MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

Subject matter: Massacre of the innocents.

Keywords: Infancy Cycle; infanticide; Herod; martyrs

Summary: King Herod the Great, after hearing the news of the birth of Christ communicated by the Magi, ordered to kill all the children under two years that lived in Bethlehem and its surroundings, fearing that his power would be threatened by the coming of the Messiah announced by the prophets. That fact provoked the flight into Egypt of the Holy Family.

Attributes and types of representation: The most common representation of this subject matter includes two scenes that are often conflated. First, Herod, showing the gestures and attributes of the sovereign, orders the slaughter. He is sometimes accompanied by an acolyte and by the executioners who await his orders. Next to this scene, the mothers with their children and the soldiers that kill them are represented. In addition, a group of dead corpses piled up can also appear.

Primary sources: among the canonical gospels, only Matthew includes the episode of the Massacre of the Innocents: “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah / weeping and great mourning, / Rachel weeping for her children / and refusing to be comforted, / because they are no more.” (Matt. 2: 16 -18).

The story appears developed and enriched in some of the apocryphal gospels. While the Protoevangelium of James (XXII, 1), the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (XVII, 1), or the Gospel of Nicodemus (IX, 3) do not add substantial information to the canonical narrative, other versions describe it in more detail. The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy (IX, 1) states that “when Herod saw that the magi had left him, and not come back to him, he summoned the priests and the wise men, and said to them: Show me where Christ is to be born. And when they answered, In Bethlehem of Judaea, he began to think of putting the Lord Jesus Christ to death.” In the History of Joseph the carpenter (VIII, 1-2), Christ himself says the following words: “But Satan went and told this to Herod the Great, the father of Archelaus. And it was this same Herod who ordered my friend and relative John to be beheaded. Accordingly he searched for me diligently, thinking that my kingdom was to be of this world.” The Arabic History of Joseph the Carpenter relates the same detail of the diabolical advice. The longest account of this event is the one contained in the Armenian Gospel of the Infancy (XIII-XIV), which

1 The common feature is his enthroned position, sometimes holding a sceptre or a sword. Regarding his gestures, he can cross the legs, lift his arm (raising his index finger) or tear at his beard.

2 http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2%3A16-18&version=NIV

3 http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/gospels/infarab.htm


5 A collection of patristic sources on the same subject can be found in LOZANO LÓPEZ, Esther (2010): “Tradición e innovación: el ciclo de la matanza de los inocentes en el románico hispano”. In CHICO PICAZA, María Victoria, y FERNÁNDEZ FERNÁNDEZ, Laura (eds.): La creación de la imagen en la Edad Media: de la herencia a la renovación, extraordinary volume of Anales de Historia del Arte.
delves on Herod’s inquiries triggered by the accusation of a resident of Bethlehem that gave away the visit of the Wise Men to the Child.

Around fifty comments and sermons of the Church Fathers discuss the passage as early as the second century, to which we must add those present in sacramentaries, calendars, martyrologies, etc. The innocent children will be seen as the first Christians and the first martyrs that reached the category of saints. Despite not having been baptized, their deaths will be interpreted as a baptism of blood.

The liturgical dramas and the medieval theatre echoed the episode of the slaughter of the innocents. The different versions of the Officium Stellae, whose main argument deals with the journey of the Magi, reflect Herod’s anger after being visited by the Three Kings, the appearance of children, their death, and even the presence of an angel who received their souls. The Lament of Rachel for her children was given special importance in the liturgical dramas, leading to an autonomous piece, the Ordo Rachelis. In Castile, the anonymous text known as the Auto de los Reyes Magos (c. 1150) retells the dialogue held between Herod and the scribes about the birth of Christ. Somewhat later, in the first half of the thirteenth century, the poem known as Libre dels tres Reys de Orient, emphasizes the bloodier aspects of the event and refers to the liturgical feast of the innocents which regards them as the first martyrs.

The Golden Legend narrates the event of the killing of the innocents in a chapter emphasizing Herod’s actions and the children’s age at the time of their death. Jacobus De Voragine echoes the explanation given by John Chrysostom, who notes that the king ordered to kill all children from two to five years old.

Other sources, non-written sources: from an iconographic point of view, both the liturgical drama and the theatre not only helped to popularize the episode, but also their staging was determining in giving a dramatic gestuality to its visual representation.

Geographical and chronological framework: the subject of the slaughter of the innocents usually appears in the cycles of the Infancy when they reach a certain iconographic development. The success of this iconography can be recognized in the West, with examples dating back to early Christian art (the mosaics of the triumphal

---


9 ALVAR, Manuel (1965): Libro de la Infancia y muerte de Jesús (Libre dels Tres Reys de Orient), Madrid, CSIC.

10 http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden143.htm

arch of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Gallo-Roman sarcophagi, ivory panels of the 5th century..., and the East, with examples also appearing at an early date (the Rabula Gospels). It is very possible that their significance from an iconographical standpoint is related to the rise of the cult of the innocents in Christian spirituality, which can be traced back to the 2nd-4th centuries and is already documented in the 5th century.

Therefore, its iconic development takes in all the Christian Middle Ages.

**Artistic media and techniques:** although it can appear in multiple formats and artistic media, the massacre of the innocents was mainly illustrated in manuscripts, mural and panel painting, mosaics, and monumental sculpture.

During the Early Middle Ages, this scene was widely represented in famous Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts such as the Drogo Sacramentary (fol. 31v.), the Codex Egberti (fol. 15v.), the Codex Aureus of Echternach (fol. 19v.) or the Gospels of Otto III. It also appears in an ivory cover from a Gospel Book created by the Metz School in the mid-ninth century (Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 9393). During the Romanesque period, its depiction was usually found in mural painting (Sant’Angelo in Formis, Pantheon of Saint Isidore in León, church of Saints Julian and Basilisa in Bagüés) and monumental sculpture, whether in capitals, such as those from the cloisters of Moissac and Monreale, or the one from the Miègèville portal of Toulouse, in sepulchres like that of Doña Blanca in Nájera (mid. 12th century) or in the archivolts of the church of Saint Domingo in Soria (the complete third archivolt, similar to what could have existed in Silos) or Saint-Julien in Le Mans (seven voussoirs). Some of the most famous Romanesque manuscripts where the scene was represented are the Saint Albans Psalter (Hildesheim, Dombibliothek ms. St. Godehard 1, fol. 30), the Winchester Psalter (London, British Library Cotton Nero C. IV, fol. 14r), or the Leonese Bible of 1162 (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional). The wooden roof of the Swiss church of Saint Martin of Zillis stands out in the depictions of the massacre of the innocents in panel painting of this era. This scene can also be found in the sumptuary arts and other media, as in the famous ivories of Salerno or the doors of the cathedral of Pisa.

The massacre of the innocents is also represented in Gothic sculpture, especially in monumental portals, where it is located in various places: from the capitals of the Royal Portal of Chartres to the tympanum of the portal of Saint John in the cathedral of León. Pulpits such as those of the cathedrals of Pisa, Siena, and Pistoia, or the choir screen of Notre-Dame of Paris also include this sculptural representation. Similarly, late medieval painting and manuscript illumination convey the scene as a significant episode of Christ’s Infancy: Psalter of St. Louis of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Scrovegni Chapel, etc., a depiction that was extended to other media such as stained glass windows (cathedrals of Chartres and Lyon among others).

Regarding the East, the scene of the massacre is represented in Byzantine manuscripts of the Second Golden Age as the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 9th century), the Menologium of Basil II (Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, ms. gr. 1613, fol. 281) or the Florence Tetraevangelium of the Biblioteca Laurenziana (Ms. Plut. lat. VI, 23, fol. 7), dating from the 11th century. It was also represented in the mural cycles of the churches of Cappadocia (Ayvalı Kilise, Tokali

---

**Notes:**


13 For the Spanish case, with information of other areas and periods, see the extensive account collected and commented in LOZANO LÓPEZ, Esther (2010).
Kilise, etc.), the Balkans (Metropolis of Mystras), the church of Panagia Theoskepatos at Trebizond, and in the mosaics of St. Saviour in Chora. Under the influence of the Byzantine world, although placed in Italy, the mural mosaics of the north nave of the cathedral of Monreale also stand out.

**Precedents, transformations, and projection:** some war scenes in the classical world have been cited as visual precedents for the massacre of the innocents. In particular, the reliefs of Trajan’s Column have been related to one of the first representations of the theme found in the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, where, in a singular way, children are brought before Herod by their mothers in an accusatory attitude. Another iconographical model, mainly illustrated in the 5th-6th centuries (with some later echoes), consisted of throwing the innocents against the ground, as shown on the sarcophagus of Saint-Maximin in Provence. The episode grew in visual violence and cruelty as time went on, culminating in the usual iconography of the beheading with a sword or the spearing, and the struggle between the mothers and the soldiers. The murder being committed with cutting weapons is already present in sixth-century works of art such as the Rabula Gospels (586, fol. 4v.).

A common distinctive feature for the corpus of representations of the event is the focus on the attitudes of anguish and horror of the mothers under the death of their children. Some formulas are continuously repeated, as the soldier who raises a child upside down by grasping his feet or the soldier who grabs the hair of another while raising the sword. Regarding the mothers, the genuflected position of one of them and the gesture of tearing the hair are also common. The executioners are often represented as contemporary knights in Romanesque and Gothic times, equipped with chain mail and other pieces of harness.

The weeping of Rachel for her children -referred to by the evangelist immediately after the occurrence of the massacre (Matt. 2: 17-18)- remarkably appear in Byzantine examples, in the Pantheon of Saint Isidore in León, or in Monreale.

In Spanish Romanesque art -although there are other later examples in France (North portal of the cathedral of Poitiers)- an iconographic peculiarity has been recognized: the figure of Herod is advised by the devil that remains besides him and even whispers to him on the ear. This iconography survived during the Gothic period in examples such as the portal on the North transept of the cathedral of Toledo (c. 1300).

The mural representation in the central nave of the cathedral of Mondoñedo (15th century), where women are represented with both Western and Moorish dress and appearance, can be highlighted because of its uniqueness.

---


16 MELERO MONEO, Marisa (1986): “El diablo en la matanza de los Inocentes: una peculiaridad de la escultura románica hispana”, *D'Art*, nº 12, pp. 113-126. E. Lozano points out other iconographic characteristics specific to the Spanish examples such as the scene of the visitation to Herod by the shepherds (Soria), the presence of an unfolded scroll on the knees of the scribes, or the figure of Abraham flanked by two angels with the souls of the children: LOZANO LOPEZ, Esther (2010).
Typology and related themes: Since ancient times the analogy between the innocents and Christ was emphasized by virtue of their shared innocence and purity and the value of their sacrificial death. In the Middle Ages, the belief that the women who wept on the road to Calvary were the mothers of the innocents -who demanded the resurrection of their children- was quite spread, based on Infancy apocryphal texts\(^{17}\). The dead children were also related by the exegetes with the souls of the martyrs referred to in the Book of Revelation.

The theme of the massacre, in particular, recalls the vindictive action taken by the Pharaoh against the Israelites as described in Exodus (Ex. 1: 15-22), a comparison that seeks the parallel between the typological figures of Moses and Christ, saved both from the slaughter.

The visual codification of the scene has some points in common with other representations of martyrdom, particularly regarding the figure of Herod ordering the massacre, which is related to that of the governor or civil authority that decrees the punishment of the martyrs (see for example the cycle in the crypt of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe).

Images:
- Diptych leaf with scenes from the life of Christ, Rome (c. 400), Berlin, Staatliche Museen.
- Triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (c. 430)
- Ivory panel with scenes from the life of Christ, probably made in Cologne (c. 850), London, Victoria & Albert Museum
- *Codex Egberti* (c. 980-993), Stadtbibliothek Trier, Ms. 24, fol. 15v.
- *Florence Tetraevangelium*, Biblioteca Laurenziana of Florence (11th century), Ms. Plut. lat.VI, 23, fol. 7
- Royal Pantheon of Saint Isidore in León (c. 1100)
- Church of the Saints Julián and Basílica in Bagüés, Huesca (c. 1100)
- Liturgical comb from Saint-Albans (c. 1150), London, Victoria & Albert Museum
- Church of Saint Baudelio in Casillas de Berlanga, Soria (c. 1125-1130)
- Life of Christ window in the west façade of the cathedral of Chartres (c. 1150)
- Capitals of the Royal Portal of the cathedral of Chartres (c. 1145)
- Capital of the chapter room of the cathedral of El Burgo de Osma, Soria (c. 1160-1170)
- Third archivolt of the portal of the church of Saint Domingo, Soria (c. 1170-1180)
- Capital of the south ciborium of the church of San Juan de Duero, Soria (end of the 12th century)
- Nicola Pisano, Pulpit of the cathedral of Siena (c. 1265-1268)
- fol. 15v. of the Ms. K. 26 of St. John’s College, Cambridge, (c. 1270-1280)
- North tympanum of the west façade of the cathedral of Strasbourg (end of the 13th century)
- Portal on the North transept of the cathedral of Toledo (c. 1280-1300)
- Giotto, Scrovegni chapel, Padua (first decade of the 14th century)
- Choir screen of Notre Dame de Paris (second quarter of the 14th century)
- Giovanni Pisano, Pulpit of the cathedral of Pistoia (c. 1301)

- Giovanni Pisano, Pulpit of the cathedral of Pisa (c. 1302-1311)
- Duccio, Maesta (1308-1311)
- Saint Savior in Chora (Istanbul), outer narthex (early 14th century)
- Mural paintings in the north bay of the cathedral of Mondoñedo, Lugo (15th century)
- Sherbone Missal (early 15th century), London, British Library, Ms. Add. 74236, fol. 42.

Bibliography:


LOZANO LÓPEZ, Esther (2010): “Tradición e innovación: el ciclo de la matanza de los inocentes en el románico hispano”. In CHICO PICAZA, María Victoria, y FERNÁNDEZ FERNández, Laura (eds.): La creación de la imagen en la Edad Media: de la herencia a la renovación, extraordinary volume of Anales de Historia del Arte.


Author and electronic address: Francisco de Asís García García - fdagarcia@ghis.ucm.es; fcoagarcia@gmail.com