

Catalogue of the narrative scenes

1. The Nativity/The Adoration of the Animals

(Mt 1,1–25; Lk 2,1–2; Protoevangelium of James 17–20; Arabic Infancy Gospel; Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 13,2–7; Act of Joseph, History of Joseph the Carpenter; Is 1,3)

The architectural background is created by a brick wall, from which a donkey comes to bow to the newly born Christ. On the other side, an ox bows towards him. The foundation wall under the crib is also made of brick. Mary is sitting on a stone dressed in a long tunic and holding a veil covering her hair with her hand. A young and beardless Joseph is dressed in an *exomis* (Roman shepherd's clothing). He is leaning against a distinctly executed attribute of his craft: a saw. He is sitting on a stone in the same position to the crib as Mary and they both participate in events to the same degree. It is in contrast to the Eastern Early Christian depiction, where Joseph is usually also present, although with ostentatious passivity, which might itself be a symbol of the dogma of incarnation, that it is not he who is the true father of the child.¹ We find an almost identical composition in the ivory Werden Casket with a disputable dating either from the 5th² or from the 9th century.³ On the sides of the scene, there are winged creatures with open books framed with oak crowns.

The first depiction of the Nativity, iconography likely coming from Rome, is connected with the establishment of the feast of Christmas first mentioned in the *Depositio martyrum* from 335–336 (e.g. the catacombs of S. Sebastiano⁴). Since the 1st half of the 4th century, the Nativity of Christ has been connected with the Adoration of the Three Magi into one scene. This two scenes were divided in Western art in the 5th century and further followed in the cyclic depictions such that one and then the other as is the case with the Five-Part Diptych. At that time, also Joseph begins to be present at the Nativity, who replaces the prophet or shepherd; from the 6th century he takes a solid place here.⁵ The figure of Joseph is only seldom seen in the Gospels. More specific information on

1 André Grabar, *Christian iconography: a study of its origins*, Princeton University Press 1968, p. 130.

2 Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz 1976, p. 83, entry 118.

3 John Beckwith, The Werden Casket Reconsidered, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1958, pp. 1–11.

4 Caterina Conidi, Natività, in: Fabrizio Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*, Città del Vaticano 2000, pp. 225–228.

5 Pia Wilhelm, Geburt Christi, in: Engelbert Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie: allgemeine Ikonographie*, Bd 2, Rom – Freiburg 1970, pp. 92–93.

Joseph, his life and job is provided in the Apocryphal texts like the Protoevangelium of James (19) and Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (13,1). The life of Joseph in its full breadth is developed in a Coptic treatise from the 4th century *History of Joseph the Carpenter*.⁶

Still in the 4th century, not only can Joseph be missing but also Mary, the donkey and ox are, however, present almost always, as e.g. on the Stilicho sarcophagus from the 4th century from the Basilica of St Ambrose in Milan.⁷ We do not find the presence of animals at the Nativity of Christ in any of the Gospels. The origin is sought in Origen's *Homilies on St Luke*. Origen's verses then influenced the later Apocryphal treatises, as e.g. Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (14). We read in them that the mother placed her child in a crib and an ox and a donkey venerated him. And so it fulfilled what was written in the prophesy of Isaiah (1,3): "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider".⁸

In the symbolic interpretations, the donkey and ox are prefigurations of the two crooks crucified with Christ or Jews and Pagans. For instance, Gregory of Nazianzus says: "The ox is the Jew tied on the chain of the Law; the donkey, which is a draught animal, bears the heavy load of prayer".⁹ Ambrose and Augustin label the ox as the symbol of the chosen Jewish nation and the donkey as the symbol of the pagans.¹⁰

2. The Massacre of the Innocents

(Mt 2,16–18)

Herod is seated on a heavy throne on a level, elevated dais. He is dressed in armour as a Roman officer,¹¹ he has a *chlamys* thrown over his shoulder joined with a circular clasp. His left hand is holding a sceptre with a spherical head, his right hand is holding the order for the massacre. His two personal guards next to the throne have javelins with long tips and shields with a seven-leaf rose, their cloaks are also joined by circular fibulae. The third shield could

6 Frédéric Tristan, *Les premières images chrétiennes: du symbole à l'icône: Ile-VIe siècle*, Paris 1996, p. 324.

7 Gertrud Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst: Inkarnation, Kindheit, Taufe, Versuchung, Verklärung, Wirken und Wunder Christi*, Band 1, Gütersloh 1966, fig. 143.

8 Henri Leclercq, Nativité, in: Fernand Cabrol, Henri Leclercq (eds), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie: Mora Vocis-Noé*, Tome XII., par. 1., Paris 1935, pp. 905–958.

9 Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Tome II, Iconographie de La Bible II, Nouveau Testament, Paris 1957, pp. 228–229.

10 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 71.

11 Richard Delbrück, Das fünfteilige Diptychon in Mailand, *Bonner Jahrbücher des Rheinischen Landesmuseum in Bonn und des Rheinischen Amtes für Bodendenkmalpflege im Landschaftsverband Rheinland und des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande*, Mainz 1951, pp. 96–107, esp. p. 97.

have belonged to Herod. One of the three soldiers participating in the act of murder is holding a child by the foot and preparing to throw him on the ground at the feet of Herod, another child is already lying on the ground. A second soldier is trying to prevent two women from saving their children. The soldiers are wearing short, girded tunics and *chlamyses*. The grief of the women is expressed by raised arms and loose hair, hence in a way that has its origin in Antiquity.¹² Their clothing comprises a plain hanging tunic without sleeves, girded by a cord. In the background, there is a very stiff and illusively marked figure of a third soldier who is watching the scene. The scene is bordered from all sides by an oak wreath with the busts of the two Gospel writers.

The Bethlehem innocents were considered as the first Christian martyrs baptised in their own blood.¹³ Matthew does not provide any details on this event, only the wailing mothers are proof for him of the fulfilment of Jeremiah's Old Testament prophesy (Mt. 17,18; Jr 31,15). The earliest and frequent depiction of this scene comes from the 5th century from Gallic sarcophagi.¹⁴ In the iconography of the Massacre of the Innocents, we can identify two types differing in the way the children were murdered. They were either killed with a sword or thrown on the ground or a cliff,¹⁵ as is the case of the Five-Part Diptych. We can find the same motif on the lid of the Gallic sarcophagus from St Maximin from the beginning of the 5th century¹⁶ or on an ivory relief of an originally five-part Diptych today divided between the Staatliche Museum in Berlin, the Musée du Louvre in Paris and the Musée Blandin in Nevers from the beginning of the 5th century.¹⁷

The scene of the Massacre of the Innocents was in the earlier literature dealing with the Milan Diptych chiefly followed with the greatest interest and far-reaching consequences were derived from it, on the basis of which its dating and provenience were determined.¹⁸ The most attention has been focused precisely on the method in which the children were murdered. In the Old Orient, it was a military custom after taking a city to kill the children of slaves as worthless. Psalms 136 (137, 138 and 139) is graphic in this sense and we have derive an image from it easily: "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones". Kurt Weitzmann using the example of the illu-

12 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 125.

13 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 267.

14 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 125.

15 Ibidem; Lieselotte Kötzsche, Zur Ikongraphie des bethlehemitischen Kindermordes in der frühchristlichen Kunst, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, XI/XII, 1968–1969, pp. 104–115.

16 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 125.

17 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, entry 112, p. 80; Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires médiévaux: Ve–XVe siècle*, Paris 2003, entry 1, pp. 33–35; on the newly proposed dating, see chapter 5 of this work.

18 Baldwin Smith, *Early Christian iconography and a school of ivory carvers in Provence*, Princeton 1918; Delbrück, Das fünfteilige Diptychon.

minated evangeliary deposited today in the Staatsbibliothek in Munich (cod. lat. 23631) seeks the origin of this iconographic detail in the popular stories from the Trojan War appearing on the Hellenic black-figure vase painting.¹⁹ Baldwin Smith believes that the impulse for this popularity for these scenes in the fine arts comes from the North Spanish poet Prudentius (4th century), who in his treatise *Peristephanon* deals with the way the children were murdered. Also, in the Mozarabic rite, the Feast of the Innocents was celebrated and it can refer according to him to the transfer of the reliquary to Marseille at the beginning of the 5th century.²⁰ Based on these arguments, he believes this type of depiction to be typical for Provence.²¹ Delbrück tries to find the roots of the special veneration for this event directly in Rome at the initiative of St Paula who visited Bethlehem in 404 accompanied by St Jerome and wrote down her visions.²²

3. The Adoration of the Magi

(Mt 2,11; Protoevangelium of James 21; Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 16; Arabic Infancy Gospel)

The Virgin Mary with the small Christ is sitting on an unadorned throne with an oval backrest placed in the right side of the image. She is dressed in the same way as in the scene of the Adoration of the Animals in a long tunic with covered hair. The central place in the composition is taken by the three magi. All of the figures are carved in the same plane and are depicted in profile. Christ, on Mary's lap, is dressed in a tunic, has a halo and greets the magi with a blessing or speaking gesture, who are approaching him at a rapid gait. They are not differentiated from one another, only the central one with a movement turns at the shoulder. We see the same detail on Isaac's sarcophagus located today in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna from the 5th century in Ravenna.²³ Another detail is the horn of plenty in the hand of one of the magi, which appears only on the ivory tablet from Nevers.²⁴ The other two magi give Christ their gifts on a circular tray and there does not seem to be any plan to mark them more clearly. Like with the scene of the Adoration of the Animals, the background is indicated by a brick wall. There are winged symbols of the Gospel writers on the sides: a lion and an eagle with open books.

19 Kurt Weitzmann, *The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Their Impact on Christian Iconography*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 14, 1960, pp. 45–68, esp. p. 61.

20 Smith, *Early Christian iconography*.

21 Weitzmann, *The Survival of Mythological*; Delbrück, *Das fünfteilige Diptychon*.

22 Ibidem, pp. 103 and 105.

23 Marion Lawrence, *The sarcophagi of Ravenna*, Roma 1970, p. 49.

24 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, entry 114, p. 81; Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires médiévaux*, entry 1, pp. 33–35; on a newly proposed dating, see chapter 5 of this work.

The Adoration of the Magi is a very frequent Western depiction in the catacombs (e.g. the catacomb of Priscilla, Capella Greca, Rome, 3rd century²⁵) or on the reliefs of sarcophagi (e.g. the sarcophagus found under the main altar in the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls in Rome, 315).²⁶ Christian art probably borrowed this motif from Roman imperial art. The artistic model is a delegation of subjected barbarians in the celebrations of a triumph, who are bringing the victorious commander and emperor a golden wreath, *aurum coronarium*,²⁷ and other gifts which we can see for instance in the famous Barberini Diptych.²⁸ From which their Persian clothing also comes, which is a Phrygian cap, a short, hitched-up skirt, pants (*anaxyrides*) and a cloak (*chlamys*) thrown across the chest clasped on the side with a circular fibula.²⁹ Thomas Mathews does not agree with the imperial model and suggests seeing in the Adoration of the Magi Eastern magicians, who came to venerate him, whose magical power was superior to theirs.³⁰ Matthew's gospel (2,1-12) is the only one to provide us with testimony on this event, but it does not mention the number of magi or their Oriental origin. It seems that the symbolic meaning of the gifts named in the Gospel, gold, frankincense and myrrh, was first dealt with by Origenes and St Irene.³¹ The symbolic meaning of the magi themselves was presented by St Basil of Caesarea in his *Homilies on the Nativity*. In the story of the bowing magi, he revealed the difference between the pagans, who were subject to truth and the Jews, who remain in lies. "Magi, races distant from God, a strange Testament, were suitable to be the first to bow to Christ, because the testimony of enemies is more worthy of faith".³² The episode is not a description of a story from Christ's childhood in Early Christian art, but rather a symbol, recognition and veneration of his divinity identified by three secular wise men.³³ André Grabar sees in the scene an unsuccessful attempt to depict the Holy Trinity, which did not become established in art. Some very early Semitic legends were connected with each of three magi had a different vision of God's revelation. According to these legends, each of them saw a different person of the Trinity.³⁴ That

25 Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 317.

26 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 246.

27 Grabar, *Christian iconography*.

28 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, entry 48; James D. Breckenridge, Diptych leaf with Justinian as Defender of the Faith, in: Kurt Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of spirituality: late antique and early Christian art, third to seventh century*, New York 1978, pp. 34-35; Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires médiévaux*, entry 9, pp. 49-54.

29 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 110.

30 Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, Princeton 2003 (1993), p. 86.

31 Henri Leclerq, Mages, in: Fernand Cabrol, Henri Leclerq (eds), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie: Lyon-Manosque*, Tome X., par. 1., Paris 1931, 980-1067, p. 985.

32 Ibidem, pp. 986-988.

33 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 246.

34 Grabar, *Christian iconography*, pp. 112-113.

the three magi were interpreted in this way at least a little later (in the 9th century) is proved by Ravennan historian Agnellus. He describes a famous mosaic with the Adoration of the Three Magi in the Basilica of St Apollinare Nuovo, where according to him their placement at the front of the procession of holy virgins was a certain expression the anti-Arian opinion.³⁵

4. The Changing of Water into Wine

(J 2,1–11)

The first of Christ's miracles according to John took place at a wedding in Cana, Galilee, where Jesus had been invited along with his mother and disciples. On the Five-Part Diptych, there is a depiction of the moment when the servant at Christ's command fill one of the three circular vessels on the ground with water. The water is poured from an Antique amphora with a pointed bottom. At the same moment, Jesus touches the just filled vessel with his staff and changes it into wine.³⁶ The miracle is watched by eight apostles, the Virgin Mary is missing here. The servant is dressed in a short, belted robe, Christ and his apostles in long tunics with wide half-sleeves. The scene is complemented on the sides with two oak wreaths with busts of the Gospel writers.

This scene appears in sarcophagus art, monumental decoration, liturgical vessels and objects of personal use. In funerary art since the late 3rd century, it has been frequently connected with other stories from the Old and New Testaments, most often with the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish. The earliest example comes from the catacomb of Saints Pietro and Marcellino in Rome.³⁷ Primarily in the first half of the century, the scene expands to the sarcophagi of the workshops of Gaul, North Italy or Spain, but in terms of iconography and composition they are the heir of a tradition coming from Roman painting. In the 5th century, the scene is included in the narrative cycles such as the wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina, where it is together with the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish,³⁸ in the Baptistry of

35 Deborah Maukopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in late antiquity*, Cambridge 2010, p. 169; for more on the iconography, see in: Rudy Favaro, Sull' iconografia Bizantina della stella dei Magi di Betlemme, *La Persia e Bisanzio: convegno internazionale (Roma, 14–18 ottobre 2002)*, Roma 2004, pp. 827–863; Marcello Mignozzi, Dal Profeta ai Magi: storia di una migratio iconografica in età paleocristiana, *Vetera Christianorum*, 47, 2010, pp. 99–116.

36 On the iconography of the staff in the hands of Christ, see Henri Leclercq, Lazare, in: Fernand Cabrol, Henri Leclercq (eds), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie: Latran-Lexique*, Tome VIII., par. 2., Paris 1929, pp. 2009–2086, esp. p. 2011; Martine Dulaey, Le symbol de la baguette dans l'art paléochrétien, *Revue des études augustiniennes*, 19, 1973, 1–2, pp. 3–38; Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 54.

37 Maria Paola del Moro, Nozze di Cana, in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, pp. 232–234.

38 Lorenza De Maria, Il programma decorativo della porta lignea di S. Sabina: concordanza o casualità iconografica?, *Ecclesiae urbis*, Città del Vaticano 2002, pp. 1685–1699.

San Giovanni in Fonte in Naples³⁹ or on the ivory tablets of the former five-part Diptych from Berlin.⁴⁰ Changing of the water into wine as the first canonical miracle is emphasized directly in the Gospel: “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him” (J 2,11). This miracle was included in some liturgical readings already in the 4th century and was mentioned in the celebrations of the Epiphany.⁴¹ Along with the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, the fathers interpreted it as a symbol of the Last Supper, an Eucharistic transformation.⁴² An even more explicit allusion to the commemoration of Christ’s sacrifice is in the sermon by Chromatius of Aquileia: “At the wedding of his son, the father invited first Jews. Lunch was usually served around noon, when Christ was crucified for the redemption of mankind with the aim of offering a heavenly dish, a feast of his Passion.”⁴³

5. The Annunciation at the Well

(*Protoevangelium of James 11; Armenian Infancy Gospel 5*)

In a rocky terrain, the Virgin Mary is kneeling to take water from a river. Water is gushing from the rock in the upper right corner. From the other side, an angel dressed in a tunic is approaching with a decisive gait and a speaking gesture. Mary turns to him, places her right hand over her heart, in her left hand she is holding a jug. She is dressed in a belted tunic with long sleeves and a richly decorated collar. Her clothes along with the hairstyle of an aristocrat is in opposition to the simple clothes of the woman with the covered hair in the scene of the Adoration of the Animals. The same Apocryphal story is found only on the Werden Casket,⁴⁴ on Palestinian ampoules from the 6th century deposited today in Monza⁴⁵ on the sarcophagus of Adelfio from the Museo Nazionale in Syracuse from the time before the middle of the 4th century⁴⁶ and on silk preserved in frag-

39 Jean-Louis Maier, *Le baptistère de Naples et ses mosaïques: étude historique et iconographique*, Fribourg 1964; Katia Gandolfi, Les mosaïques du baptistère de Naples: programme iconographique et liturgie in: Nicolas Bock, Serena Romano (eds), *Il duomo di Napoli: dal paleocristiano all’età angioina: [atti della 1. giornata di studi su Napoli, Losanna, 23 novembre]*, Napoli 2002, pp. 21–34.

40 Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires médiévaux*, entry 1, pp. 33–35; on the newly proposed dating, see chapter 5 of this work.

41 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 172.

42 Henri Leclercq, Cana (Miracle de), in: Fernand Cabrol (ed.), *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie: C–Césène*, Tome II., par. 2., Paris 1910, pp. 1802–1821.

43 Sandro Piuissi, *Cromazio di Aquileia, 388–408: al crocevia di genti e religioni*, Milano 2008, p. 237.

44 Beckwith, The Werden Casket.

45 André Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre sainte: Monza, Bobbio*, Paris 1958, Fig. 31.

46 Giuseppe Bovini, Il dittico eburneo “dalle cinque parti” del Tesoro del Duomo di Milano, *Corsi di cultura sull’arte ravennate e bizantina* 16, 1969, pp. 65–70, esp. p. 66.

ments from the Museum at Abegg Stiftung in Bern from the 4th century.⁴⁷ All of the other examples of this scene are of Byzantine origin and later dates.⁴⁸

The Apocryphal version places the Annunciation at the Well before the actual event of the Annunciation described in the Gospel of Luke (1,26–28). According to the non-canonical texts, the Virgin Mary went to get water when she heard a voice that said: “Hail, one full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed among women.” She looked to the right and left to see where the voice was coming from. Fearing evil, she began to pray: “God, give not me the temptations of the enemy and seducer, set me free from the snares and deceit.” She went back to her home, where she began to weave the purple for the temple curtain. There, the angel appeared before her a second time.⁴⁹

The rarity of this story in Western image is explained by the rejection of these legends by Early Christian theologians.⁵⁰ Their protests were, however, evidently unsuccessful, because already in the first third of the 5th century Pope Sixtus III commissioned the decoration of the triumphal arch of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, whose iconographic programme used immediately in a few cases these legends that were very popular in the 5th century.⁵¹

In Early Christian art, the story takes place on the bank of a river. It is an element also present in Carolingian art and sometimes in Byzantine depictions a few centuries later. A special meaning in the scene of the Annunciation is thus taken by the presence of water, it seems. The depiction of a stream of water coming from the cliff in the Five-Part Diptych, like in the scene of the Baptism of Christ, is reminiscent of Moses’ miracle taking place in the desert in the Old Testament (Ex 17,6) and could be an echo of Psalms 105,39–41: “He spread a cloud for a covering; and fire to give light in the night. The people asked, and he brought quails, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven. He opened the rock, and the waters gushed out; they ran in the dry places like a river.” A jug as an attribute of Mary is a possible allusion to the Mother of God, which is understood as the “virgin vessel of incarnation”, a metaphor very widespread in the texts. In the homilies and liturgical hymns, Mary is often called the gold vessel, which carries Christ: the heavenly manna. John of Damascus makes it more precise as the vessel “of

47 Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, *Textile conservation and research: a documentation of the Textile Department on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Abegg Foundation*, Riggisberg 1988, pp. 367–383.

48 Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*, p. 1.

49 Réau, *Iconographie de l’art*, p. 176.

50 Henri Leclercq, Apocryphes, in: Fernand Cabrol (ed.), *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie: Amende-Azymes*, Tome I, par. 2., Paris 1907, pp. 2555–2579, esp. p. 2556; Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 46.

51 Leclercq, Apocryphes; on the iconography of the decoration of the Basilica of S. Maria Maggiore, see Suzanne Spain, The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 1979, pp. 518–540; Maria Raffaella Menna, Mosaici della basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, in: Maria Andaloro, Serena Romano (eds), *La pittura medievale a Roma, 312–1431: corpus e atlante*, Corpus, Volume I (L’orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini), Milano 2006, pp. 305–347.

the incarnated Word of God and Wisdom of God; she is the one who contains God's son."⁵²

6. The Three Magi See the Star

(Mt 2,9; Protoevangelium of James 21; Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 16,2)

The three figures in lively movement are dressed in Persian clothes, which comprises a Phrygian cap, a short, hitched-up skirt, pants and a cloak thrown over the chest and fastened on the side with a round clasp.⁵³ The two magi on the edges point towards a star executed on the frame, the central magi looks towards the magi on the right as is he has not yet noticed. We find an almost identical scene in composition, clothing and gestures on the Gallic sarcophagus from Arles (end of the 4th century, Arles, Musée Lapidaire d'Art Chrétien⁵⁴), on the Werden Casket, when the scene fluently transitions into the scene of the Nativity, after which the three magi again follow adoring the small Christ.⁵⁵ The same theme is also presented by the sarcophagus from the Basilica of San Celso in Milan from the 4th century.⁵⁶

The presence of a star and its symbolic meaning in this story does not require any special explanation; for all believers the star was Christ himself, the guide of the lost.⁵⁷ The roots of this faith come from Antique mythology, where a newly appearing star indicates the birth or death of a great person.⁵⁸ The hymn of the poet Prudentius (4th century, Prudentius, *Cathemerinon*, XI, 54) is striking for the Milanese scene: "Then quickly did they follow, with eyes fixed on high, where the star was marking the way with its trail of light"⁵⁹ The importance of the appearance of the new star is underlined in his interpretations by Ambrose: "A star (...) shows them the way. This star is the way; and the way, it is Christ (J 14,6); i.e. that in the secret of the incarnation, Christ is a star (...)." ⁶⁰

52 Hélène Papastavrou, *Recherche iconographique dans l'art byzantin et occidental du XIe au XVe siècle: l'Annonciation*, Venice 2007, pp. 307–309, esp. p. 258; see more on the iconography in: Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconography of the Cycle of the Life of the Virgin*, in: Paul Atkins Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, Vol. 4, 1966–1975, pp. 188–190.

53 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 110.

54 Ibidem, p. 109, Fig. 151.

55 Ibidem; Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*.

56 Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 309.

57 Leclercq, *Mages*.

58 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 243.

59 Leclercq, *Mages*, p. 988; Bovini *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 66.

60 Ambroise de Milan, *Traité sur l'Évangile de S. Luc*, introduction, traduction et notes de Gabriel Tissot, livre 1–2, Paris 1976, pp. 93–94.

7. The Baptism of Christ

(Mt 3,13–17; Mk 1,9–13; L 3,21–22; J 1,29–32, 3,5; R 6,3; 1 K 10,1–4)

The River Jordan, in which the nude Christ-child stands, flows from the cliff from the upper, left corner of the scene. Standing in water up to his knees, the bearded John the Baptist is dressed in an *exomis*, just like Joseph in the scene of the Adoration of the Animals. In his left hand, he holds a shepherd's staff, a *pedum*, he places his right hand on the head of the small Christ. Directly above his head, the dove of the Holy Spirit is coming down, which extends beyond the decorated frame of the scene.

The Baptism of Christ is one of the earliest scenes of Early Christian art and other than miracles one of the first where the figure of Christ appears in his human form. The earliest depiction comes from the period around 200, which is the approximate date of the earliest paintings in the Catacombs of St Callixtus, where this scene appears three times.⁶¹ It is present as a symbol of the new birth and promise of eternal life also on a large number of ivory monuments. It could explain the relation between the texts and the funeral function of the diptychs placed on the altar and bearing the names of the deceased, who were commemorated by the priest and faithful in the memorial ceremonies.⁶² There are two significant elements in all Early Christian depictions: the image of Christ as a child and water flowing from above, both appearing also in the Milan Diptych. Neither element can be explained by the Scripture. In the first Christian depictions, Christ is always a child, although the canonical texts describe that this moment took place in the 30th year of Christ's life (e.g. Lk 3,23). It is in conflict also with the operated Christian liturgy, because at that time the baptised were mainly adults.⁶³ Réau comments that the origin of the image not agreeing with the Scripture comes from the contrary from the Christian liturgy, because catechumens were called *pueri infantes* in it.⁶⁴ The adult and bearded Christ first appears in Byzantine depictions from the middle of the 5th century,⁶⁵ in the West only in the Syrian Rabula Evanageliary from the end of the 6th century.⁶⁶

Several texts correspond with these earliest preserved images. Lactantius (3rd century) in his work *Divinae Institutiones* (Book 4, 15,2) says: "When He first began to reach maturity He was baptized by the prophet John in the river Jordan." In the image of Christ the child it is possible to see the metaphor for his humanity, his

61 Jean-Michel Spieser, Les représentations du Baptême du Christ à l'époque paléochrétienne, in: Ivan Foletti, Serena Romano (eds), *Fons vitae: baptême, baptistères et rites d'initiation, IIe-VIe siècle*, Roma 2009, p. 66.

62 See chapter 4 of this work.

63 Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 224.

64 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 296.

65 Spieser, Les représentations du Baptême, p. 81.

66 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 297; Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 224.

subordination to the Law, the gesture of placing the hand could then be a gesture used for freeing a slave, healing the sick, transition to a higher position from the state of slavery or illness. The emphasis on Christ's humanity and subordination can be found in the sermon on the theophany by Pseudo-Hippolyte: "Look, the Lord is approaching, fragile, alone, nude and unprotected."⁶⁷ In the East, the Baptism of Christ was like theophany, a celebration of the incarnation of God, celebrated along with the Adoration of the Three Magi probably already from the 3rd century.⁶⁸

The second distinctive element of all Early Christian depictions is water streaming from above; the element is particularly distinctive in the Milan Diptych. The water source placed above in the image is a certain visually rewritten metaphor. It is proved, for instance, by the text by Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century) on water, which is the symbol of the spirit and comes from above: "But why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water? Because all things are dependent on water; plants and animals have their origin in water. Water comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects, one in the palm tree, another in the vine, and so on throughout the whole of creation."⁶⁹ Some of the texts attribute special significance to the Jordan. Here, it is not only a river of Palestine, but it became the river of Genesis (2,10), which gave birth to the four rivers of paradise. For example, the text by Gregory of Nazianzus makes a connection between the source of paradise, the Jordan and the ocean surrounding the Earth.⁷⁰ The Baptism of Christ becomes an image of multiple meanings also thanks to another detail, the descending Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The Baptism of Christ is a single iconographic interpretation of the Trinity, which survived the Early Christian period and remained valid throughout the Middle Ages. It is supported by sentences from the Gospels that the moment of the baptism of Christ there was in parallel the theophany of three persons: the voice of God the Father heard coming down from heaven, God the Son stood in the waters of the Jordan and God the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove flying above the Son.⁷¹

67 Spieser, *Les représentations du Baptême*, p. 68.

68 Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 138.

69 Cyrille de Jérusalem, *Les catecheses baptismales et mystagogiques*, traduction de Jean Bouvet, Paris, 1993, p. 261.

70 Spieser, *Les représentations du Baptême*, p. 74.

71 Grabar, *Christian iconography*, pp. 112–115.

8. The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem

(Mt 21,1–11; Mk 11,1–10; L 19,29–40; J 12,12–19; Za 9,9; Jes 62,10; Gospel of Nicodemus 1,3)

The event is described by all four Gospels, Matthew and John, moreover, see in it the fulfilment of Zechariah's prophesy (Za 9,9): "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation, lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." Christ is seated upright with his head resting on the donkey in the Western manner (astride the animal), with his right hand in blessing. It is in contrast to the Eastern depiction where Christ is usually sitting aside on the donkey.⁷² A male figure is placing a cloak under its hoof, probably the same, but only outlined, gesture is made also by the figure next to him. Behind the ass in the background, third male figure stands with a palm branch of victory in his hands. It is only marked in low relief and the lower part of the body is missing.

From the pilgrimage diary of St Egeria, we know that Christ's entry was celebrated in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday already in the 4th century with large processions. That was also the period of its first depiction from Roman sarcophagi (e.g. the sarcophagus of Adelfius of Syracuse, Museo Nazionale, 340–345⁷³) or the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (359).⁷⁴ Besides the liturgy performed on Palm Sunday, also the symbolic explanation of the city of Jerusalem are affected, which was not only the political and ideal capital city of the Jews or the city of Christ's passion, but also the eternal city of Christianity, Heavenly Jerusalem. These symbolic explanations interpreted the entry of Christ into the heavenly city as his triumph over death and hence the liberation from sin and death and are the reason for the use of these scenes in funeral art.⁷⁵ The pictorial type draws from imperial ceremonies, when the ruler enters the liberated or subjugated city.⁷⁶ Also the placement of cloaks under the feet of the emperor's horse when welcoming the monarch was a general custom so the animal would not get dirty from contact with the earth.⁷⁷ A new meaning is added by Ambrose: "(...) Those who went before Jesus covered the path with their own clothes all the way to the temple of God. For you, to continue without collision, the apostles of Christ tore the clothes from their own bodies, for you by their martyrdom made a path through the unfriendly crowd".⁷⁸ Palm

72 Elisabeth Lucchesi-Palli, Einzug in Jerusalem, in: Engelbert Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Band 1, A–Ezechiel, Rom 1968, pp. 593–597, esp. p. 596.

73 Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, Fig. 31.

74 Lucchesi-Palli, Einzug in Jerusalem, p. 594.

75 Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 30.

76 Grabar, *Christian iconography*, p. 45; Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 30.

77 Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 350.

78 Ambroise de Milan/2, p. 142.

branches (J 12,13) are a symbol of victory, in Antiquity also peace.⁷⁹ We find testimony of the glorification of Christ with palm sprays in Apocalypse (7,9), where the elect celebrate their victory. Against the clear symbolic meaning of the palm sprays, the donkey had several interpretations. The emperor enters the defeated city on a horse, the peace-loving King Jesus on a donkey. In the Gospels, Christ's requested "ass's foal that nobody had even sat upon" could symbolize the new religion.⁸⁰ The depiction of the victorious entry into the holy city was understood by the first Christians as the arrival of Christ's new Kingdom.⁸¹

9. Twelve-Year-Old Christ in the Temple (?)

(Lk 2,46–49)

The standing male figure in the centre speaking with a figure of less size, who is sitting on a raised, stepped teacher's desk. Behind him, there are two more figures holding books in their hands, other books lie on the ground. This scene was identified by Delbrück⁸² as Christ before Pilate (Mt 27,11–14; Mk 15,2–5; Lk 23,1–7; J 18,28–40), Osteneck,⁸³ Bovini,⁸⁴ Volbach⁸⁵ or Spier⁸⁶ believe that it is the 12-year-old Christ disputing with the teachers in the temple (Lk 2,46–49).

The dominant standing figure is in dress and hairstyle identical at first sight with the figure of Christ from the scenes of the Healing and Resurrection of Lazarus. In the context of all the scenes of the Milan Diptych, however, it does not seem to have been any effort to differ the figures distinctly from each other, e.g. even angels have the same hairstyle as Christ with hair reaching to the neck. If it is a scene of Christ before Pilate, it would be a very unique depiction, because of all the political trials Roman-Christian art presents only Pilate's washing of his hands which is the identical with conviction,⁸⁷ such as on the doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome.⁸⁸ Christ's judgement before Pilate was the most common way to depict the Passion of Christ in Early Christian art,⁸⁹ but a detail of hand washing in the scenes of the Milan Diptych is missing, although in

79 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 30.

80 Leclerq, *Apocryphes*, p. 2062.

81 Tristan, *Les premières images*, p. 353.

82 Delbrück, *Das fünfteilige Diptychon*, p. 105.

83 V. Osteneck, *Zwölfjähriger Jesus im Tempel*, in: Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der christlichen*, Bd 4, Rom – Freiburg – Basel – Wien 1972, pp. 583–589, esp. p. 583.

84 Bovini, *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 66.

85 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 84.

86 Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, New Haven 2007, p. 256.

87 Gertrud Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst: Die Passion Jesu Christi*, Band 2, Gütersloh 1968, p. 71.

88 Gisela Jeremias, *Die Holztür der Basilika S. Sabina in Rom*, Tübingen 1980, pp. 57–59 and 107; De Maria, *Il programma decorativo*.

89 Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 89.

other monuments it is very distinct. Pilate is, moreover, often depicted in military dress as Herod in the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents.⁹⁰

On the contrary, a distinct detail are the books in the hands of the two figures and one on the ground and the rhetorical gesture of the seated figure. It has hence led the majority of the researchers to the fact that it was the moment when Joseph and Mary after three days of search found their son in the temple in Jerusalem, sitting among the teachers, listening and setting them questions. Even so, it is a very rare depiction from the Early Middle Ages; it appears only on the Milan Diptych, an ivory relief from the British Museum from the beginning of the 5th century,⁹¹ on fragments of an ivory Casket also from the British Museum with a dating to 420–430,⁹² on a miniature of a Roman Evangeliary deposited today in Cambridge from the 6th century⁹³ and on a sarcophagus from the 4th century from the Church of St Francis in Pérouse.⁹⁴

10. The Ordeal of the Bitter Water (?)

(*Protoevangelium of James 15,2*)

A female figure is standing in front of the steps leading to a building with a triangular fronton and curtain. According to the rich, ostentatious clothing and hairstyle, it is identical with the figure of the Virgin Mary in the scene of the Annunciation at the Well. Besides the curtain, the building is similar to the grave of Lazarus. Next to the Virgin Mary, an angel stands, who point to the star on the frame. Almost the same composition is found on the Werden Casket.⁹⁵ There is, however, a priest present moreover holding in his hands a Diptych for taking notes and leading the Virgin Mary into the temple to undergo the Ordeal of Bitter Water, which was to prove her innocence. On the Werden Casket, also the angel's gesture is the same, but the star is missing, so it is not ruled out that there could be an unpreserved frame. Based on this iconographic similarity, the Milanese scene is interpreted as the Ordeal of Bitter Water by Delbrück,⁹⁶ Beckwith⁹⁷ and Spier.⁹⁸ We can find the same

90 For more on the iconography of Pilate, see Raffaella Giulliani, Pilato, in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, pp. 259–263.

91 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, entry 115, p. 82

92 Ibidem, entry 117, p. 83.

93 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 134, Fig. 425.

94 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 290.

95 Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*.

96 Delbrück, *Das fünfteilige Diptychon*.

97 Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*, p. 2.

98 Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible*, p. 256.

Apocryphal scene for instance also on a later monument from the middle of the 6th century on the Throne of Maximian.⁹⁹ Whereas it is possible to agree on the Werden Casket, the Milan Diptych remains in this sense ambiguous, because we lack the main figure of a priest or any other indication that it would be this scene.

Another hypothesis leading to the identification of this ambiguous scene was the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple. It was interpreted this way by Volbach¹⁰⁰ and also Delbrück admits it could be. According to the Protovengalia, it takes place at age three, but according to the only full Syrian version at age 12.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, Giuseppe Bovini assigns the scene a rather symbolic than narrative meaning. He speaks of a continuation of the scene of the Annunciation from the passage of the Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew (chapter 9); that is the angel showing the Virgin Mary the light which illuminates the whole world: “*per te universo mundo resplendet*”.¹⁰² In this sense, the scene was another strengthening of the dogma of incarnation and the role played in it by the mother of Christ. Jeffrey Spier interprets the scene similarly as symbolic. The Virgin Mary with the angel in front of the temple according to him is a message for us that Christ’s sacrifice allows us to enter the temple: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh” (Hebrews 10,19–20).¹⁰³

11., 12. Healing

The left vertical panel depicts Christ’s miracles, healing the blind, the crippled and resurrecting Lazarus. On the Milan Diptych, Christ heals the blind and crippled with a blessing gesture, Lazarus with a staff. He uses this also in other miracles when he changes water into wine. Identically with his retinue, an apostle as a witness of his miracles, he is dressed in a tunic with wide half-sleeves and a pallia and has sandals on his feet.

Already in the Antique works, the miracles were a sign and proof of the divine¹⁰⁴ and in Early Christian art they comprise the most numerous group of depictions.¹⁰⁵ The popularity of these scenes at the time was explained by Thomas

99 Clementina Rizzardi, *Massimiano a Ravenna: la Cattedra eburnea del Museo Arcivescovile alla luce di nuove ricerche, Ideologia e cultura artistica tra Adriatico e Mediterraneo orientale (IV-X secolo)*, 2009, pp. 229–243.

100 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 84.

101 Delbrück, *Das fünfteilige Diptychon*, p. 98.

102 Bovini, *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 66.

103 Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible*, p. 257

104 Réau, *Iconographie de l’art*, p. 360.

105 Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 59.

Mathews that they were a part of the battle against paganism, that Christ “out-magicked” all of the non-Christian magicians.¹⁰⁶ In Early Christian times, it was not effective to distance Christ from the Ancient magicians, it was more effective to give him greater power. The explicit symbol of this idea according to Thomas Mathews is the staff in the hands of Christ, who resurrects the dead Lazarus and changes water into wine.¹⁰⁷

Most of the existing studies have identified the upper scene on the Milan Diptych as Healing the Blind (Mt 9,28, 31; 15,30–31; 20,29–34; 21,14; Mk 8,22–26; Lk 7,21; 18,35–43; J 9,1–41).¹⁰⁸ We find a similar iconography on the five-part Diptych of Murano from the second quarter of the 6th century,¹⁰⁹ on a mosaic in the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna¹¹⁰ or on the Andrews Diptych from the 5th century.¹¹¹ Tertullianus, Ambrose, Chromatius, Cyprianus, Irenaeus, and Augustine interpret this Gospel scene as a symbol of baptism and generally pointing to the healing and redemption ability of Christ.¹¹²

On the above-mentioned monuments, we also find a second scene, when the lame carries his bed on his shoulders (Mt 9,2–6; Mk 2,3–10; Lk 5,18–24; J 5,1–15). In Early Christian times, this miracle was regarded as an expression of repentance. The analogy of the disease of the body and spirit is a constant in these depictions. The bed that the sick lay upon is a symbol of sin, and that the original. It is thus possible to consider this miracle as a parallel of not only individual but also general human repentance. The lame on his bed is a symbol of Adam after the Fall, the lame carrying his bed depicts the new person redeemed by Christ. The bed is a synonym for the Cross, which must be carried after awakening from his spiritual paralysis.¹¹³ The explanation of this scene as the redemption of humanity through the figure miraculously healed is confirmed by a fragment of a sarcophagus from the Musée Kircher in Rome, when next to the Healing of the Lame there is a scene of Adam and Eve at the Tree of Wisdom.¹¹⁴

106 Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, pp. 65–66.

107 On the iconography of the staff, see in: Leclercq, Lazare, p. 2011; Dulaey, *Le symbol de la baguette*; Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 54.

108 Delbrück, *Das fünfteilige Diptychon*, p. 106; Vollbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 84; Bovini, *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 67.

109 Jean-Pierre Caillet, *Remarques sur l’iconographie Christo-Mariale des grands diptyques d’ivoire du VIe siècle: incidences éventuelles quant à leur datation et origine*, in: Gudrun Bühl, Anthony Culter, Arne Effenberger (eds), *Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs*, Wiesbaden 2008, pp. 17–29.

110 Emanuela Penni Iacco, *La basilica di S. Apollinare Nuovo di Ravenna attraverso i secoli*, Bologna 2004; Deliyannis, *Ravenna in late antiquity*, pp. 146–174; Mariëtte Verhoeven, *The Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna*, Turnhout 2011, p. 42.

111 Lieselotte Kötzsche, *Andrews Diptych*, in: Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of spirituality*, p. 500.

112 Cristina Ranucci, *Guarigione del Cieco*, in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, p. 200.

113 Réau, *Iconographie de l’art*, p. 334.

114 *Ibidem*, p. 335.

13. The Resurrection of Lazarus

(J, 11,38–44)

The greatest of Christ's miracles takes place again with the presence of one witness-apostle, who stands between the grave of Lazarus and Christ. He touches Lazarus directly with the staff. Lazarus is standing in a building in the form of an edicule with a triangular fronton to which stairs lead. Lazarus is wrapped like an Egyptian mummy. His stance is a reminder of the tradition of the Jews who buried their dead standing in burial caves.¹¹⁵ In Eastern art, a cliff grave is depicted¹¹⁶ precisely according to the Scripture (J 11,38): "It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it." The construction of the Milan Diptych is a Western adaptation of the grave as a mausoleum in the Roman Empire.¹¹⁷

Since the 4th century one of the sisters of Lazarus bows at Christ's feet, since the 5th century sometimes both.¹¹⁸ On the Milan Diptych, Mary falls at Christ's feet precisely according to John's text (J 11,32).

Already in Early Christian times, the Resurrection of Lazarus functioned as a prefiguration of the resurrection of Christ and generally the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgement. As a symbol, through which believers could hope in rebirth, it appears in Roman catacombs,¹¹⁹ where approximately forty images have been preserved, on sarcophagi from the 3rd and 4th centuries, or on the tablets of Trivulzio with the Holy Women at the Tomb, where the Resurrection of Lazarus decorates the doors leading to the Holy Sepulchre.¹²⁰ The depiction in early sepulchral art is therefore often in parallel with Christ's baptism or the story of Jonah.¹²¹

14. The Gift of the Widow

(Mk 12,41–44; Lk 2,1–4)

Mathew's and Luke's gospels identically narrate the story of the poor widow, who came to the temple treasury to put in two mites. When he saw this, Christ sitting opposite calls his disciples and tells them: "...Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all. For all these have of their abundance

115 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 386.

116 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 191.

117 Ibidem.

118 Ibidem, Figs. 561 and 562.

119 Melania Guj, Lazzare, in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, pp. 201–203.

120 Beat Brenk, Das Trivulzio-Elfenbein und seine antiarianische Mission, in: Tobias Frese, Annette Hoffmann (eds), *Habitus*, Berlin 2011, pp. 245–257, pp. 245–257.

121 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, p. 190, Fig. 559; more on the iconography is in: Jan Stanisław Partyka, *La résurrection de Lazare dans les monuments funéraires des nécropoles chrétiennes à Rome: Peintures, mosaïques et décors des épitaphes. Étude archéologique, iconographique et iconologique*. Varsovie 1993.

cast in unto the offerings of God, but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had.” Christ with a halo on the Milan Diptych sits on a heavenly globe set with stars; his right hand is raised with a blessing or speaking gesture. Between him and a female figure dressed in a long tunic with a covered head, there is a treasury, where the temple’s offerings were collected.¹²² The moment she places her coins in it is depicted. Another figure dressed in a tunic with short sleeves and a pallium is leaving the temple and turns towards Christ. It could be another donor who Christ has shamed by his words. In the background, there is only half a body executed of another donor or Christ’s disciple, who is listening to Christ.

In the context of Early Christian art, it is generally a very unique selection. The proof of this is that another appears only on the mosaics in San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna,¹²³ no other Early Christian example of this iconography has been preserved and in later art it is rather exceptions. That this scene, apparently marginal in the narration of the life of Christ, had, however, general significance is proved for instance by the sermon by Chromatius of Aquileia: “This woman represents the Church, who offered Christ her full devotion and faith.” The widow is understood as a personification of the Church.¹²⁴ According to St Ambrose, the two ducats of the given widow are the symbol of the Old and New Testaments, hence perfectly unified faith. Also the Last Judgement has the same value as Christ’s judgement in the case of the poor widow according to Ambrose.¹²⁵ Pope Leo I the Great uses this Biblical passage several times in his sermons (e.g. Sermons 29,2; 31,2; 90,3). Using the example of the poor widow, he incites the believers to generosity and to giving alms to the poor. According to him, alms was the peak of all virtues (Sermons 48,4). Leo said that generosity did not depend on the value of the gift but on the sense of the donor, the desire to be generous and on the amount of good will (Sermon 8). According to Leo, charity was the only virtue that connected the heavenly and earthly areas, because it had the power to change material goods into heavenly wealth. Almost half of his sermons, i.e. forty sermons of the ninety eight preserved, speak of this type charity.¹²⁶

122 Bovini, *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 69.

123 Penni Iacco, *La basilica di S. Apollinare Nuovo*, p. 55.

124 Piusi, *Cromazio di Aquileia*, p. 237.

125 Caterina Curci, *Obolo della vedova*, in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, pp. 234–235.

126 Philippe Henne, *Léon le Grand*, Paris 2008, p. 45.

15. The Last Supper

(Mt 26,20–30; Mk 14,17–25; Lk 22,14–23; J 13,21–26, 6,22; 1 Cor 10,16, 11,23)

The scene takes place inside the room, which is marked by a brick background. Christ and his three disciples are around a semi-circular table half-seated in the Antique way, just as it is, e.g., in the illuminations of the Rosano Gospels from 3rd quarter of the 6th century¹²⁷ or on the mosaics in San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.¹²⁸ Christ assumes an honourable place on the left side and his right hand shows the bowl with fish or on the other six loaves with the cross, which are placed on the table. The figure on the right has its back turned to the viewer, the head is turning towards Christ and watching his gesture. Considering the different position and clothing, it could be Judas. Another two figures behind the table illustrated only in half-body are in a lively discussion, the one on the left has his hand on his chin in a gesture of thinking. The gestures of Christ, the apostle and Judas indicate that it could be the moment Christ marked one of his disciples as a traitor, which would be the one who wetted his hand in the bowl (Mt 26,23; Mk 14,20, 26,25; Lk 22,21). Christ's gesture could correspond more to the text of John (J 13,26), where we read: "He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it."

The story of the Last Supper takes an essential place in the centre of Christian teaching, its interpretation can be either historical and narrative or symbolic and sacral. Christ at it gives out bread and wine which are a pre-figuration of his sacrifice, speaks of them as his body and blood and orders his disciples to perform this act in his memory. The Gospels speak almost identically on this moment of the establishment of the ceremony. Réau labels the faith in the transubstantiation of Christ's body and blood as a relic of the old totemic faith, when a person takes the power of the divine being or animal by eating its essence, blood or meat. In Christianity, however, it is not a magical ritual, but a remembrance of the voluntary sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The use of the symbolic divine essence as bread and wine is a guarantee of redemption.¹²⁹ The depiction of the Last Supper on the Milan Diptych respects the method of dining of the time it comes from. This story generally in Early Christian art builds on the customs of Antique feasts when the table is usually in the shape of a semicircle and Christ half-lies in the left corner of the table. The front side remains unfilled, because according

127 Schiller, *Ikongrafie der christlichen Kunst*, 1968, p. 37; Herbert L. Kessler, *Studies in pictorial narrative*, London 1994.

128 Penni Iacco, *La basilica di S. Apollinare Nuovo*; Clementina Rizzardi, *Il mosaico a Ravenna: ideologia e arte*, Bologna 2011.

129 Réau, *Iconographie de l'art*, p. 417.

to ancient customs food was served here and plates were carried away. The iconography with Christ and the apostles sitting appears already from the 7th century.¹³⁰

Where the iconography of the Last Supper first appears is not entirely certain, likely on the frescoes of catacombs (e.g. St Domitilla or St Priscilla from the 4th century). Gertrud Schiller, however, believes that these frescoes are rather sign of the future dinner that God promises in the heavenly empire.¹³¹ In the case of the Milan Diptych, the scene was identified this way also by Giuseppe Bovini.¹³² Gertrud Schiller considers the mosaic in St Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna to be the earliest depiction of the Last Supper.¹³³ Karl Möller does not mention the depictions from the catacombs at all and considers precisely the Milan Five-Part Diptych as the first scene of the depiction of the Last Supper.¹³⁴

16. Christ giving (?) crowns to martyrs

The scene that does not belong to the narrative story depicts Christ with a halo sitting on a heavenly sphere with stars. From both sides, two male figures approach him, who in shrouded arms hold martyrs' crowns.¹³⁵ In Early Christian art, the giving of crowns is a symbol of the surrender and recognition of power and we can find it in such depictions like the magi adoring the small Christ or the elders before the throne in the Last Judgement. If it is supported by the saints, then it is a reward for their martyrdom.¹³⁶ In the mosaic of the apse of San Vitale, the enthroned Christ is offering a crown to the martyr St Vitale, which is presented to him by an angel.¹³⁷ Another famous depiction comes from the Baptistry of the Orthodox¹³⁸ or Arians in Ravenna.¹³⁹ The saints are depicted just as frequently as they return crowns to Christ, which they have won, because precisely in them all martyrdom is enacted. This dual relation of the martyrs to the Redeemer is expressed in a lively way by St Cyprian "*Dominus ipse in certamine et coronat pariter*

130 Karl Möller, Abendmahl, in: Otto Schmitt (ed.), *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte, 1. Band*, München 1983, p. 30.

131 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1968, p. 38.

132 Bovini, Il dittico eburneo, p. 59.

133 Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 1968, p. 41.

134 Möller, Abendmahl.

135 More on the iconography of crowns in: Francesca Severini, Corona in: Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia*, pp. 155–156.

136 Spiro Kostof, *The orthodox baptistry of Ravenna*, London 1965, p. 90.

137 Deliyannis, *Ravenna in late antiquity*; Rizzardi, *Il mosaico a Ravenna*.

138 Kostof, *The orthodox*; Ivan Foletti, Saint Ambroise et le Baptistère des Orthodoxes de Ravenne. Autour du Lavement des pieds dans la liturgie baptismale, in: Foletti, Romano (eds), *Fons Vitae*, pp. 121–156.

139 Deliyannis, *Ravenna in late antiquity*; Rizzardi, *Il mosaico a Ravenna*.

et coronatur".¹⁴⁰ All attempts to identify the depicted martyrs remain mere hypotheses (e.g. Peter and Paul, Felix and Nabor, Nazar and Celso, Gervasius and Protasius¹⁴¹). Considering the purposeful lack of distinction of the figures, I believe that it could be martyrs in general and a moral report that could be not only this scene but all three of the right, vertical panels of the tablet with the cross being the bearer. Christ is explicitly depicted here as the ruler of heaven, as the provider of eternal fame through the granting of heavenly rewards to martyrs, through the holiness of the Eucharist and through his teachings.¹⁴²

140 Kostof, *The orthodox*, p. 90.

141 Bovini, *Il dittico eburneo*, p. 69.

142 Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible*, p. 256.