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AFTER CONSTANTINE

STORIES FROM THE LATE ANTIQUE AND
EARLY BYZANTINE ERA



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EARLY BYZANTINE ERA

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[1] Στα λόγια μου ας είναι
μάρτυρες όλοι οι παντοτινοί.

[2] Ότι λευκός ήταν ο κόσμος
ώσπου ν' ακουστεί η φωνή του
βασιλιά Τελεστή
όταν διέταξε: ας γίνει!

[3] Και όλα τα ουράνια
σώματα ενώθηκαν και
σχημάτισαν μεγάλη σφραγίδα
όμοια με σφυρί και άστραψε ο
ουρανός και στροβιλίστηκαν
τα νέφη.

[...]

[7] Κι έπαψε να 'ναι διάφανος
ο κόσμος και φανερώθηκε.

[8] Και είδε ο Ταξιδευτής και
θαύμασε και θέλησε ν' αφήσει
και να πάρει.

[...]

[11] Και για πάντα συνέχισε
την θεϊκή του πορεία, νέα
μονοπάτια ανοίγοντας.

THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST ON LATE ANTIQUE IVORIES

YANNIS D. VARALIS¹

Abstract

The scene of the Nativity in late antique monumental painting, i.e. the fresco decoration of the catacombs and the mural mosaics and paintings of Early Christian churches, is very rare.² The scene is considerably more frequent on stone sarcophagi, mainly in the west part of the late Roman Empire, but as has been aptly observed, sarcophagi were not easily accessible nor were all their sides visible.³ How was portrayed the scene of the birth of Jesus, the central figure of the Christian religion? Which components of the representation of the Nativity showed the human and the divine natures of the Son of God? In this study I shall focus on the versions of the Nativity preserved on late antique ivories, mainly because their iconography would have had the approval of higher circles of the society, secular and ecclesiastical, due to the high cost of the material and the fewness of the workshops that produced such items of luxury.⁴

Keywords: *Nativity, Jesus, birth, painting, Late Roman Empire*

Twelve ivories dated to the period from about 400 to the first decades of the seventh century and kept at European museums and collections bear the representation of the Nativity of Christ. These ivories either are objects destined to be used in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy or are parts of the decoration of sacred books, receptacles or pieces of furniture used during the liturgy. Seven of them are plaques that were made for the revetment of Gospels' covers, caskets and thrones. The other five are pyxes, i.e. cylindrical boxes with separate lids and bottoms which were

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² For the iconography of the scene, see Leclercq 1935; Réau 1957, pp. 213-255; Wilhelm 1970; Ristow 1971. The earliest known depictions of the Nativity in Rome are found in fragments on the south wall of the sanctuary of Santa Maria Antiqua dated to the papacy of John VII (705-707) and in the oratory of the same Pope at Saint Peter's. Wilpert 1916, vol. IV, pl. 156.2 and vol. III, pl. 113.2, respectively.

³Milinović 1999.

⁴ Cutler (1985, pp. 20-37, *passim*) argues for a cost lower than usually supposed, but it was nevertheless high enough and saved only for the upper classes of the society; bone carving has always been less expensive.

mostly used to hoard relics, incense or particles of the Eucharistic bread. Among the pyxes, only one new appeared quite recently in the art trade and probably can be dated, if it is authentic, to the sixth century.

The ivories under study here can be divided into three groups, according to the iconography of the manger containing the divine infant Jesus wrapped in swaddling bands. The first group, which is the earliest of the three, includes plaques and pyxes on which the manger is presented in the center of the composition, with the ox and the ass above the Child. The Virgin and Joseph are placed on either side and, if there is enough space, the Adoration of the Magi or the Shepherds' staring at the star are also included. The second group comprises pyxes and plaques belonging to five-parted ivory diptychs dating from the end of the fifth to the end of the sixth century. The examples of this group show the Virgin Mary reclined on a bed or seated on a throne, next to the manger. In front of the crib a woman named Salome holds her hand by the wrist. In fact, Salome questioned the virginity of the Virgin and in her attempt to touch the Mother of God, her hand was paralyzed; and then a Lord's angel suddenly appeared and told her to touch the Child in order to be healed. The scene is inspired by the account of the episode in the *Protevangelium* of James and the *Evangelium* of Pseudo-Matthew⁵, which seem quite early in date, though it was depicted in Rome only during the period of the



Figure 1

Nevers, Musée de la Faïence et des Beaux-arts Frédéric-Blandin,
ivory pyx, inv. no. NOA 20, early fifth century (source: Volbach
1977, fig. 16)

papacy of Pope Paul I (757-767).⁶ The third group includes plaques and a pyx from the later part of the sixth and the early seventh centuries on which the Nativity is shown in a quite familiar manner: the manger is located behind the bed of the Virgin, which is placed diagonally on the first

⁵ *Protevangelium Iakobi*, ed. Tischendorf 1853, ch. XX, pp. 36-38. *Incipit liber de ortu beatae Mariae et infantia Salvatoris a beato Matthaeo evangelis ta hebraice scriptus et a beato Ieronymo presbytero in latinum translatus*, ed. Tischendorf 1853, ch. XIII.3-5, pp. 74-76; Cf. also Craveri (1990), pp. 22, 80-81.

⁶ Wilpert 1916, vol. IV, pl. 194 (on the south wall of the nave of Santa Maria Antiqua).

level, while Joseph and Salome are depicted in front and/or behind the Mother of God, depending on the available space.

The first group comprises the most ancient ivories known with the scene of the Nativity. The earliest ivory known is a rectangular plaque with the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi,⁷ dated to the beginning of the fifth century and kept today at the Musée de la faïence, Nevers (inv. no. NOA 20) (fig. 1). It belonged to a more complex ivory set, probably a five-part leaf of a diptych with representations of other miracles performed by Jesus, such as the Massacre of the Innocents, the Baptism and the miracle at Cana on the plaque at the Bode Museum, Berlin,⁸ and the Healing of the Woman with an issue of blood, the Exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac and the Healing of the paralytic on the plaque at the British Museum, London,⁹ with which the Nevers plaque has been associated iconographically and stylistically. Moreover, the Nativity scene occupies the oblong narrow panel on the upper part of the Gospel cover kept at the Treasury of the Milan cathedral dating from roughly the same period.¹⁰ The long narrow panel on the lower part displays the Massacre of the Innocents and the side plaques illustrate the Annunciation, Mary's Trial by Ordeal of the Bitter Water, the Three Magi guided by the star, the Twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple, the Baptism and the Entry to Jerusalem. The square with the three Magi, secondary episode of the Nativity narrative, is a rare example of an episode which has become an independent scene at an early date.¹¹ The third ivory plaque comes from the revetment of a wooden box found in Werden, Germany, is currently kept at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. no. 149A-1866), and dates back to the late fifth century.¹² Some scholars have suggested that this is a copy of the time of Charlemagne, around 800,¹³ but I do not share this opinion, since the iconographic, stylistic, and technical links with the Gospel cover at Milan are so close, that we can think of a prototype and a copy that were made

⁷ Volbach 1976, pp. 81-82 no. 114, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 24-25, fig. 16.

⁸ Volbach 1976, pp. 80-81 no. 112, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 15-16, 24, fig. 15a.

⁹ Volbach 1976, p. 81 no. 113, pl. 60; Volbach 1977, pp. 15-16, 24, fig. 15b. For both the Berlin and London plaques, cf. Cat. New York 1979, pp. 446-448 nos 406-407 (L. Kötzsche).

¹⁰ Volbach 1976, pp. 84-85 no. 119, pl. 63; Volbach 1977, pp. 13-33, *passim*, figs. 7a-b. Cat. Fort Worth 2007, pp. 256-258 no. 76. The chronology attributed to this cover varies from the fourth to the sixth century; a date around the middle of the fifth century, probably at the end of the first half, would be in my opinion closer to the truth.

¹¹ Cf. Réau 1957, pp. 242-254; Weis 1968.

¹² Volbach 1976, pp. 83-84 no. 118, pl. 62; Volbach 1977, pp. 16, 30, fig. 17b.

¹³ See the entry of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which the plaque is dated to around 800.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92728/the-nativity-and-the-adoration-panel-unknown/>

one after the other without a long interval between them.¹⁴ These three ivories were made in a workshop active at an important city in the west part of the Empire, conceivably at Rome or Milan.¹⁵ The iconography of these ivories, spread through artists' sketchbooks or luxury objects, was adopted for two pyxes possibly carved in a Constantinopolitan workshop of the first half of the sixth century. The one pyx is today kept at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen (inv. no. 110), and illustrates, apart from the Nativity, the Adoration of the Shepherds and of the Magi¹⁶ (fig. 2), while the other is rather a copy of it and has been presented in the art trade quite recently.¹⁷ This cylindrical box has not yet been studied thoroughly, so it is mentioned herewith reservation. However, its relationship with the Rouen pyx and with another fragmentary pyx kept at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul¹⁸ is particularly close.



Figure 2

Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, ivory pyx, inv. no. 110, sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 20)

¹⁴ See Beckwith 1958 and Volbach 1976, no. 118, with the previous bibliography.

¹⁵ Volbach (1977, pp. 13-20, 24-30) argues in favor of an attribution to a workshop active in Ravenna, which seemshighly improbable.

¹⁶ Volbach 1976, p. 109 no. 173, pl. 87; Volbach 1977, pp. 16-17, 19, 30, 33, figs. 20a-b. Cat. Paris 1992, pp. 80-81 no. 31 (J. Durand).

¹⁷ *La gazette Drouot* 43 (4 Décembre 2020), Lot no 3 (cf. <https://www.gazette-drouot.com/en/lots/1963909>).

¹⁸ Volbach 1976, p. 109 no. 173a, pl. 88. Unfortunately, only the part of the pyx with the Adoration of the Magi is preserved; the missing part may have been adorned with a Nativity scene. Cf. Cat. Istanbul 1983, pp. 105-106 no. C.106; Cat. Istanbul 2010, pp. 203, 454 no. 101 (G.B. Çelik).

The second group comprises two central panels from five-part diptych leaves with the Virgin Mary enthroned holding the Christ-child on her lap and flanked by an angel and the three Magi. The one panel is kept at the British Museum, London¹⁹ (inv. no. 1904, 7-2, 1) (fig. 3), and the other at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester²⁰ (no. ivories 6). To the latter panel have been associated four other plaquettes, which are today dispersed at the Bode Museum, Berlin (inv. no. 2978), the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (inv. nos. III 300-301), and a private collection in Paris, showing the cross in a wreath elevated in the sky by angels, the Annunciation, Mary's Trial by Ordeal and the Voyage to Bethlehem, as well as two scenes from the life of St. Anna, the Annunciation and her dialog with Euthine, the maid²¹ The Nativity scene occupies the lower part of the central panels; on the Manchester piece



Figure 3

London, The British Museum, ivory panel, inv. no. 1904,7-2,1, sixth century (source: Cat. Athens 2000, p. 267 no. 3)

between the reclining Virgin and the manger with the Child in swaddling clothes surrounded by the animals and the star, a standing angel is addressed to the Virgin. He probably is the one who advised Salome to touch the divine child; she stands (on the Manchester panel) or kneels (on the London panel) extending her paralyzed hand to Jesus for healing. The kneeling Salome

¹⁹Volbach 1976, pp. 89-90 no. 131, pl. 68. Cf. also Cat. New York 1979, pp. 531-532 no. 476 (S.A. Boyd); Cat. Athens 2000, 266-267 no. 3 (A. Eastmond). Cat. London 2008, pp. 81, 383 no. 22 (A. Eastmond).

²⁰Volbach 1976, p. 88 no. 127, pl. 67; Cat. New York 1979, pp. 509-510 no. 457 (E. Lucchesi-Palli).

²¹Volbach 1976, pp. 88-89 nos. 126, 128, and 129, pls. 66-67; Cat. New York 1979, pp. 510-512 nos. 458-461 (E. Lucchesi-Palli, H.L. Kessler).

in front of the crib is found on a pyxis kept at Berlin (inv. no. 585),²² and on another one at the Museum of Art History, Vienna (inv. no. X42) which has been dated to the Carolingian period²³. The London and Manchester panels are thought to have been carved at Constantinople, Syria or the Holy Land at the same time or after the reconstruction and the redecoration of the Nativity basilica by Emperor Justinian.²⁴ According to later testimonies, the basilica of the Nativity received prior to 614 a mosaic decoration at the main cave and at the site of the manger,²⁵ as well as on the exterior of the west wall and perhaps on the east conch of the church; the latter included representations of the Nativity, the enthroned Virgin with the Christ-child, and the Adoration of the Magi.²⁶ Therefore, the ivory panels may have been inspired by the iconography of the monumental paintings of the Nativity church at Bethlehem, which, however, were recreated by mosaic workshops from Constantinople. We need only to remember here the case of the catholikon of the monastery at Sinai, the mosaic decoration of which is attributed to Constantinopolitan artists of the Justinianic period.²⁷

The third group consists of even more probable Constantinopolitan creations. The plaquette from the revetment of the Maximian's throne in Ravenna²⁸ (fig. 4), the five-part ivory cover of the Erevan Gospel,²⁹ and the pyx from Essen-Werden³⁰ (fig. 5) have specific iconographic and stylistic characteristics that in all probability stem from the art of the capital of the Empire. Two of the three works preserve a peculiar detail, an arched opening in the lower part of the manger, which could be a realistic feature of the crib in the very basilica of the Nativity at Bethlehem. This opening, which has the form of a window or *fenestella confessionis* with a rounded top, permitted sight and

²² Volbach 1976, p. 110 no. 1/4, pl. 88. Volbach 1977, 19, figs. 27a-b. See also Cat. New York 1979, pp. 497 no. 447 (A. St. Clair). Cat. Munich 2004, p. 268 no. 404 (G. Bühl).

²³ Volbach 1976, p. 120 no. 199, pl. 97.

²⁴ For the origins of the pyxes, cf. Cat. New York 1979, pp. 510-512 nos. 458-461 (E. Lucchesi-Palli, H. L. Kessler) and pp. 531-532 no. 476 (S. A. Boyd). For the partial rebuilding and redecoration of the Nativity church by Emperor Justinian, see Vincent and Abel 1914, pp. 32ff., 118-131, pl. II; Grabar 1946, vol. I, pp. 245-251, 326, and vol. II, p. 163, 175-177; and Wilkinson 2002, pp. 287-288. See recently Bacci et al. 2012 and Bacci 2017, pp. 59-95.

²⁵ Cf. the travelogue of Epiphanius in Grabar 1946, p. 163; Wilkinson 2002, p. 299 ch. 11; Bacci 2017, p. 91.

²⁶ Cf. *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*, 7.8, ed. Munitiz, Chrysostomides, Harvalia-Crook, Dendrinos 1997, pp. 42-43 (comp. *ibid.*, pp. 26, 146); See also Bacci 2017, pp. 92-93.

²⁷ Weitzmann 1966; Weitzmann 1971; Miziolek 1990; Andreopoulos (2002). For a thorough consideration of the mosaics of the sixth century, see recently James (2017), pp. 215-253.

²⁸ Volbach 1976, 93-94 no. 140, pl. 73; Volbach 1977, pp. 38ff., esp. 44, fig. 50; Rizzardi 2002, 145-150.

²⁹ Volbach 1976, pp. 94-95 no. 142, pl. 75.

³⁰ Volbach 1977, pp. 16-17, 19, 30, fig. 18; Cat. New York 1979, pp. 499-500 no. 449 (G. Vikan).



Figure 4.

Ravenna, Museo Arcivescovile, ivory revetment plaque, Maximian's throne, middle of the sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 50, detail)



Figure 5.

Essen-Werden, Schatzkammer St. Ludgerus, ivory pyx, sixth century (source: Volbach 1977, fig. 18)

accessibility to a relic or a number of relics kept inside (or underneath) the manger. This opening is found again on the Manchester panel, which is also placed in the latter half

of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century.

My intuition is that the iconography of the panels and pyxes mentioned above is undoubtedly related to the decoration of the Nativity church at Bethlehem. The mosaic decoration of the cave and of the church as a whole offered visual and spiritual experiences to those pilgrims who had the determination and - chiefly - the means to make the long journey to the holy site where Jesus was born.³¹ Even if someone denies any relationship between the ivories bearing the representation of the Nativity and the decoration that could have existed in the Nativity church, there is some evidence that proves that there was a sort of a standard type of the Nativity scene in the Bethlehem basilica. The round clay *mementoes* that were distributed to pilgrims, a considerable number of which are kept at the British Museum (inv. no. 1973,0501.1-81)³², show the scene of the Nativity under three basic forms: either as a manger with the divine infant surrounded by the animals and the star, or as a manger with the infant and the animals under a baldachin, from which hangs an unquenchable lamp, or as a manger with Jesus, the animals and the star to the right of the Virgin, who is enthroned or leaning on a mattress. All three types are like frozen “snapshots” that do not have any trace of narrative and offer first-hand proof for the standardized, abbreviated, and simplified image that would have been treasured in the minds and hearts of pilgrims when back home. This image possibly mirrors the decoration of the church of the Nativity before the seventh century, for the same characteristics of the Nativity scene are present on ivories, on lead pilgrim ampullas like those which are kept at the Monza and Bobbio treasuries,³³ as well as on gold medallions, like the one of the two medallions from the region of Adana, now kept at the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.³⁴ Finally, on the lid of the well-known box containing stones from the Holy Land, which is now kept in the treasury of the Vatican Sancta Sanctorum,³⁵ the same iconography is kept, although

³¹ On the terms of this journey to the Holy Land, see Hunt 1982; Maraval 1985; and Wilkison 2002. On the so-called “Palestinian” iconography, see Grabar 1946, 129-206 and *passim*; Weitzmann 1974; Kitzinger 1988; and Galavaris 2002, to cite only a few names of eminent scholars.

³² Camber 1981.

³³ The Nativity is shown in a roundel on the obverse of Monza ampulla no 2, and in similar roundels on Bobbio ampullas nos. 17, 18, and 19; Grabar 1958, pp. 19, 40-42, 52-53, pls. V, XLVI-XLVII, L.

³⁴ See recently Olsen Lam 2019, 46-51.

³⁵ Mietke 1998, figs. 27-28, no. 13 and Kessler 2014, pp. 97-108, figs. 14-16, with previous bibliography

inverted, with the Virgin Mary on the left and Joseph on the right, but also with the well-known detail of the arched opening on the side of the manger.

In summary, the iconography of the Nativity on late antique ivories brings us on the one hand to the texts concerning the birth of the Lord, the canonical and the apocryphal, and on the other hand to Bethlehem, where the event of the birth took place in the cave and where the basilica of the Nativity above it became one of the most visited pilgrimage destinations. In the beginning, Western artists included the manger with the divine infant and the animals, the basic elements of the New Testament text in a narrative context with the Virgin, Joseph, the Magi and the shepherds around her. In the next phase, the scene acquired a dogmatic character, in which the Virgin, the divine infant and Salome had distinct and specific roles: thus, the virginity of the Mother of God was confirmed, any questioning was punished and the healing of the paralyzed hand of the skeptic sinner woman was the first miracle performed by Jesus. In the sixth century, the iconography of the Nativity became more compact and coherent: the Virgin Mary is depicted reclining in front of the manger that was put back to the second level, probably as it was depicted in the new basilica of the Nativity under Justinian. However, the scene of the Nativity did not yet acquire the first role, because the Adoration of the Magi had the lead; this will end when the Dodekaorton as a coherent entity will be established as the typical iconographic program of the byzantine churches during the middle byzantine period.

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and precious insights.

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