

## **Dura-Europos Church, Syria, 2nd century**



Discovered in the 1920s by a team of archaeologists from Yale, the Dura-Europos Church in modern day-Syria is considered to be the earliest Christian church we currently know of. The team was able to recover its ancient artworks, dating back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, including the depiction of a woman leaning over a well, which for a long time was considered to be a representation of the Samaritan woman who speaks with Jesus beside Jacob's well as recounted by John (4:1-42).

But a recent theory proposed by Michael Peppard, an Associate Professor of Theology at Fordham University, has rejected this interpretation, arguing that the painting is actually a depiction of the Annunciation, when angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive and give birth to Jesus.

Peppard points out that in written descriptions of the Annunciation found in 2nd-century biographies of Mary, Gabriel reaches her as she is drawing water with a pitcher, much as the Dura-Europos image shows and in line with Byzantine-era images of the scene.

Further study of the image also revealed details that are invisible to the naked eye, such as two lines reaching the woman's torso, that suggest the depiction of an incarnation. Based on such evidence, the Dura-Europos painting can be considered the first ever portrait of the Holy Mother.

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