

THE NATIVITY

Theme: Nativity or Birth of Christ

Keywords: Christian Iconography, Nativity, Christ, New Testament

Summary: Despite the differences among the Nativity sources, there are some points in common that can be described as follows: The Virgin Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register. During the night travel, the Virgin started to show the signs of going into labour. Since they had no other choice, Mary gave birth to the child in improvised scarce circumstances, i.e. in the middle of the road to Bethlehem. The child was Jesus Christ or the announced Messiah of the Old Testament. Several shepherds were first informed by an angel of the good news. Then a court of angels adored the newborn. Finally the wise men arrived and paid tribute to him.

The sources did make differences concerning the exact place of the birth (cave or manger), the attendance of certain figures (midwives, Joseph, and his son Simon), the presence of the ox and the mule, the apparition of the star in the sky, the attitude of Joseph and Mary before, during, and after labour, etc. For more details see section *primary sources* and *other sources, non written sources*.

Attributes and types of representation: The Birth of Christ is one of the most popular topics in medieval Christian iconography. Thus differences among depictions are numerous. Three people can always be found in Nativity images, i.e. the Virgin Mary, Joseph and the newborn, but their attitude and position and the atmosphere that surrounds them have many variations.

Generally speaking, there are two types of Nativity depictions: the Eastern (or Byzantine) one and the Western one. The images coming from the Byzantine territory, or made under its influence,¹ usually place the Nativity scene in a mountainous area where a cave, inspired in the Apocryphal Gospels, is the centre of the composition. This atmosphere encourages the presence of numerous figures and anecdotes: the Virgin, the Child inside the crib, the announcement to the shepherds, the adoration by the angels, the arrival of the wise men, Joseph and the midwives, the star in the sky, the ox and the mule, the bath of the new born, etc. By contrast, the images under Western influence prefer a modest stable, even a tumbledown construction, where the main focus of attention is the Sacred Family (Mary, Joseph, and the Child). Nevertheless, they do not avoid certain secondary figures such as the animals, the angels and/or the shepherds who could be present in this miraculous event.

However, exceptions were almost as usual as the general rule. As an example, let's see the Hohenfurth Altarpiece by the Vissy Brod Master (National Gallery in Prague, ca. 1350). There the Byzantine and Western atmosphere have been put together so that the Virgin is placed under a humble roof and near some animals feeding from a crib but, at the same time, on a rocky floor typical of a cave.

¹ We should keep in mind the strong influence of Byzantine iconography in Medieval Italian art. At the same time, Italian art had a great influence over other regions in Europe, so that it encouraged the spreading of Byzantine iconography.

For that reason, analysing the elements and figures one by one seems more useful than to study the depictions by dividing them according to their Western or Eastern origin:

- The **Virgin Mary**, who is the second main figure of the Nativity iconography, plays an ambiguous role, since she has to show -at the same time- her human nature and a supernatural miraculous birth. In many works of art, Mary lies down, with her back to her Son and a melancholic expression in her face (ex. Ingeburge Psalter, ca. 1200), which is usually explained as the sign of a *painful labour* and her *human nature*. Nonetheless we should wonder if it is the physical suffering caused by the labour or the spiritual suffering caused by the prediction of the future death of Christ on the cross. In some images, the melancholic lying Virgin Mary caresses her child (ex. Avia altarpiece, ca. 1200), put him in the crib (ex. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, by Giotto, ca. 1300-1305), or breastfeeds him (ex. Guillaume de Digulleville, Pèlerinage de Jésus-Christ, ca. 1425-1450, BNF, ms. français 376), which is an expression of the maternal-filial relation and of the human nature of both of them. Such images can be easily found both in Western and Eastern art during all the Middle Ages.

The most important change in Mary's position took place in Western Europe during the 14th and 15th century, when she started to be depicted kneeling down, with both hands together indicating praying, and looking at her divine Son, who shined with an intense light. This iconography, which was inspired in the *Revelations* written by Saint Bridget of Sweden (14th century)², should be understood as the unmistakable sign of the *painless labour*. There are no examples of this iconography among Eastern works of art.

- The **Child** could be depicted either bandaged or completely naked. The bandages are included for two reasons. First because medieval newborns used to be bandaged during forty or sixty days in order to protect their fragile body from any kind of fracture or knock. Second because it was meant to be a comparison between the birth and the death of Christ. Thus the bandaged Child looks like the shrouded Christ and he even lies down in a place that seems more like a small tomb than a crib (ex. Avia altarpiece, ca. 1200; mosaics of Monreale cathedral, 12th century).

If Jesus is naked, he usually irradiates a strong light and lies down in the ground, following in that case the vision of Saint Bridget (14th century). See for example the Spanish Bañeza altarpiece painted by Nicolás Francés in the 15th century.

Nevertheless, the notion of the divine birth as the *light that becomes matter* was already present in the *Liber Infantia Salvatoris* (Apocryphal Gospel, 9th century). For that reason, some Nativities under Byzantine influence show a beam of light emerging from the sky and directing it towards the bandaged Child, as it happens in the mosaics of Monreale cathedral (12th century).

Moreover, it is possible to include the bath of the Child. One or two midwives, who are occasionally helped by Joseph, wash Jesus either in a humble bucket or in a baptismal font (ex. Hohenfurth altarpiece, ca. 1350). The bath of the newborn must be understood as an everyday habit used to eliminate the blood surrounding the newborns' body. Nonetheless, in the case of Christ's Birth, it must also be seen as a rite linked to

² However, the notion of a praying Mary related to the newborn was already in the *Liber Infantia Salvatoris* (9th century), although it did not have many iconographical consequences in that century.

the central role of baptism in the Christian church. Christ, who had been born absolutely clean according to the *Liber Infantia Salvatoris* (9th century), was depicted inside a baptismal font with the aim of becoming a model for Christians.

- **Joseph** is said to play a secondary role in the Nativity scene. He is usually either dozed off or thoughtful, the latter one must be understood as a way for artists to express Joseph's doubts concerning the Virgin Mary (see Mathew's Gospel 1, 18-25). Sometimes he is waiting outside the cave, as it was told in the *Liber Infantia Salvatoris* (ex. obverse of the *Maestà* by Duccio, Siena, 14th century).

However, he gradually plays a more active role in Western art. Thus, from the 14th century onwards, he is in charge of different housework chores such as feeding the animals with straw, bathing the child, making a fire, cooking a soup, sowing a bout, building a fence, washing the nappies, etc. (ex. Bañeza altarpiece, 15th century). In this way, the nativity became more and more real and natural. Moreover, some of the thoughts and concerns of the Pseudo Bonaventura expressed in his *Meditations* (end of the 13th century) had an artistic impact, since he had stated that Joseph was worried about the atmosphere surrounding the Virgin and the Child, and he was doing his best for the comfort of his family. In general terms, these details were not present in Byzantine examples.

- The **ox** and the **mule** are always linked to the manger, where they eat peacefully. Their presence is narrated in the apocryphal texts, which are usually present both in Western and Eastern art, from the first depictions of the Nativity onwards. Sometimes they adore the Child, since they acknowledged his divinity, according to the *Pseudo Mathew* (6th century), the *Golden Legend* (13th century) and *Saint Bridget Revelations* (14th century), see for ex. the Nativity by Hugo Van der Goes (Berlin, 15th century).
- **Midwives** were added to images under the apocryphal texts' influence. They were depicted both in Western and Eastern art, having examples already in the earliest images, such as in the chair of Maximianus, ca. 550. One or two midwives are in charge of the newborn, i.e. they bath him, bandage him, feed him, put him in the crib, etc. Thus, they make the Nativity closer and more natural.

By contrast, there is almost never any reference to Salome's incredulity and the following punishment (one of her hands had been either burned or dried), as it was told in the Apocryphal Gospels. As an exception, this image subtly appears in the ivory scene in the chair of Maximianus (ca. 550) and the Dijon Nativity by Robert Campin (ca. 1420).

Finally, in the 14th and 15th century, with the spreading of Saint Bridget's visions, adoring midwives were added to Nativities³, so that they contribute to the general adoration of shepherds, angels, animals, Mary and Joseph. See for example the Nativity by Jacques Daret (Thyssen Museum, ca. 1434).

- **Shepherds**, who usually wear leather bags, crooks and musical instruments, are frequently placed in a secondary position, close to their flock, looking at the sky, and putting their hands in front of their eyes with the aim of not being blinded by the light of the announcing angels⁴; see

³ That detail is not mentioned by Saint Bridget, but by the *Liber Infantia Salvatoris*.

⁴ Usually there is only one announcing angel, although in some sources and images we can find several angels, for example in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* or in the Nativity of Pisa Cathedral by Bonanno Pisano, Saint Ranieri door, ca. 1180.

for ex. Saint Michel Chapel in Pedralbes Monastery, by Ferrer Bassa, ca. 1350. Sometimes they and their animals seem to be petrified, according to the notion of the *stopped nature* expressed by the *Gospel (or Protoevangelium) of James*; see for ex. The wall paintings in San Isidoro de León, 12th century.

In the Late Middle Ages, shepherds are represented closer to the place of birth. They even look through the windows and gaps of the shed, nodding their heads in respect (ex. Dijon Nativity, Robert Campin, ca. 1420). In this way, they express some of the ideas of the Gospel of Luke. In fact, according to him shepherds had been in the shed and had glorified the Child.

- **Angels** were first placed in heaven or, at least, outside the birth place. They look either at the sky or at the ground, adoring, glorifying, and acknowledging the divinity of Jesus. One of the ways of glorification of the newborn is singing, and so angels could carry phylacteries with the lyrics⁵. This kind of depiction was used both in Western and Eastern works of art; see for ex. Monreale mosaics, 12th century.

Later on, in the 14th and 15th century, in Western examples connected to Saint Bridget's writings, angels were placed closer to the main focus of attention. Thus, they kneel down in the ground, very close to the Virgin and the Child, among other adoring people. An excellent example of this can be found in the Portinari Triptych painted by Hugo Van der Goes (Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1475).

- The announcement, travelling and adoration of the **Wise Men** were usually related to the Nativity. However, the extension and importance of this topic merits a separate analysis [available on 2010/2011].
- The **place of birth** could be either a stable (or humble shed) according to the Gospel of Luke, the *Golden Legend*, the Pseudo Bonaventura, and Saint Bridget; or a cave according to the Apocryphal Gospels (*Protoevangelium of James*, *Gospel of Pseudo Mathew*, and *Liber Infantia Salvatoris*). The stable is frequent in Western art while the cave is usual in Eastern examples. Nevertheless, there is no restriction about the combination of both sceneries (the cave and the stable), as we can see regularly in Late Medieval Italian painting (ex. Nativity in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Giotto, ca. 1305). Moreover, the *Gospel of Pseudo Mathew* seems to have included the same notion, since it stated that the Sacred Family had passed three days in the stable after the Virgin's labour in a dark cave.

Sometimes the architecture surrounding the Sacred Family is in ruins. It is a way to affirm that the strong Christian Church (New Testament) would be built over the ruins of the Jewish Synagogue (Old Testament). This detail was introduced in Flemish paintings in the 15th century.

In certain Western examples, we could find the Virgin lying down in a bed under a canopy and inside a domestic interior place. That detail seems to be the result of the iconographical *contamination* of the labours of Anne (Mary's mother) and Elisabeth (Mary's cousin), since both of them had taken place in a comfortable house. An example of this was included in the *Pèlerinage de Jésus-Christ*, by Guillaume de

⁵ For more details, see the research in progress by Candela PERPIÑÁ GARCÍA, "Los ángeles músicos. Estudio de los tipos iconográficos", *II Encuentro Complutense de Jóvenes Investigadores en Historia del Arte*, Madrid- UCM, Abril 2010, whose final results are expected to be published in the Extraordinary Volume of 2011 of the journal *Anales de Historia del Arte*.

Digulleville, ca. 1425-1450, BNF, ms. français 376, although in this case the domestic interior scene and the stable are mixed and put together.

Another detail that is very common is the star in the sky indicating the exact place of the Child's birth. The star will also be the guide for the Wise Men. Sometimes, a beam of light emerges from the star and ends in the newborn. In other occasions, the star is closed to God the Father, indicating the supernatural character of the event. Anyway, the star was mentioned by Pseudo Matthew and Jacobus de Voragine and was present both in Western and Eastern art; see for example the mosaics of Saint Maria Maggiore in Rome (13th century) or the Bañeza altarpiece by Nicolás Francés (15th century).

Primary sources: The Nativity of Christ was narrated by the Bible (Luke 2, 1-7), the Apocryphal Gospels (*Protoevangelium of James*, chapters 17-20, 4th century; *Gospel of Pseudo Mathew*, chapters 13-14, 6th century; *Liber Infantia Salvatoris*, paragraphs 62-72, 9th century), the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, 13th century (chapter 6), and the writings of mystic authors (*Meditations* by the Pseudo Bonaventura, end of 13th century; *Revelations* by Bridget of Sweden, 14th century), among others⁶. Let's see now a chart about the sources, their common elements, and their main differences⁷. We have included the events that took place starting in the travel to Bethlehem until the shepherds' adoration, omitting other previous and later scenes.

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
TRAVELLING TO BELEN	Travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register					-	-
TIME OF BIRTH	During the night					-	During the night

⁶ For a better understanding of the Nativity, we should keep in mind medieval medical advice about labour and infancy, since Christ's Birth images included many everyday life details. For that reason, in the section *bibliography*, certain books about the link between art and gynaecology have been added.

⁷ The section *Primary Sources* contains many conclusions of students who had participated in the practical activities of Group D of "Medieval Iconography" in the Bachelor of Arts during the academic year 2009-2010. Thus, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to them.

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
JOSEPH'S SON	-	Mention to Joseph's son (anonymous) who travels with them	-	Mention to Simon , i.e. Joseph's son , who travels with them	-	-	-
ANIMALS	-	Travelling by donkey		-	During the trip, Joseph carries with him one donkey and one ox	-	Mary and Joseph are close to some animals
TWO PEOPLES	-	During her trip, Mary becomes sad and happy at the same time since she sees two people		-	During her trip, Mary becomes sad and happy at the same time since she sees two people	-	-
	-	-	A child explains to Mary that those two people are the Jews and the Gentiles	-	An angel explains to Mary that those two people are the Jews and the Gentiles	-	-

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
PLACE OF BIRTH	Birth in a manger (crib)	Birth in a cave			Birth under a shed outside the city. The newborn will be later placed in a crib	Birth in a stable	Birth in a crib
	Before the birth, they had tried to stay in a inn but there was no place	-	-	Before the birth, they had stopped outside the city, in a stable for poor travellers , since they could not afford another kind of accommodation	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	Joseph builds a fence for protecting the Virgin. Afterwards he offers her a woollen seat and puts some hay under her feet	Joseph ties the animals up and puts a candle in the wall
THE CAVE LIGHTS UP	-	-	It is an angel who proposes the Virgin to go inside an underground cave	It is Simon who leads the Virgin inside the cave	-	-	-
	-	A bright cloud surrounds the cave	When Mary goes inside, the dark cave becomes extremely brilliant		When Christ is born, the night becomes day	-	-

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
LOOKING FOR THE MIDWIFES	-	Joseph looks for a midwife	Joseph looks for two midwives, Zelomi and Salome	Simon looks for a midwife called Zaquel	Joseph looks for two midwives, Zebel and Salome	-	-
JOSEPH'S DOUBTS	-	The midwife tells Joseph about the miraculous virginal birth, but he does not believe it	-	-	-	-	-
JOSEPH WAITING OUTSIDE	-	-	-	Joseph and Simon wait for the birth outside the cave . Zaquel will tell them about the miraculous events that happened inside	-	-	Joseph waits for the birth outside the cave , so he is not present during the nativity
BODY POSITION OF THE VIRGIN	-	-	-	Before labour, the Virgin was looking at the sky, praying and praising God	-	The Virgin comes closer to a column in order to give birth	Before the labour, the Virgin kneels down , with her back to the crib, the hands together, and the eyes looking at the sky. She takes off her shoes , puts out her veil , and remains dressed in white clothes

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
BIRTH UNDERSTOOD AS LIGHT	-	-	-	The birth of the Child was like a beam of light becoming matter , and that matter was Christ.	-	-	When Christ is born, he irradiates so much light that he hides the light of Joseph's candle
THE CHILD IS BORN QUICKLY AND CLEAN	-	-	-	The Child was born without blood, clean, light and brilliant as if he were a bolt	-	-	The Child is born clean and “ in the twinkling of an eye ”
ADORATION BY THE VIRGIN	-	-	-	The Virgin, looking like a <i>vineyard</i> , adored the newborn	-	The Virgin adores the newborn	
TRIPLE VIRGINITY AND LACTANCY	-	-	Zelomi palpates the Virgin and acknowledges the triple virginity and the milk in her breast	Zaquel palpates the Virgin and acknowledges the triple virginity and the milk in her breast	Zebel palpates the Virgin and acknowledges her virginity	The Virgin Mary breastfeeds her Child	-
PAINLESS LABOUR	-	-	-	Zaquel also acknowledges the birth of Christ and the lack of blood and pain in labour	Zebel also acknowledges a painless labour	The labour is painless	

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
ADORATION BY THE MIDWIFE	-	-	-	Zaquel adored the Child	-	-	-
SALOME'S DOUBTS	-	The midwife talks to a another woman, called Salome , who expresses her doubts about the virginal birth and wants to palpate Mary to check the miracle	Salome , sceptical about the virginity, asks to palpate Mary	-	Salome , sceptical, decides to palpate Mary	-	-
	-	Salome's hand becomes burnt after the palpation of the Virgin	Salome's hand becomes dry after the palpation of the Virgin	-	Salome's arm becomes dry after the palpation of the Virgin	-	-
	-	When Salome kneels down begging for pardon, an angel appears in the sky and the Child heals her	A brilliant young man (an angel?) orders Salome to adore and touch the Child. She touches the fringes of the nappy and becomes healed	-	An angel orders Salome to touch the Child and she becomes healed	-	-
MIDWIFES'S DEPARTURE	-	Salome leaves the cave	-	The oldest midwife (Zaquel?), together with her apprentice , takes the stool and leaves the place	-	-	-

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
COLABORATION BETWEEN THE MIDWIFE AND JOSEPH	-	-	-	Zaquel put the Child on Joseph's arms	-	-	-
ADORATION BY JOSEPH	-	-	-	-	-	Joseph adores the newborn	
THE CHILD IS WRAPPED	The Child is wrapped in nappies	-	-	-	-	The Child is wrapped by using the Virgin's veil	-
ANNOUNCEMENT TO AND ADORATION BY THE SHEPHERDS	The shepherds, who take care of their flock during the night, get scared with the announcement made by an angel	In the middle of the countryside, where the atmosphere had become static and immobile , there were shepherds taking care of their flock	Several shepherds listen to the announcement of angels during the night	-	Several shepherds, who were up all night adoring the sun , listen to the announcement of an angel	-	-
	The shepherds visit the Child and glorify God	-	After three days , the shepherds go to the stable	-	The shepherds adore the Child	-	-
THE STAR IN THE SKY	-	-	A star over the cave announces the birth	-	A star , under the shape of the Child with a cross , shows the Wise Man the way towards the adoration of the Child	-	-

	Luke, 2	Protoevangelium of James, 17-20	Pseudo Mathew, 13-14	Liber Infantia Salvatoris, paragraphs 62-76	Golden Legend, Jacobus de Voragine	Meditations, Ps. Buenaventura	Revelations, Saint Bridget
ADORATION BY ANGELS	The heavenly court adores the Child	-	The heavenly court adores the Child	-	The heavenly court adores the Child	-	The heavenly court adores the Child
ADORATION BY ANIMALS	-	-	The ox and the donkey adore the Child	-	The ox and the donkey do not eat the hay from the crib but they adore the Child	The ox and the donkey heat the Child with his breath	The ox and the mule adore the Child
POSTLABOUR			The Sacred Family stays three additional days in the stable				-

The following are links to and full records of the original text of these primary sources:

- *Bible* (Luke 2, 1-7): available on <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%202&version=NIV> (last access 24-10-2010)
- *Protoevangelium of James* (4th century), chapters 17-20: available on <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stj20001.htm> (last access 24-10-2010)
- *Gospel of Pseudo Mathew* (6th century), chapters 13-14: available on <http://www.gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm> (last access 24-10-2010)
- *Liber Infantia Salvatoris* (9th century), paragraphs 62-76, Spanish edition by DE SANTOS OTERO, Aurelio (ed.) (2002): *Los Evangelios Apócrifos*, BAC, Madrid, pp. 110-115. [<http://www.ucm.es/centros/cont/descargas/documento19127.pdf>]
- *Golden Legend* (Jacobus de Voragine, 13th century), translated into English by CAXTON, William (1483) available on <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GL-vol1-nativity.html> (last access 24-10-2010)
- *Meditations* (Pseudo-Bonaventura, end of 13th century), Spanish translation in PÉREZ HIGUERA, María Teresa, *La Navidad en el arte medieval*, Madrid, Encuentro, 1997, pp. 106, 129 y 135, from where a summarized free translation has been made:

“Be sympathetic and look at this fifty-year-old young woman, tired after a long walk and ashamed among unknown people, who look for accommodation but without success. Mary and Joseph had to stay in a stable where other men used to stay during the raining season. There Joseph, who was a carpenter, must have made a sort of fence to protect her” (p.106)

“In the middle of Sunday night, the Virgin got up and went closer to a column. Joseph was sitting and sad because he could not offer her all the things that she required. However he got up, took hay from the manger, put it under Our Lady’s feet, and came back. Then, the Son of God, without pain nor injury, was born rapidly over the hay put under his mother’s feet. Mary bended, took him, hugged him sweetly, put him in her lap, and wash his body with her milk, since her breast was miraculously full of milk thanks to the action of God. Afterwards, she wrapped him with her veil and put him in the crib. Then, the ox and the donkey heat the Child with their breath as if they understood -in human terms- that the child, wrapped in poor clothes, needed heating. His mother, knelt down, adored him and praised to God. Joseph also adored him. Then he looked for the saddle of the donkey, extract from it the woollen cushion, and offer it as a seat for the Virgin” (p. 129)

“You must have heard how much sadness surrounded him in at his birth. Among other sufferings, his mother put sorrowfully a stone under his head because she had no pillow. That stone is already visible inside a wall (in Bethlehem), as a memorial” (p.135)

- *Revelations* (Bridget of Swede, 14th century), Spanish translation in PÉREZ HIGUERA, María Teresa, *La Navidad en el arte medieval*, Madrid, Encuentro, 1997, p. 133, from where a summarized free translation has been made:

“[...] The Virgin, with great respect, knelt down and started to pray, with her back to the crib and her face looking at the sky, towards the East. With her hands together and her eyes towards the sky, she seemed a mystic woman in ecstasy, drunk with the sweetness of God. While the Virgin was in that position, I saw her Son moving in her womb, and *in the twinkling of an eye* she gave birth to her Son, from whom an intense light emerged, even more intense than the sun. His bright hid the material light of the candle taken by the old man (Joseph) [...] In that moment the Virgin knew that the Saviour had been born, tilted her head, put her hands together, and adored the Child with big respect and decorum [...]”.

- **Other sources, non written sources:** taking into account that the Nativity was one of the central events of the Christian calendar, its iconography was under the influence of the liturgy. Thus, the tomb-like crib must have been the result of the liturgical connection between the Nativity and the Passion. Moreover, the addition of the bath of the Child must have been the consequence of the central role played by baptism among Christians. Both questions were mentioned in the section *attributes and types of representation*.

On the other hand, liturgical drama inspired many Late Medieval western iconographies. Details such as the Child put on the altar, curtains behind the figures, crowds adoring Jesus, shepherds showing their happiness by playing music, etc. must have been under the influence of Nativity dramas. A good example of this is the *Berlin Nativity* by Hugo Van der Goes (15th century).

- **Geographical and chronological framework:** the Nativity is a central topic of Christian art which can be found almost in any geographical and chronological framework, from the Early Christian to recent art, from Eastern to Western Europe during the Middle Ages and all over America in Modern Times. Probably the oldest image linked to the Nativity was the *Adoration of the Wise Men* in the Greek Chapel of Priscilla Catacomb (3rd century), where the Virgin holds the Child in her lap while the Wise Men go towards them, although there are no other complementary figures in this depiction. In Byzantine art, depictions of the Nativity were more frequent and contained more figures and details, as we can see for example in the chair of Maximianus' ivories (ca. 550). The Nativity was very popular both in the Western and the Eastern Church and both in the Early and the Late Middle Ages. Until the 12th- 13th century the Byzantine church seemed to be the main generator and exporter of iconographical models towards Western art. Nevertheless, from the Late Middle Ages onwards, Western art started to develop new original iconographical models, not only by introducing the thoughts of mystic authors such as Pseudo-Bonaventura or Saint Bridget of Sweden, but also by adding everyday life naturalistic details. In Modern Europe the influence of mystic and everyday life continued to play a central role among Nativity depictions.
- **Artistic media and techniques:** the universality of Nativity encouraged the spreading of images on all kinds of artistic media and techniques: ivory, stone or wooden sculptures, wall, panel or canvas painting, fresco, tempera or oil painting, illuminated manuscripts, xylography, metal works, textiles, mosaics, stained glass, etc. Generally speaking, there were no iconographical differences depending on the media and techniques.
- **Precedents, transformation and projection:** the Nativity of Christ seems to have been an iconographical creation of the Middle Ages. Although the birth is normally the first step in any legend of any god or hero of Antiquity, these figures were usually born in a supernatural context; as an example Dionysius was born from Zeus's leg and Athena from Zeus's head. One of the novelties of Christ's birth was linked to his human nature, which made everyday life details to be added to images, such as the crib, the animals, or the midwives.

As we previously mentioned, the 15th century did not mean the end of Nativity depictions, but on the contrary this scene had an interesting projection in Modern and Contemporary art, keeping the main iconographical features already defined in the Middle Ages.

- **Typology and related themes:** the birth of Christ was linked to the birth of his mother the Virgin Mary and his cousin John the Baptist, so that they sometimes took part in a common iconographical program (ex. Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Giotto, ca. 1305). However, there were differences among them. Mary's and John the Baptist's birth used to take place in wealthy houses while Christ's birth used to take place in a humble cave or the manger. Moreover, John the Baptist's birth used to have his father Zachary represented, who had become dumb as a punishment for his incredulity and had written his name in a little panel.

On the other hand, while Christ's Passion had numerous typological parallels among the Old Testament stories (ex. Abel, Isaac, Jonah, etc.), the Nativity does not seem to take part in the typology system.

- **Images:**

- Nativity, Chair of Maximianus, Archbishop Museum in Ravenna (Italy), ivory sculpture, ca. 550
- Nativity, Madeleine Church in Vézelay (France), stone low relief, middle of the 12th century.
- Nativity, Martorana Church in Palermo (Italy), mosaic, 12th century.
- Nativity, Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (Italy), Giotto, fresco wall painting, 1302-1305.
- Nativity, Wildungen Altarpiece (Germany), Conrad Von Soest, tempera on panel, 1394-1422.
- Nativity, Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, fol. 44v., Limbourg Brothers, Musée Condé de Chantilly (France), Ms. 65, illuminated manuscript, 1410.
- Nativity, Dijon (France), Robert Campin, oil on canvas, ca. 1420-1422.
- Nativity, Life of the Virgin and Saint Francis Altarpiece (or Bañeza Altarpiece), Nicolas Francés, Prado Museum (Spain), tempera on panel, ca. 1445-1460.
- Nativity, Portinari Triptych, Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Italy), Van der Goes, oil on panel, 1475.

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