw and his open mouth seem interrogatory. Christ’s assured gaze and right hand, placed on his cousin’s breast, seem to reassure the questing Baptist. Though as the two appear in the Bible, Christ is the younger of the two, in this representation of the central motif of the *Encounter*, his boyish form is imbued with the authority and grace of his older self. The level of intimacy between the two figures is unprecedented for the time, as this appears to be the first example of the young Christ and Baptist depicted together outside of a lifecycle of either cousin. Desiderio or his patron has recognised the viewer’s potential interest in the two cousins depicted alone, with their kinship and intimacy the focus of the composition. This shows an early use of the textual precedent of the *Encounter*, developed beyond its narrative boundaries into an exploration of the closeness of the young John and Jesus, and a further variation on the theme of Christ acting as the more mature of the two, offering his cousin support.

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23 Olson covers the associations of the format in her book. See Olson (2000), 1-5, 34-57 and 83-105.
Desiderio’s Louvre tondo, Filippino’s drawing of the Encounter and Jacopo’s Berlin panel each depict the motif innovatively, moving away from narrative illustration, and towards an exploration of the intimacy between the two kinsmen. In the previous chapter, in Piero di Cosimo’s devotional tondo (fig. 6.16) the infants were so close to one another than an embrace between the two was imminent. These moments of physical tenderness may be a product of both naturalism and a deeper symbolic meaning. I also contend that the motif of the Embrace may be a relative, as it were, of the Encounter. This is particularly true if we consider the moment of closeness, and the communication between the two boys (or men) to be the important feature of the scene, rather than the wilderness setting which, as we see here, may be dispensed with. Filippino has not troubled to draw in even the rudiments of any setting in this sketch, focusing rather on the Embrace between the two cousins, and the moment of dramatic import and emotional connection. Much like the figure of the young Baptist himself, who may be isolated from a narrative setting and placed into new compositions, the Embrace retains the solemnity and gravity of the Encounter, but becomes mobile towards the end of the fifteenth century.

In a large tondo now in Glasgow (fig. 7.8) c. 1490s, Raffaellino del Garbo has displaced the Encounter/Embrace motif from the desert setting, and inserted it into a devotional composition featuring the Virgin.24 Here again, depictions of the young Baptist (in concert with the young Christ) are shown to be well-suited to a devotional composition featuring the Virgin. Both birth and Passion symbolism are rife in this tondo with the intimate interaction between the infant Christ and the young John (not much older than his cousin) again the symbolic centre of the composition. The Virgin is a large, finely-drawn figure, whose substantial bulk is exaggerated by the elaborate trails

24 H. Buschmann, “Raffaellino del Garbo: Werkmonographie und Katalog”, Ph.D diss., Freiburg (Breisgau) Universität, 1993, cat. A48, 181-182; P. Humfrey, Glasgow Museums: The Italian Paintings, London: Unicorn Press, 2012, 51-53; L. A. Waldman, “Raffaellino del Garbo and His World: Commissions, Patrons, Associates”, Artibus et Historiae 27 (2006), 51-94. The Fondazione Zeri gives the date as c. 1485-1524. I note that whilst Raffaellino scholarship does not offer a more secure dating for this tondo, in Waldman the author rejects a painting as a post-1500 Raffaellino partially on the basis that after this point, Raffaellino’s drapery became more volumetric and less “busy”, with decorative “loops and pothooks” (Waldman, 61). The tondo examined here certainly seems to exhibit the more fluted, busy style of drapery apparently favoured by Raffaellino earlier in his career. I have found a very strong parallel for the arrangement of the Virgin and attendant (here, an angel) and the embrace between the Baptist and Christ bear a strong resemblance in a Sacra Famiglia con San Giovannino e Santa Margherita by Filippino, now in Cleveland, painted ca. 1489, which may suggest that Raffaellino’s was painted at least after this date. I suggest that a date of c. 1490-1500 would be plausible for this work. This is supported by Humfrey, who places the work at c. 1493-94, relating it again to Filippino’s Cleveland tondo. For the Filippino antecedent, see Humfrey, fig. 1, 51; and Zambrano & Nelson, cat. 42, 588-89; for the Raffaellino, see ibid., R27, 609-610.
and loops of drapery which surround her and Christ. Due to the obfuscating effect of this extra cloth, it is difficult to tell whether she is standing, kneeling or sitting behind the marble ledge on which Christ and the Baptist are placed. She holds the infant Christ to her, seeming to wrap his torso with the cloth of her dress and cloak. This is one of two types of cloth which encircle both Virgin and Child, and give us the simultaneous symbolism of both birth and death, in an unobtrusive fashion. Her self-conscious act of wrapping folds of her dress around her son indicate his issue from her loins, whilst a thin, translucent veil tumbles from around her shoulders and tangles around the infant Christ’s legs, indicating the Virgin’s veil which she wrapped about the adult Christ at his death. This transparent drapery spreads over the marble top of the plinth on which Christ stands and the Baptist kneels – the veil appears to extend under the boy Baptist’s knee, indicating that he too partakes of Christ’s fate, with his own martyrdom.

Further indications of the salvific roles of the two children are placed in the composition. The infant Christ stands with one tiny foot on a book which lies on the ledge, drawing a literal connection between Christ and the Word. The Baptist’s usual reed cross is here very obviously placed between the two children, and their hands form a helix which envelops it, showing both children’s acceptance of the Passion, which the viewer recognizes the cross signifies. The cross-bar of the cruciform staff is aligned parallel to Christ’s head, framing his face against its arms – an unmistakable reference to his future death on the cross. Most significant of all these elements is the embrace between Christ and John. The young John kneels before Christ, whose standing posture positions him as John’s superior. John’s body is posed much as if he were engaged in prayer, but his left hand reaches out to touch Christ’s right elbow. Christ in turn draws him into an embrace, with his left arm cradling John’s shoulders, and his right hand cupping John’s chin, and turning the boy’s face up towards his own, employing the gesture of the chin-chuck. Christ’s expression is keenly focused, John is filled with awe at Christ’s gesture of intimacy. Both the Virgin and the angel to her left support this exchange, with each holding and supporting a young interlocutor and gazing down with purpose. Their hands holding the children form an equivalence which suggests the involvement and approval of both heaven and earth in the exchange.

Though the scene is placed inside, the generic nature of the setting allows the viewer to recall any apocryphal meeting of John and Jesus they choose. The centrality of

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25 Steinberg (1996), 30-33.
their meeting to the composition of the *tondo* contains echoes of the narrative moment of the *Encounter*, though it does not employ the same narrative setting. What Raffaellino has used here is the combination of the portentousness and inherent futurity of the *Encounter*, as well as the opportunity to explore the intimacy of the pair’s relationship. With the attendant Passion symbolism, it is possible to see Christ’s loving embrace of the Baptist as a signal of Jesus’ acceptance of the Passion. The cross which would have been borne into the scene by the Baptist, is seen here at the moment of transfer between the children. The next moment would be Christ taking ownership of the cross, and coming fully into his birthright of martyrdom. His love of the Baptist, who brings him symbols of the Passion, shows his willingness to be sacrificed for humanity who he so loves.

Finally, here we begin to see the embrace between the two children (as distinct from the greater distance between the two in the Encounter) as a representation of the spiritual marriage between Christ and the faithful. This was raised earlier, in chapter 4 of this thesis, where I highlighted the gesture in a late fifteenth-century anonymous Umbrian panel also featuring the Virgin and Child with the young St John, accompanied by two angels (fig. 4.16). However, here the gesture is performed at much closer range, far enhancing the intimacy and implications thereof. In the cupping of John’s chin, Christ gives an indication of the love he feels for humanity. In the anonymous Umbrian panel, the young John reacted with wide-eyed adoration as Christ’s loyal subject; here he reacts with awe at Christ’s acceptance of the fate which John brings him, in the form of the cross. Christ’s willing Embrace of the Baptist, despite or because of the futurity inherent in the child saint, signifies Christ and God’s forbearance and forgiveness of humanity, and willingness to be put to death to save the souls of mankind. Thus the *Encounter* has been refined into a representation of an *Embrace* between the infant John and Jesus, and the Embrace in turn evokes the dynamics of the spiritual marriage of Christ and humanity, or the individual soul. It is the *Embrace*, thus inscribed with both Christ’s foreknowledge of the Passion, and his and the Baptist’s mutual love and intimacy, which will be discussed in further detail throughout the remainder of this chapter.

A follower of Filippino Lippi (School of Filippino) included the Embrace motif in a *tondo* now in Lille (fig. 7.9) that manages to defy firm typological categorisation – being instead an example of a devotional composition including a number of different
References for the viewer’s contemplation.26 The composition combines elements of an Adoration, Nativity, and Encounter, leading to a nuanced, multi-layered representation of Christ’s Incarnation, his mission and future Passion. Despite the inclusion of the ox and the ass and the stable in the far left-hand side of the composition and the shepherds at the right, the main figures are set instead within a vast, classicised yet non-descript architectural setting that acts as a frame for the Holy Family, accompanied by the young John, who by this point appears to have been all but elevated to the status of member of the Holy Family. The rustic figures of the shepherds add a further reference to the composition’s collection of significant moments. The narrative markers of the Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds are problematised by the inclusion of the young Baptist, who is not present in any retelling of the Nativity, and by the sack on which the Christ Child rests, often seen as a symbol of the Holy Family’s Rest on the Flight to Egypt.27 The conflation of a number of different narrative moments fits with the non-specificity of many such devotional works, which I have highlighted throughout this thesis.

A gap in the ceiling of the architectural ruin over the Virgin’s head contrives to echo her halo with another of natural light, or perhaps to imply the presence of the Holy Spirit, which appeared through a similar aperture at the moment of Christ’s Baptism to confirm him as the Messiah. This passage of light renders the setting a simulacrum of an antique temple with an oculus at its head. However, the figural group of the Holy Family can also be read as a representation of the liturgy, as performed within a contemporary church, given the link between Christ and the altar, and the Virgin and Baptist’s parallel roles as representatives of the church itself.28 The link between Christ and altar is seen elsewhere more literally with Christ’s manger placed conspicuously on an altar, but the echoes of this possibility are clear enough here for the viewer to make the connection. The Virgin’s figure dominates the composition, the dark swathes of her drapery not only occupying a great deal of its three-dimensional space, but also extending to enfold the infant Christ, once again presenting him as the issue of her loins, and her real human

27 Also seen in Perugino’s Madonna del Sacco, or Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist and an Angel, examined in the previous chapter (6.13). On the symbolism of the sack, see the following on the c. 1525 work by Andrea del Sarto depicting the same motif: M. Lisner, “Osservazioni sul Tondo Doni di Michelangelo e su la Madonna del Sacco di Andrea del Sarto: cromia e colore iconografico, con un epilogo (parte I)”, Arte Cristiana 836 (2006), 337-346 and part II, Arte Cristiana 837 (2006), 423-430; G. Neufeld, “On the Genesis of the Madonna del Sacco”, The Art Bulletin 47 (1965), 117-118.
son. Joseph here takes a far more active role than usual, sponsoring the interaction of Christ and the Baptist. This role is often filled in other compositions by angels, as in Raffaellino’s *tondo* examined above, but here is awarded to a further representative of Christ’s Davidic heritage, thereby reinforcing again Christ’s mortal family ties.

The Embrace between the Baptist and Christ is slightly awkwardly posed, however any difficulties the artist appears to have had with attempting to reconcile Christ’s seated position and the Baptist’s active entrance from the left side of the composition only demonstrate the importance of their interaction to the artist’s design for the work as a whole. Christ is presented as a customarily winsome toddler, with the usual dimpled limbs and rounded cheeks, but in this composition sits up on a sack or cushion covered by the edge of the Virgin’s cloak, and appears very engaged in his surroundings. He shows not just awareness of the family that surrounds him, through his interaction with John, but is also the only figure who acknowledges the audience – he gazes out at the viewer, almost confirming that they are watching him closely and understanding his actions. His right arm embraces the young John, who is of a similar size and maybe only a few years old himself – still very much a toddler or young boy. John is depicted in profile, his right leg (closest to the viewer) bent to indicate movement, and the possibility of genuflection. His role in the composition is as tightly bound with Christ as his body – his inclusion in the composition appears to be necessary in part to confirm the corporeality of Christ.

Again, the Baptist appears as a materialisation of Christ’s future – one which he can either accept, and interact happily with, or turn away from in fear. Christ’s acceptance of the Baptist, as evidenced by their close embrace, and his significant glance at the viewer, is the crux of this composition. Christ’s diagonal motion, twisting him away from the comfort of his mother, and towards the future as represented by John, also gives this composition a strong sense of temporal progression; that is, the suggestion that John actively draws Christ away from babyhood, and towards adulthood. The stillness of the other areas of the composition, including the outstretched hands of the shepherd, serves to highlight the movement of Christ towards the Baptist (shown by his leaning body, his left foot firmly planted to propel him towards his cousin) and the Baptist’s sudden entrance. The artist has adopted the motif of the Embrace here for the

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29 One of the most evocative illustrations of the frightened Jesus can be found in Michelangelo’s Taddei Tondo, which falls outside the purview of this thesis for close examination. However, it illustrates an alternate action for Jesus, who in Michelangelo’s composition appears to shy away from the Baptist, who offers him a goldfinch. See Easton, *op. cit.*
air of recognition and assent it imparts, similar to the air of acceptance attendant in the Raffaellino tondo. The young Baptist is instrumental here in conveying the message of prophetic fulfillment and acceptance, and the Embrace between the two children is the emotional centre of the composition.

In a panel by a late fifteenth-century anonymous Florentine artist, now in the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden, the intimacy of the Embrace as seen in the Raffaellino and the School of Filippino tondi is increased, and becomes the focus of the entire composition (fig. 7.10). The seated Virgin is placed before a pillar, with panoramic views of the countryside beyond on either side. The infant Christ, cradled loosely in her lap, leans over to embrace the young Baptist, who reaches up as if to lift the Child into his arms. The figure of Mary is large, with over-long arms to accommodate her twin actions of gently holding Christ’s leg in her lap, and simultaneously placing a cradling arm around John’s shoulders. Her face is passive and disengaged, exhibiting the idealized sweetness described by Goffen in her examination of the Virgin as a paragone of motherly virtue. Her large frame transforms her into a throne for the body of her Child – it is through her untainted body that he is Incarnate on earth, and thus she forms the seat for his physical existence.

The Baptist is characterized with relative economy, with the back of his hair shirt revealed by his cloak, and just the letters “E·A” visible on his banner, enough for the viewer to surmise that it reads ECCE AGNUS DEI. With his right hand, he reaches up towards Christ, gripping the Child under his arm. Christ in turn places one hand around John’s head, and the other on his cousin’s chin. Jesus draws John’s face near in a gesture which evokes the chin-chuck, their cheeks touch, and they appear about to kiss. The restraint with which the Baptist is signified (with a relative lack of hagiographic identifiers) is related to the nudity of the Baptist figure in Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks: the characterisation of the child saint as Baptist is stripped back so that the young John may also be identified in this composition as the representative of humanity. His

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30 The attribution of this panel has not been resolved. Zeri suggests Ghirlandaio, and a somewhat early date of c. 1478-97. However, this has not been accepted by any scholars on the artist, and the panel is not mentioned in Ghirlandaio catalogues. For Ghirlandaio, I consulted J. K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; and R. G. Kecks, *Ghirlandaio: Catalogo completo*, Florence: Octavo, 1995. Berenson suggests Raffaellino del Garbo, but again this appears not to have gained any traction. Berenson (1927), 79. On the basis of the use of the Embrace motif, I would place this towards the end of the fifteenth century.

31 Goffen (1999), op. cit.
impending kiss with Christ symbolizes the spiritual marriage between Christ and mankind which is the subject of the Song of Songs.

The Baptist in this composition has been promoted from Friend of the Bridegroom, to Bride himself.\textsuperscript{32} He is entitled to be the Bride of this Bridegroom in two ways. First, as discussed in my first chapter, as the administ rant of the rite of Baptism, John signifies entry into the church, and by extension can be seen as the representative of the church itself. The standard reading of the Song of Songs sees the canticle as a love song devoted to Christ’s love for the Church.\textsuperscript{33} Second, as seen several times throughout this thesis, the Baptist can stand for humanity entire; as the people who make up the congregation of the church. In this sense, as one such individual soul dedicated to Christ, the Song of Songs describes their loving – and here, physical – relationship in terms of a marriage.\textsuperscript{34} The Virgin has also played the role the Baptist is cast in here, as is seen in the many depictions of her holding her son (both child and adult) in an intimate, and sometimes carnally activated, embrace. However, here her relative disengagement from her child, allowing him to all but fall from her lap into the arms of the Baptist, signals that she has relinquished this role, and it is ceded to the boy John instead. The two children’s impending kiss, in their shared childhood, signals Christ’s impending fulfillment of the promise of salvation: the kiss is the Passion, where Christ will die for the salvation of humanity.

We see the consummation of that marriage – the kiss completed – in a panel painted by Botticelli (possibly with assistants), at the end of the Quattrocento, which though a devotional painting featuring both Virgin and Child, and the young St John, bears a strong resemblance to a Pietà in its thematic and emotive qualities (fig. 7.11).\textsuperscript{35} This may be in fact the inspiration for the painting just examined, but it represents the completion of the Embrace, so I will discuss it here in order to demonstrate the motif’s development and consummation. Many familiar elements of Florentine devotional imagery, and Botticelli’s own symbolic arsenal are included in this panel, such as the wall of rose bushes in the background, signifying both the \textit{hortus conclusus} of the Virgin and the red roses, the blood of Christ’s martyrdom. The Passion symbols of the Baptist himself, his prominently positioned cross, and the thin, shroud-like wrapping of

\textsuperscript{32} On the distinction between “Bride” and “Friend”, see Kingsmill, 17-19.
\textsuperscript{33} On the ecclesiastical interpretation of the Song of Songs, see Matter, 86-122.
\textsuperscript{34} On this (personal and mystical) interpretation of the Song of Songs, see Matter, 123-150; and Scheper, 529-584.
\textsuperscript{35} See Lightbown 2, cat. C45, 139-140; Mandel, cat. 119, 103-104; and Zöllner (2005), cat. 73, 258-259.
Christ’s body, are also common to many devotional works. Here however the innovative combination of a Deposition-like pose for the white-faced, lifeless Christ, and the Embrace and kiss with the Baptist, create a newly evocative depiction of the significance of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity.

The clearest pictorial line in the composition attends to the crux of its purpose. The emotive centre of the work is the reciprocal embrace of Christ and the young Baptist, framed by the Baptist’s left arm, their faces rendered almost as two halves of the same whole. The monumental Virgin cradles the infant Christ in her arms. Additional swathes of drapery loop in weightless curves from Mary’s head and around her body to not only echo the shroud she wraps around her son, but also to draw with a sinuous line a circle around the central Embrace of Christ and John. The composition is an echo of a Deposition, with an infant Christ sleeping, cradled tenderly in his mother’s arms and cousin’s embrace, rather than the dead Christ of the Pieta. In Botticelli’s composition however, John is cast in the role of the Virgin at the Deposition, pressing his face to Christ’s as seen in, for example, Botticelli’s own depiction of the Pietà, c. 1495, now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Christ’s white face closely resembles his mother’s in both physical features and solemnity. The recumbent Child clearly prefigures his own death, with a further reminder present in the Baptist’s cross, framed directly above the children against a patch of blue sky in the uppermost right hand corner of the painting. By portraying Christ as infant who pre-enacts his own death, Botticelli achieves the circularity of depicting both his birth and death within one composition. A strip of diaphanous gauze softens the view, but nevertheless Christ’s genitals are visible in the centre of the painting, Botticelli draws attention both to Christ’s birth as a complete man, and his death as one. Despite the solemnity of the Virgin’s face, it is clear that she is complicit and willing, leaning down to offer John access to Christ. Though she cradles her child in her arms, with her left arm she holds him away from her body to receive the embrace of the Baptist. The Virgin’s acceptance of Christ’s inevitable death, which is known even at birth, is necessary – and she sets a serene example for the viewer. Christ’s death is necessary for humanity’s redemption.

John is fully characterized as the Baptist, which allows him to stand clearly for Christ’s adult mission and for the Passion. This last is symbolized by the elegant line of the reed cross, tracing the diagonal line of the Virgin and John’s bodies. With his left

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36 For the Pietà motif in devotional iconography and imagery, see W. Krönig, “Rheinische Vesperbilder und Leder und Ihr Umkreis”, Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch 1 (1962), 97-192.
hand John reaches up to Christ and draws the infant’s head towards him. His own head in turn is cradled in both of Christ’s hands, Christ’s loving response showing that John has fully taken up the mantle of sponsa here. The saint’s legs at the bottom of the panel seem awkwardly posed; he simultaneously stands still and indicates forward movement with his bent left leg. His animal-skin robe, depicted here in lavish detail by Botticelli, indicates that he has taken full ownership of the identity of desert prophet. In this composition, we see the culmination of nearly half a century of experimentation and development of the young Baptist figure, for here his role is multi-layered and diverse. He prefigures the Passion, through bearing the cross to the young Christ, and through the biblical associations between the two which make John’s death the harbinger of Christ’s own. As an actor within a devotional image, he demonstrates the correct approach for the viewer: leading by example, he encourages the worshipper to embrace Christ and share the pain of his death. The composition contains the very totality of Christ’s existence, encompassing both his miraculous birth and his sacrificial death. Botticelli depicts God’s covenant and fulfils it within the same image, and indicates for him this sacrifice is made in the figure of John, who again represents humanity, receiving the love of Christ in the form of a kiss.

The motif of the Embrace between the young – often infant – John and Jesus then is the combination and culmination of the various roles the young Baptist has played in devotional imagery throughout the second half of the fifteenth century. By sharing this intimate moment with the infant Christ, John symbolically enacts the spiritual marriage at the very heart of the Christian faith, representing both the union of the soul with the divine, and the marriage of Church and Godhead. This is made possible by the connection between the two children established elsewhere, and is a development in the iconography of the Baptist which very much follows and builds on the various layers of meaning he accrued through being represented in large numbers of devotional works. When the young John embraces Christ, he acts as witness, Baptist and man, and as such is the only figure who could enact the role in such a fashion, with each of these meanings layered over the figure of the boy Baptist like layers of cloth. The kiss of Christ and Baptist, as seen in Botticelli’s late Quattrocento panel – redolent of a Pietà – is nothing less than a precursor to the Passion, and Christ’s willing sacrifice for humanity. To add this role, and this imagery, to the typographic structure present throughout Christian art surely cemented the Baptist as a significant, compelling addition to devotional imagery.
CONCLUSION

The boy Baptist in Renaissance art began to be used independently in Florence as a representative of Medicean political and social ambitions. However, over the course of the second half of the fifteenth century, the youthful John came to represent a far greater range of themes in devotional art, becoming popular beyond the city of Florence, and to a far wider audience. The infant Baptist carried much of the significance of the mature, desert-dwelling Baptist, but was a much freer figure than his adult equivalent, and as such could be imprinted with a number of different meanings. His ability to invoke a wide range of referents such as the wilderness, hermetic life, and entry into the church through the rite of baptism, in addition to the enactment of a fluid series of roles including witness, forerunner, harbinger of the passion, and of course Baptist, made John an endlessly useful and variable figure for patrons and artists. In Florence his appeal was immense. He represented the ambitions, ideals and hopes of the city, either as a Republic or under Medici rule. During the second half of the fifteenth century, John’s status as Florentine patron continued to ensure that the vast majority of works featuring a figure of the young Baptist were produced either in Florence, by artists who had worked within the Florentine workshop system, or for patrons with a connection to Florence. However, as the young saint’s figure began to appear in compositions throughout Tuscany and beyond, the boy Baptist’s utility within devotional compositions, and resonance with faithful viewers, meant that many representations of the young John, particularly from the 1480s onwards, were produced elsewhere in Italy. Giovannino’s ubiquity in devotional painting and Italian art by the end of the fifteenth century has meant that his appearance has perhaps been taken somewhat for granted, with only one landmark study, that of Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, having been made of the boy Baptist prior to this thesis. The present project has aimed to readdress the
significance of the young Baptist starting from the very basics of his theological basis, and continuing through a consideration of a broad range of influences to chart and investigate his popularity up until 1500.

Chapter 1 of this thesis aimed to reconsider the figure of the Baptist starting with the most significant source material: a thorough investigation of the Bible. The influence of the Bible on Western art cannot be overstated; yet detailed interrogation of it as a source by art historians has been largely lacking. Thus the starting point and basis of this thesis was a thorough examination of the figure of the Baptist throughout the Bible, including references in the Old Testament which are understood to have shaped perception of the saint, as well as a detailed reading of the Gospels, and John’s role therein. This inquiry engaged with the material on a number of levels, including narrative, lexical and structural, and revealed a deep-seated parallel between the figures of John and Jesus, whereby the Baptist figure is pivotal in both linking New Testament to Old, and in leading the way for miraculous moments in Christ’s life, through both narrative and structural means. Chapter 1 also included an analysis of Early Christian Apocrypha, as these have often been suggested as source material for later medieval and Renaissance depictions of the birth and infancy narratives of both Christ and John. In contrast to the strong thematic portrait of the Baptist which emerged from the Old Testament and Gospels, these texts yielded remarkably little in secure, irrefutable source material for later imagery. Nevertheless, such an inquiry was indispensable to the scope of the thesis.

In chapter 2, I examined more contemporary late-medieval to Renaissance textual and visual sources, to understand the context for the first independent appearance of the young Baptist figure in Florence, ca. 1459 in the Medici Adorations of Filippo Lippi. This was necessary in order to foreground the appearance of the Baptist as a young, independent narrative actor in the city in the middle of the fifteenth century. As such, this investigation spanned roughly the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, though I considered dates and events which pointed to earlier beginnings of the Baptist’s cult in Florence. The Baptist’s cult in the city has been investigated in the course of other inquiries, such as those by Cornelison, Tacconi and Trexler, but a plausible reason, or even date, for the establishment of the Baptist’s cult in Florence has never been proposed. The present thesis did not presume to fill this void, but rather looked for the beginnings of the young Baptist’s iconography, and investigated some of the reasons for the popularity of the saint in late medieval and Renaissance Florence.
This chapter also included an examination of the devotional text that many scholars (most notably Aronberg Lavin) have suggested as the major source for the iconography of the young Baptist in the Renaissance. Epistemological problems aside, the text itself is not an exact match for most, if any, of the representations of the Baptist that emerged following its creation and dissemination. The issue with trying to pin all visual depictions on this one text – or any other single text, as noted – is that in many cases, sources and influences are not so clear-cut as some scholars propose. As I have shown, the figure of the boy Baptist had its genesis in a panoply of written sources, from the Bible to late-medieval retellings of the saint’s life, in addition to religious ritual, liturgy, sermons, and visual culture, including statues, banners, cassone, deschi di parte, and contemporary art. To narrow the field of inspiration to one text of dubious origin and influence, when the text does not even contain more than a rudimentary similarity to the works of art in question, I believe is to wilfully ignore the rich confluence of ideas and sources which influence the production of art and devotional objects. Instead, we should be aware of the limitations imposed by assuming a direct relationship between single, individual written sources (besides the Bible), and works which clearly draw on a greater array of ideas and precepts.

In chapter 2, I also delineated a trend, not previously remarked upon, whereby narrative lifecycle representations of the life of John saw a shift in emphasis and timeline, to effectively expand the period of childhood and youth. From the thirteenth-century Florentine Baptistery mosaics, to the early fifteenth-century Salimbeni frescoes at Urbino, this shift, once highlighted, is evident, through a comparison of the age of John at the moment of various significant events common across these cycles. Through such comparisons, not only does an increasing interest in the childhood and youth of the saint become clear, but also a deliberate linking of the age of the Baptist to those significant events is noticeable. Thus the Baptist appears to leave for the desert at a progressively younger age, and he begins his ministry there earlier, so that eventually, at Urbino, the artists are able to depict the saint reaching full maturity at the moment at which he baptizes Christ, which has a symbolic neatness.

Chapter 3 explored in detail the circumstances and significance of the first representation of John the Baptist as a youth outside a narrative cycle. A young independent figure of the Baptist was included in the altarpiece for the new Palazzo Medici ca. 1459, which was built and lavishly decorated in part to support the notion of the Medici family’s authority and right to rule in Florence. Though the Medici family
and their commissions, and Florence under their rule and influence, are a much-studied area, I believe the figure of the young John in the Palazzo Medici Adoration by Fra Filippo Lippi has not been sufficiently addressed. In this chapter I linked this figure to the theological and political significance of Benozzo Gozzoli’s Cavalcade of the Magi frescoes, which cover the chapel walls, as well as to other Medici commissions which have well-established political motivation, such as the bronze David made for the Palazzo’s courtyard. As I argue, Cosimo de’ Medici co-opted the patron saint of the city to stand for the observer within an Adoration composition, but the innovation is in the drastic makeover to which the Baptist was subject in this painting.

The newly youthful figure of John emerges from the wilderness of Filippo’s composition, seen elsewhere in his Annalena Adoration (also with a Medicean connection), poised to lead and witness. The potential of this young figure revitalised the inaccessibility of the older Baptist, depicted previously as a haggard desert prophet. The new youthful Baptist was representative of the hopes of Cosimo de’ Medici for his grandson Lorenzo, behind whom the family had thrown their fortune. This chapter shed new light on the iconography of this altarpiece, which was the key to the Medici’s program of self-representation following their tumultuous fortunes at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Their use of the youthful Baptist figure helped cement their position in Florence, and introduced a new possibility to the visual language of devotion, which was soon repeated by Piero de’ Medici and his wife Lucrezia Tornabuoni, who commissioned a variation of the Palazzo Medici Adoration’s composition to appeal to the religious novitiates at the Camaldoli Hermitage. Already, the broad appeal of the youthful Baptist figure – to both city princes and business contacts, and the cloistered residents of the hermitage – was clear.

Chapter 4 demonstrated the enormous popularity, and interrogated the significance of the young Baptist in the second half of the fifteenth century, first in Florence and subsequently elsewhere in Italy, by collating and examining the entire corpus of works featuring a youthful figure of the saint, drawn from a number of sources. This chapter surveyed the appearance of the young Baptist as an infant, boy and adolescent across a wide range of pictorial and sculptural representations. Naturally there are limitations to this sort of investigation, including the limited number of Renaissance works which have survived to the present day, issues with dating and attribution, and a lack of commission details for the vast majority of works. Additionally, I imposed a chronological limit, examining only works for which there
was a possibility they were produced before 1500, for reasons outlined in the introduction. However, conducting an investigation in such a thorough and systematic fashion has allowed me to draw certain conclusions with a great degree of certainty, leading to new insights into the geographic spread and variations of the young Baptist figure, which have been collated in numeric form for reference in Appendix 1 of this thesis. In this chapter, I identified key iconographic features associated with the boy Baptist, observed and examined trends in the saint’s age and appearance, and analysed several different types of works which featured the young saint. These included portrait busts, works linked explicitly to his continuing identity as patron saint of Florence, and an increasing number of paintings featuring the Baptist in a simple devotional composition, most often containing only the Virgin, Child and young St John. These works proliferated rapidly towards the end of the fifteenth century, and spread well beyond Florence, though their production within Florence proper continued apace.

In this chapter it emerged that far from remaining static as a representative of Florentine interests, the boy Baptist changed and grew, adding layers of meaning and reference like so many layers of clothing. The polysemic nature of the young Baptist – as distinct from the adult version of the saint – saw him act as interlocutor with the audience, guide and example, attendant of Christ, and, increasingly important, witness to the truth of Christ’s Incarnation. This role became perhaps the young Baptist’s most significant, and saw him participate in devotional compositions as a figure uniquely poised to confirm both Christ’s earthly and heavenly lineage. Many such representations built on one another and relied on a certain degree of intertextuality on the part of the viewer. The worshipper could recall the Baptist’s biblical role, combine it with his appearances and actions within other devotional literature, and add their own personal resonance to depictions of the young John presented at face value as companion and playmate of the similarly-aged Christ, but representing much more. This chapter examined and established the means through which this role was characterised and supported by other iconographic elements, including such signifiers as the goldfinch and the Baptist’s reed cross.

Following the first four chapters of the thesis, the next three constituted shorter iconographic studies, each investigating the genesis, significance and influence of a compelling use of the boy Baptist. Two of these covered subject areas entirely new in art historical scholarship, whilst the other made an original entry into a crowded area of study. These three short chapters examined the primarily testamentary and incarnational
function of the Baptist in detail. Chapter 5 examined perhaps the single most influential representation of the young Baptist produced in the whole fifteenth century – Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. Both versions of the composition were examined (despite the date of the London panel), for the slight changes from first to second version confirmed some of the innovations and iconographic meaning of the composition. In the course of this chapter, I did not attempt to resolve the reasons behind the legal disputes which consumed both patrons and artists, though I have followed recent scholarship based at London’s National Gallery, which has reached the probable, if unexciting, conclusion that the dispute largely revolved around money, instead of the perceived unorthodoxy of the altarpiece’s iconography.

Rather, I examined the significance of the infant Baptist’s appearance in the composition and the significance of his characterisation, which simplified the imagery associated with saint by the 1480s, but built upon the polysemic meanings of the figure which had been developed by Florentine artists since 1459. Leonardo’s depiction of the naked infant saint allows John to stand not only for the viewer, but for humanity as a whole. In so depicting the Baptist, the artist opened up new possibilities in devotional iconography. The Baptist continues to play an active role in Leonardo’s *oeuvre* following the *Virgin of the Rocks*, with his appearance in the Burlington Cartoon being only slightly less influential on the artist’s contemporaries than the distinctive *Virgin of the Rocks* figure. Work remains to be done on the iconography of the Baptist (both as a child and a young adult) in the work of Leonardo as a whole, and on Leonardo’s iconography at large. His innovative solutions in this area, though particularly in this instance steeped in Florentine visual and iconographic tradition, can sometimes be overlooked by scholars in favour of solving seemingly intractable questions about dating, and in investigating the artist’s technical innovations.

Chapter 6 revisited Leo Steinberg’s perceptive and influential work on the nudity of Christ, and examined the Baptist’s role in compositions where the *ostentatto genitalium* of the infant Christ communicated a significant part of the work’s message. This chapter also interrogated the concurrent or alternative display of the infant Baptist’s genitalia as a compositional element, which has not previously been noted as a significant motif, or received any scholarly investigation. These works, it was shown, often relied upon the interpretation of the Baptist figure as a representative of the whole of humanity, as established chiefly by Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks*. As such, the paintings often cast the Baptist’s body as inferior to Christ’s or inflected with the
implicit shame of Original Sin. Through a number of works by Perugino, this chapter also examined a different permutation of the shared nudity of the infant John and Jesus, whereby the similarity of the two naked bodies was used to underline and reinforce the very meaning of the *ostentation genitalium*. This dynamic was beneficial to both figures, with John basking in the reflected holiness of the Child, and the mortal Incarnation of Christ being confirmed through comparison with the body of another human child. These works took the infant Baptist yet closer to Christ and the Virgin. Originating from all over Italy, such paintings show again the resonance of the Baptist to range of viewers.

The final chapter examined another neglected aspect of infant Baptist imagery, the prophetic Embrace between the young John and Jesus, whose iconographic significance has not been sufficiently analysed. These works I believe have as their bases depictions of the apocryphal meeting of John and Jesus, which I have shown appeared in no fixed setting, and within which the ages of the two protagonists were variable. The changeability of the surroundings of the main encounter demonstrate that the heart of the narrative moment is in the meeting of John and Jesus as a prefiguration of the Baptism of Christ, and of their respective key roles in salvific history. Thus this central core – the meeting of the two figures – could be, much like the figure of the young Baptist himself, liberated from its narrative setting, and made the subject of devotional imagery. The increasing closeness of the two children, with added connotations of the spiritual marriage of both the church and the individual soul to the divine, see the culmination of the young Baptist’s involvement in devotional and Incarnational iconography occurring in depictions of a kiss between the infant Christ and boy Baptist.

With the basis, sources, various iconographic meanings, and characterisation of the saint thus explored, defined and discussed, it remains to be seen what further nuances can be read from the figure of the young Baptist beyond the fifteenth century. Influential and significant representations of the boy John were produced by leading High Renaissance artists such as Raphael and Michelangelo. Raphael was not addressed here, partially because his use of the boy Baptist figure commences after the end of the Quattrocento, and I also because I saw, particularly in Perugino’s works, precedents for many aspects of Raphael’s use of the figure. However, considering the broad influence and appeal of his devotional works which feature the young Baptist, further investigation into his use within Raphael’s *oeuvre* is certainly warranted. Michelangelo
also makes great and somewhat perplexing use of the boy Baptist in several works, including the Doni and Taddei *tondi* and the unfinished, remarkably little-studied *Epiphania* cartoon.¹ This latter work I find fascinating for the monumentality the artist bestows on the young figures of John and Jesus, and for the thread of prophetic portent which runs through the composition. It was with reluctance that I concluded it could not be covered by the present study, for I believe that a thorough investigation of the genesis and development of the young Baptist as a subject of devotional art would better serve understanding of the motif than an investigation only of a small number of very famous works, hence my inclusion of many works by less well-known or anonymous artists, from across Italy. It was my intention to consider, as far as possible, all of the influences on, sources for and permutations of the boy Baptist figure, so ubiquitous in Renaissance Italian art and beyond, and yet so little understood. The Baptist was not the Messiah, but led the faithful to a true, loving relationship with Christ, and so was recognised by Jesus himself for his testament to the light.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

PRIMARY SOURCES


**SECONDARY SOURCES**


BIBLIOGRAPHY


-------- “Osservazioni sul Tondo Doni di Michelangelo e su la Madonna del Sacco di Andrea del Sarto: cromia e colore iconografico, con un epilogo (parte II)”, *Arte Cristiana* 837 (2006), 423-430.


**IMAGE SOURCES**

In addition to several catalogues and the image archives of the relevant museums/repositories, some of the images for this thesis have been sourced from the below websites. See image list for details of each image.

All Art/World History of Art: [http://www.all-art.org/](http://www.all-art.org/)

L'Associazione SCRIMA Torino: [http://www.scrimatorino.it/](http://www.scrimatorino.it/)


The Dominican Sisters of St Joseph: http://dominicansistersofstjoseph.org/


Web Gallery of Art: http://www.wga.hu/

Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
## APPENDIX 1 – Table of figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>I. 1</td>
<td>Total number of works examined</td>
<td>Starting date 1400. Works with a possible commencement date before 1500 were included, and a median date determined. In Ch IV of this thesis, those with a median date before 1500 have been considered</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Number of <em>tondi</em> that are Florentine</td>
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<td>83.5%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Number possibly painted before 1455</td>
<td>By median date (as noted above)</td>
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<td>Of these, x are Florentine</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I. 6</td>
<td>Number possibly produced before 1500</td>
<td>By median date (as noted above)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Of these, x are Florentine</td>
<td>% of works produced before 1500 that are Florentine</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of works produced before 1500 that are Florentine</td>
<td></td>
<td>79.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I. 7</td>
<td>Number of works that are representations of the Baptist alone</td>
<td>Excluding lifecycles of the saint. Includes all other media, eg. paintings, sculptures etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of these that are Florentine</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. 8</td>
<td>Number of works featuring <em>only</em> Christ and the young Baptist</td>
<td>Excluding eg. Rest on the Flight to Egypt with Virgin and Joseph. Also excluding Baptism of Christ (as these feature older Christ and John)</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of these that appear to be an Encounter in the Desert</td>
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I. 9  Number of works containing only the Virgin, Child and young St John the Baptist
% of total  47.5%

I. 10  Number of these works that are Florentine
% of these works that are Florentine  75.9%

I. 11  Number of depictions of John as a child
% of total
Including ages of approximately 5-12
The ages of 354 works were compared – others were impossible to include in this part of the study due to lack of photographs, etc
69.93%

I. 12 – Graph showing spikes in production of works featuring the young St John the Baptist in Italy during the fifteenth century (using median date of production).
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4.3 Mino da Fiesole, *The Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1480, Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André (Casa in Italia image archive)

4.4 Jacopo del Sellaio, *The Young St John the Baptist (Before the City of Florence)*, c. 1480, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art (National Gallery of Art image archive)

4.5 Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, c. 1473-75, Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello (Wikimedia Commons)

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4.17 Mariotto Albertinelli, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and a Goldfinch*, c. 1495, location unknown (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

4.18 Workshop of Botticelli, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1480s-90s, location unknown (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

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5.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with Infant St John the Baptist and an Angel (The Virgin of the Rocks)*, c. 1495-1499 and 1506-1508, London, National Gallery (left, before restoration and right, after. Image from the National Gallery)

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5.6 Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with Infant St John the Baptist and an Angel* (*The Virgin of the Rocks*), c. 1495-1499 and 1506-1508, London, National Gallery (Syson & Keith, 167)

5.7 Workshop of Andrea and Giovanni della Robbia, *Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist and Cherubim*, c. 1500, Paris, Musée du Louvre (Wikimedia Commons)

5.8 Bastiano Mainardi, *Virgin and Child with the Archangel Gabriel and the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1475-1513, location unknown (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

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6.1 Filippino Lippi (or School of), *Nativity with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1480-1510, location unknown (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.2 School of Filippino Lippi, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist, Joseph and Two Angels*, c. 1480-1510, Lima, private collection (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.3 Luca Signorelli, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and an Older Male Figure*, c. 1491-94, Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.4 Andrea Mantegna, *Virgin and Child with Saints Elizabeth, Joseph and the Young Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1485-88, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum (Wikimedia Commons)

6.5 Marco Palmezzano. *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and Joseph*, c. 1493-1509, Phoenix, Phoenix Art Museum (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.6 Lorenzo di Credi, *Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist and an Angel*, c. 1485-90, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Metropolitan Museum of Art image archive)

6.7 Lorenzo di Credi, *Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1490, Rome, Collezione Casati Stampi di Soncino (Web Gallery of Art image archive)

6.8 Pietro Perugino or follower, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and Two Angels*, c. 1495-1510, Berlin, Museum der bildenden Künste, Berlin (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.9 Pietro Perugino, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1470-73, London, Courtauld Institute of Art (Courtauld Institute of Art image archive)

6.10 Pietro Perugino, *Virgin and Child with Cherubim*, c. 1495, Perugia, Banca dell’Umbria (Garibaldi 1999, cat. 42, 41)

6.11 Pietro Perugino, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1480-85, London, National Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)

6.12 Pietro Perugino, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1495, Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunstinstitut (Wikimedia Commons)
6.13 Pietro Perugino, *Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist and an Angel (Madonna del Sacco)*, c. 1500, Florence, Galleria Palatina (Garibaldi 1999, cat. 55, 55)


6.15 Anonymous Umbrian artist, *Christ and the Young St John the Baptist*, after c. 1492-1502, Perugia, S. Pietro (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

6.16 Piero di Cosimo, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and Saints Anthony and Jerome*, c. 1490-1500, Strasbourg, Musée des Beaux-Arts (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

Chapter 7

7.1 Giovanni di Corraduccio, right panel of triptych (detail), c. 1386-1415, Trevi, Pinacoteca Comunale (Bildindex der Kunst und Architektur, Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte - Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

7.2 School of Perugino, *St Jerome in the Desert with Christ and the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1490s, Rome, Palazzo Barberini (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

7.3 Perugino with assistant, *St Jerome in the Desert with Christ and the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1490s, Washington D.C, National Gallery of Art (Wikimedia Commons)

7.4 Jacopo del Sellaio, *St Jerome in the Desert with Christ and the Young St John the Baptist, the Vision of St Bernard and the Penitent Mary Magdalene*, c. 1470-93, location unknown (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

7.5 Jacopo del Sellaio, *Christ Encountering John the Baptist in the Desert*, c. 1480s, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Fondazione Zeri image archive)


7.7 Desidero da Settignano, *Christ and the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1460-64, Paris, Musée du Louvre (Musée du Louvre image archive)

7.8 Raffaellino del Garbo, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist and Two Angels*, c. 1490s, Glasgow, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (Glasgow Museums collections navigator)

7.9 Maestro di Memphis, *Virgin Adoring the Child with the Young St John the Baptist, Joseph and Shepherds*, c. 1480-1510, Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts (Fondazione Zeri image archive)

7.10 Anonymous Florentine artist, *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1490s, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie (Fondazione Zeri image archive, listed as Ghirlandaio)

7.11 Botticelli (or Workshop), *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, c. 1495-1500, Florence, Galleria Palatina (Wikimedia Commons)