



THE NATIVITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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The earliest representations of Christ's birth are to be found in the sarcophagi of the beginning of the fourth century. The increasing popularity of this subject was partly due to the religious controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries concerning the human and divine nature of Christ: the nativity scene was meant to show the Infant both as a true man and a true God.

This theme became more important also from a liturgical point of view. In the fourth century the commemoration of Christ's birth was separated from the Epiphany and became an independent feast (in the early Christian Church, the

Birth of Christ, the Adoration of the Magi and Theophany were celebrated together, on 6 January). Sometime before 336 the Church of Rome established a feast commemorating the birth of Christ while in the Eastern Church it started becoming independent from the Epiphany towards the end of the fourth century. In Rome the choice of date was influenced by existing pagan customs: 25 December (close to the Winter Solstice on 21 December) was the festival of the birth of Sol Invictus, promulgated by the Emperor Aurelian in 274.

The changing nature of the Nativity scene

The earliest Nativity scenes contained very few elements: the Infant in his crib; the star; the stable (or hut); the ox and the ass. It is interesting to note that the

presence of these animals is mainly due to two factors: a) an error in the translation of Habakkuk 3:2 from Greek ("He will be known to you between two ages") into Latin ("He will be known to you between two animals") because of the similarity between the genitive plural of *zoë* (=era) and of *zoon* (=animal); b) the words of Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (these animals, which are described as capable of recognising their master, can therefore be understood as a call to humankind to recognise the nature and message of the Lord). The apocryphal text of Pseudo Matthew 30-32 reads: "Three days after the birth of the Lord, Mary left the grotto and, entering a stall, laid the Child in a manger; and the ox and mule adored Him."

The Mother of Christ was not always present. She started being represented regularly, close to her child, only after the Council of Ephesus (431), when she was officially declared "mother of God". Her position and attitude in the nativity scenes vary. Sometimes she is situated in a corner, not looking at her son (her distant and peaceful attitude, in the absence of delivery pain, was meant to symbolise the divine origin of the child); other times she is seated next to the crib in a pensive mood or laying on a portable bed. The latter iconography is typical of the Byzantine tradition. Mary's pensive image probably has classical origin: the "afflicted Penelope" was its Athenian precedent from the middle of the fifth century AD.

The 'extras'

The shepherds and the prophet can be considered as "extras" in the scene. The prophet, usually portrayed behind Mary and indicating a star, was a reference to the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Jesus was shown as the Messiah mentioned by the prophets of the Old Testament (see box Old Testament prophecies).

St. Joseph is omitted altogether until the beginning of the fifth century, when he starts replacing the figure of the prophet. His appearance seems to be linked to Apocrypha texts from the second to the fifth centuries (Protogospel of Jacob; Pseudo Thomas; Pseudo Matthew; De Nativitate Mariae, the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy; the Story of the Carpenter Joseph). At a corner of the composition, he often turns his back to the newly-born Christ, thus suggesting that not him, but God himself is the real father of the child. The angels announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds start to appear in the nativity scene also at the beginning of the fifth century. Interestingly, in early

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Relief of the Nativity on a 3rd-4th century sarcophagus

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Adoration of the Magi - a fresco from the Catacombs (above), a relief (below) on a sarcophagus

ENGLISH SPEAKING CHURCHES & SERVICES IN ROME

Rome's English-speaking residents - Americans, Britons, Irish, Antipodeans and Filipinos among others - are well served by churches belonging to most denominations including:

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✦ **All Saints' Church (CoffE)** - Via del Babuino, 153B. (M Spagna)
Tel/Fax: (+39) 0636001881 (www.allsaintsrome.org) Pastor: Rev. Jonathan Boardman
Services: 08:30 and 10:30 Eucharist (Sun), 08:00 Morning Prayer (Weekdays), 12:00 Eucharist (Mon, Wed, Fri), 19:00 Eucharist (Thu)

✦ **St. Paul's Within-the-Walls (Episcopal)** - Via Napoli, 58. (M Repubblica)
Tel. (+39) 064883339 (www.stpaulsrome.it) Pastor: Rev. Michael Vono
Services: Eucharist 08:30 and 10:30 (Sun)

✦ **Anglican Centre** - Piazza Collegio Romano. Tel. 066780302.
Director: Rt Rev. John Flack. Services: 12:45 Eucharist (Tue)

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

✦ **International Christian Fellowship** - Viale della Serenissima, 113. (FS Prenestina)
Tel. 0621801431. Pastors: Mr. Francis Santos, Rev. Michael Hopkins
Services: 15:00 (Sun) at Saint Paul's Within the Walls

BAPTIST

✦ **Rome Baptist Church** - Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina, 35. (M Spagna)
Tel: (+39) 066876211 (www.crossspot.net/rbc) Pastor: Rev. David Hodgdon
Services: **Sundays** - 10:30 Worship Service in English, 13:00 Filipino Worship Service (in

Tagalog and English), 16:00 Worship Service and Bible Study (in Chinese).

Weekdays - 19:00 Prayer and Bible Study (Wed), 18:00 African Fellowship Prayer (Sat)

METHODIST

✦ **Ponte Sant'Angelo Methodist Church**
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Pastor: Rev. Dr Trevor Hoggard. Services: 10:30 (Sun)

✦ **Christ Worldlight** - Via Giacinto Pullino, 20. (M Garbatella)

PRESBYTERIAN

✦ **St. Andrew's Church of Scotland** - Via XX Settembre, 7. (M Repubblica, M Barberini)
Tel. 064827627 Pastor: Rev. William McCulloch. Service: 11.00 (Sun)

ROMAN CATHOLIC

✦ **Santa Susanna Church (American)** - Via XX Settembre, 15. (M Barberini)
Tel: 0642014554 / 064882748 (www.santasusanna.org) Pastors: Rev. Greg Apparcel, CSP and Rev. Tom Holahan, CSP
Services: Sat 18:00, Sun 09:00 and 10:30.

✦ **St. Patrick's Church (Irish)** - Via Boncompagni, 60. (M Barberini) Tel. 064203121
Pastor: Rev. Tony Finn. Services: 10:00 Mass (Sun)

✦ **San Silvestro Church (English)** - Piazza San Silvestro. (M Barberini) Tel. 066977121.
Pastor: Father John Fitzpatrick, SanA.C. Services: 10:00 and 17:30 Mass (Sun)

✦ **Caravita: The Jesuit Church of St. Francis Xavier** - Via del Caravita 7 (between Via del Corso and Piazza S. Ignazio). An international Catholic community in Rome.
Pastor: Mark R. Francis, CSV (www.caravita.org)
Services: Mass in English, Sun 11.00 (except August)

Old Testament prophecies about the coming of Christ

"I see him, but not now: I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." Balaam (Num 24:17)
"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." (Ps 110[109]:3)
"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Isaiah (Is 7:14-15)
"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days! Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel! And he shall stand and feed his flock, in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God! And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great the ends of the earth!" Micah (Mi 5:1-3).

Christian representations angels were portrayed without wings, probably to avoid confusion with the pagan winged Nike (symbol of victory).

The stable, or the grotto

As a variation of the scene, the Infant is sometimes portrayed inside a cave (see box 'The cave as birthplace') instead of lying in a stable (no reference about the grotto is found in the canonical Gospels, but the apocryphal gospels of St. James and St. Matthew mention it). The crib itself is represented in different ways: mainly as a manger (suggesting the lower condition of humankind that Christ decided to share, as well as the Lord himself as "spiritual fodder"), but also as an altar (evoking Christ's sacrifice, and the Eucharist), a basket (as a sign of salvation, recalling the basket in which Moses was saved from the waters as well as Noah's ark which was represented as a basket), a sarcophagus (Christ's birth foreshadows his death for the redemption of humanity), or as coming out of a bush (as the Tree of Jesse mentioned in Isaiah 11:1-2, referring to Christ's messianic origin, as David's descendant).

The cave as birthplace

Other religions mentioned the birth of their respective gods and heroes inside caves (for example, Mithras, Krishna, Buddha, etc). Porphyry speaks of the idea of the cave as an image of the cosmos referring to Mithraism, in his treatise On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey: "Zoroaster... was the first to dedicate a natural cave in the nearby mountain of Persia, a cave surrounded by flowers and furnished with springs, in honour of Mithras, the maker and father of all. The cave was for him an image of the cosmos which Mithras created, its interior symmetrically arranged with symbols of the elements and regions of that cosmos. After Zoroaster it became the custom among others to perform initiation ceremonies in caverns and caves, either natural or artificial."

The Adoration of the Magi

Sometimes the scene of the nativity merges with the scene of the adoration of the magi, which was an earlier subject, both in painting and in sculpture (its first known representation is the third-century fresco in the Cappella Greca of the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome). The composition includes Mary usually seated on a chair or a throne with Jesus on her lap and her feet on a footstool (after the Council of Ephesus, her figure takes on the attributes of a queen). Mother and Child are often represented frontally and a star shines above them. The Magi, in their oriental styled clothing (Phrygian caps, short mantles, calf-length footwear), step toward them bearing their gifts. This scene could be seen as a re-drawing of the pagan representation of the submission (submission), when the emperor or a Roman general received their conquered enemies, or of the aurum coronarium, ie, the custom of sending golden crowns to emperors or generals on various occasions (victories, jubilees, major achievements, etc); the latter tradition explains why the presents offered by the magi are often

shown as crowns (although crowns were also referred to by Christians as symbols of victory over death, and of important spiritual merits). From a biblical point of view, the adoration of the magi is to be understood within the context of the Messiah's divine manifestation to humankind, and recalls both the words of Isaiah 60:3-6: "The nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning brightness. Lift up your eyes and look around: all are assembling and coming towards you... the riches of the sea will flow to you, the wealth of the nations come to you... everyone in Saba will come, bringing gold and incense, and proclaiming Yahweh's praises", and the

words of Ps 72:10-11: "the kings of Tarshish and the islands will pay him tribute. The kings of Sheba and Saba will offer gifts; all kings will do him homage, all nations become his servants." The number of magis in the adoration scene could vary; it only became standardized in the fifth century, although the first to mention the number three was apparently Origen (185-254) on the basis of their gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. These presents were interpreted by early Christian authors in a symbolic way: gold was a reference to Christ's regality, frankincense to his divinity, and myrrh to his death (it was used to prevent decomposition).



OTHER PLACES OF WORSHIP

OTHER NON-ITALIAN CHURCHES

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San Giuliano dei Fiamminghi (Belgian), Via del Sudano 40, Tel. 06687514
San Girolamo (Croatian), Via Tomacelle 132, Tel. 066873811
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San Luigi dei Francesi (French), p. San Luigi dei Francesi, Tel. 0668827209
Saint Yves des Bretons (French), Vicolo della Campana 8, Tel. 066833818
Trinita dei Monti (French), p. Trinita dei Monti 3, Tel. 066794179
San Maria dell'Anima (German - Roman Catholic), Via della Pace 24, Tel. 066833729
Evangelische Luterische Kirche (German - Lutheran), Via Sicilia 66, Tel. 063235493
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San Anastasio al Babuino (Byzantine), Via dei Greci 46, Tel. 063244903
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Santa Teresa d'Avila (Hungarian), corso d'Italia 37, Tel. 068416583
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Tempio dei Giovani - Piazza S. Bartolomeo all'Isola, 24.
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Tempio Ospedale Israelitico - Via Fulda, 14.
Tempio Beth-Shalom - Via Pozzo Pantaleo, 52.
Tempio Spagnolo (Sephardi) - Via Catalana.
Tempio Beth-El (Sephardi) - Via Padova, 92.
Tempio Tripolino (Sephardi) - Via Pozzo Pantaleo, 52.
Tempio Ashkenazita (Ashkenazi) - Via Balbo, 33.

MOSQUES

Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia (*Islamic Centre*), Moschea di Roma, Viale della Moschea. Tel. 068082167 / 068082258
Centro Islamico - Via Urbana, 9.
Istituto Culturale Islamico - Via Tagaste, 119. Tel. 065674555
Centro Islamico - Via Dei Frassini, 4. Tel. 062300461 (www.alhuda.it)
Centro Islamico el Fath Roma e Lazio - Via della Magliana, 76g. Tel. 3395991627
Centro Islamico al Manar - Via Giuseppe Cataldo, 19, Zona Torre Angela, Casilino. Tel. 3392770857

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Tempio Buddista Roma - Via Ferruccio, 8/8b (M Vittorio 'A' line)
Services: 07.00-08.30, 17.00-18.30 every day.

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