

## The Lost Infant Jesus

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The recently restored Convent of Santa Clara in Funchal on the island of Madeira was founded at the end of the 16th century by the second captain of Funchal, João Gonçalves da Câmara as a convent for Franciscan nuns, the 'Poor Clares'. Although the convent is now officially classed as a historic monument, a small group of half a dozen or so nuns live in the convent which also houses a large pre-school nursery.

Visiting the convent in late August we found it contains a significant array of artworks including one which intrigued us – the 'Lost Infant Jesus' described as having been made of gold leaf and polychromed wood in a Portuguese atelier at the start of the 18th century.



Convent of Santa Clara  
Funchal

The caption to the figure of the 'Lost Infant Jesus' read as follows:



The Lost Infant Jesus

*"An image of great monastic devotion. As a tradition passed on by word, the image was kept hidden in the house of an aristocratic family, its location only known by the convent's abbess and the family that kept the image. This was a game that took place on the first Sunday following the Three Kings celebration festival, the person who guessed the location of the image being rewarded with savouries and alms, but only if the discovery took place on the "Recovery Sunday" being the seventh day after the hiding of the image.*

*It is thanks to Mother Clara das Chagos (1623 – 1701), daughter of António Dias de Araújo and of his wife Donna Isabel da Silva that this Christmas festivity started taking place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the convent where, it is presumed an older image existed. The tradition was kept until the year 1890, the year of the passing away of the last Poor Clare. The Lost Infant Jesus is a reference to an episode during the infancy of Jesus, connected to one of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, one of them due to having lost the infant Jesus whilst in the Temple of Jerusalem.”*

The canonical Gospels say little or nothing about the childhood of Jesus apart from the incident related in Luke 2:41-51 when, at the age of 12 he stayed behind in the temple courts in Jerusalem with the ‘teachers’. Although the caption to the image relates the ‘Lost Infant Jesus’ to this incident, he could scarcely be considered an ‘infant’ at the time.

Many years ago, I came across references to various apocryphal texts that purported to describe the childhood of Jesus and wondered if the ‘Lost Infant Jesus’ may, in fact derive from one of them. Searching around, I found various texts although most seem to derive their content from what is known as the ‘Infancy Gospel of Thomas’ (not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas, a set of sayings attributed to Jesus). This ‘Infancy Gospel’ is a set of texts by an unknown author or authors which is thought to be Gnostic in origin. It is of uncertain date but is thought to have been written in the mid-late 2nd century AD.

The text describes the life of Jesus from the age of about five to twelve with rather fanciful and at times malevolent supernatural events. The stories cover how Jesus matures and learns to use his powers for good and how those around him first respond in fear and later in admiration. One of the episodes involves Jesus making clay birds and then bringing them to life. This is also referred to in the Qu’ran (Shurah 5, 110) and also in a mediaeval Jewish work known as the ‘Toledot Yeshu’. Making clay birds and giving them life seems fairly benign, but other incidents were less so.

When a child spilt water that Jesus had collected, he killed the child. At age one he cursed a boy and caused the child's body to wither into a corpse. Later, Jesus killed another child via a curse when the child apparently accidentally bumped into him, threw a stone at him, or punched him (depending on the translation). When Joseph and Mary's neighbours complained, Jesus miraculously struck them blind. Jesus then started receiving lessons, but tried to teach the teacher instead, upsetting the teacher who suspected supernatural origins. Jesus was amused by this suspicion, which he confirmed, and revoked all his earlier apparent cruelty. Subsequently, he resurrected a friend who was killed when he fell from a roof and healed another who cut his foot with an axe.

After various other demonstrations of supernatural ability, new teachers tried to teach Jesus, but again he proceeded to explain the law to them instead. Another set of miracles is mentioned, in which Jesus healed his brother, who was bitten by a snake, and two others, who had died from different causes. Finally, the text recounts the episode in Luke referred to above in which Jesus, aged twelve, stayed behind in the temple.

All of this seems rather fanciful and definitely at odds with the way Henry Gauntlett (1805 – 1876) described the child Jesus in his Christmas carol ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ –

*And through all his wondrous childhood  
He would honour and obey,  
Love, and watch the lowly maiden  
In whose gentle arms he lay.  
Christian children all must be  
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

Not surprisingly, from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas was regarded as inauthentic and by some, heretical.

To my mind, these texts probably represent attempts to fill in the gaps of Jesus’s early years perhaps based on oral traditions or legends. In similar fashion, the Gospel of James, another second century text attempts to sketch out a life of Mary by elaborating on references in the canonical Gospels. Although condemned as heretical by Pope Innocent I, it became a widely influential source for doctrines and beliefs around Mary.

So, it seems the tradition of the ‘Lost Infant Jesus’ at the convent of Santa Clara does not relate to anything included in the ‘Infancy Gospels’. Nonetheless, the connection with Jesus remaining in the temple courts rather than returning home with Mary and Joseph seems tenuous. Perhaps though, it was just something Mother Clara das Chagos thought up to provide a bit more colour for the convent’s Christmas festivities.

Finally, and not really connected to the ‘Lost Infant Jesus’, in researching for this article I came across the Syriac Infancy Gospel, which itself is partly based on the

Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This text includes a reference to the healing powers of one of Jesus's nappies, of all things. I couldn't help but connect this to one of the oddest relics I have ever come across, namely one of Jesus's nappies stored in a silver casket in the treasury of Dubrovnik Cathedral.



Casket containing relic of Jesus's nappy  
Dubrovnik Cathedral

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## **A Big Thank You!**

*From Gerald Barton, former Circuit Administrator and Editor of In-touch*

Dear Friends,

Many thanks for the kind and generous gift I received from people across the Circuit to mark my retirement from the Circuit Office. Your gift only reached me at the start of October which explains why I haven't written to thank you before. I have not yet decided how to spend the gift, but I am sure I will find something very suitable. Once again, many thanks!

Gerald Barton