

The Iconography of Birds Offered at the Temple After Childbirth in Byzantine Art

Bizans Sanatında Doğum Sonrası Mabede Sunulan Kuşların İkonografisi



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Abstract

The continuation of the lineage through childbirth and the role of motherhood are among the most significant attributes that sanctify a woman. By nature, the menstrual cycle and postpartum bleeding have led, especially in monotheistic religions, to the perception of a woman's blood as impure during these periods. During this time, entering the temple, participating in worship, and engaging in marital relations were considered sinful and prohibited. According to Jewish beliefs, a purification ritual had to be performed after childbirth by offering a pair of birds (doves or turtledove) at the temple.

These offerings, in accordance with Jewish traditions, were sacrificial in nature. In Christian art, depictions of this ritual are encountered in scenes such as the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The practice, rooted in Jewish tradition, continued until the crucifixion of Jesus, who was perceived as the ultimate sacrifice. In Christianity, Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross symbolically abolished animal offerings, leading to the replacement of doves with other elements.

This study examines the ritual of offering birds after childbirth and its reflections in Byzantine art. In particular, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple scenes highlights the traces of birds presented as purification offerings by women. Furthermore, specific examples reveal varying depictions of this ritual. This work aims to analyze the artistic transformation and reinterpretation of women's purification offerings, specifically bird sacrifices, within the context of Byzantine art.

Keywords: Byzantine Art, Women, Postpartum Purification, Bird Depictions, Christian Iconography

Öz

Kadının doğurarak soyu sürdürmesi ve anne olması onu kutsallaştıran en önemli özelliğidir. Doğası gereği menstrüasyon döngüsü ve doğum sonrası kanama süresi özellikle tek tanrılı dinlerde kadının kanının bu süreçte kirliliği kabul edilmesine yol açmıştır. Bu dönemde tapınağa girmesi, ibadet etmesi ve eşiyile cinsel birliktelik yaşamaması günah kabul edilip yasaklanmıştır. Yahudi inancı gereğince doğumdan sonra tapınağa bir çift kuş (güvercin ya da kumru) sunarak arınma töreni gerçekleştirilmelidir. Yahudi geleneklerine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilen bu sunular birer kurban niteliği taşımakla birlikte Hristiyan resim sanatında İsa'nın ya da Meryem'in tapınağa taktimi sahnelerinde bu ritüele dair tasvirler ile karşılaşmaktadır. Yahudi geleneğinde uygulanan bu ritüel, İsa'nın çarmıhta kendini kurban edişine kadar devam etmiştir. Ancak Hristiyanlıkta, İsa'nın nihai kurban olarak kabul edilmesi, hayvan kurbanını sembolik anlamda sonlandırmış ve güvercinlerin yerini başka unsurlara bırakmasına yol açmıştır.

Bu çalışma, doğum sonrası tapınağa adak sunma ritüelini ve bu ritüelin Bizans tasvir sanatındaki yansımalarını incelemektedir. Özellikle, İsa'nın Mabede Takdimi sahnelerinde, kadınların arınma adakları olarak sunulan kuşların izleri dikkat çekmektedir. Bununla birlikte, spesifik örneklerde bu ritüelin farklı tasvir biçimleri de görülmektedir. Çalışma, Bizans resim sanatında kadınların arınma ritüeli olan yakmalık kuş sunularını ele alarak, bu ritüelin sanatsal bağlamdaki değişim ve dönüşümünü analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bizans Sanatı, Kadın, Doğum Sonrası Arınma, Kuş Tasvirleri, Hristiyan İkonografisi

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Introduction

The ability of women to give birth has historically been regarded as more than a mere biological distinction; it has been imbued with socio-cultural meanings. This phenomenon has led to the female figure assuming diverse roles, both sacred and societal. In the evaluation of archaeological data available to us today, scholars have initially debated the existence of a "mother goddess" model for the Paleolithic period, particularly through the lens of female figurines from this era (Delporte, 1979; Dixon & Dixon, 2011, p. 1-11; Kolankaya Bostancı, 2014, p.191-204; Maktal Canko, 2020, p.129-142). According to these researchers, fertility has held both biological and spiritual significance for human communities since the early Paleolithic period, leading to the emergence of concepts like the "Mother Goddess." However, more recent archaeological findings reveal that this perception was not universally applicable across all periods and societies. In many cultures, patriarchal structures constrained the position of women. Notably, the recently discovered Neolithic sites of Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe in Anatolia provide the earliest known evidence of such patriarchal systems (Ayaz, Çelik, & Çakmak, 2022, p. 122-142; Karul, 2021, p.21-31).

However, the fertility capacity of women has often been central to many religious and ritual practices. For instance, in the Ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia, postpartum women left offerings in temples as an expression of gratitude to the gods (Stol, 2016, p.152-155). These rituals were performed to ensure the protection of the mother and child, with offerings including ceramic objects, figurines, and food items. Similarly, in ancient Greece, offerings dedicated to the childbirth goddesses Eileithyia or Artemis were an integral part of postpartum rituals (Wise, 2007, p. 71-100). Archaeological findings reveal female figures and votive bowls present in various sacred sites, emphasizing their ritual significance. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, childbirth is associated with both sanctity and, through the concept of "original sin," a spiritual burden. This duality influenced the development of postpartum purification and reintegration rituals from the early periods of Christianity. In the Jewish tradition, as reflected in the Hebrew Bible, practices such as the dedication of newborn male children to the temple and the offering of sacrifices following the ritual of circumcision are particularly notable (Hetto, 2023a, p. 134-142). In particular, the gifts presented in scenes of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple highlight the continuity of this ritual in Christian iconography.

In the Byzantine period, the reflections of these rituals in artworks are particularly noteworthy. Depictions associated with women's postpartum offerings establish a strong connection with religious and social practices. In this context, bird figures presented as offerings hold a special place in Christian iconography, serving both as symbols of purification and as mediators of sanctity. This study will examine the role of bird figures within the iconographic and ritual contexts of women's postpartum rituals.

Women, Birth and Beliefs

A woman's most significant physiological attribute, the ability to give birth, is portrayed in the Abrahamic religions as a process tainted by original sin. Following this first transgression, the greatest punishment bestowed upon humanity is, without doubt, the state of mortality (Genesis 3:23). However, alongside this, it is observed that additional punishments were imposed on women, and all women born into the world were condemned to the same punishment (Genesis 3:16). In response to a woman's seductiveness and sinfulness, God imposed the punishment of painful childbirth upon her (Genesis 3:16). In parallel, the woman's menstrual cycle, as part of the punishment of childbirth, has been regarded as a symbol of sin and impurity within Judaism and Christianity. The perception of this

cycle, which enables a woman's fertility, as impure is explicitly stated in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic beliefs, and this attitude has formed the foundation for demeaning approaches toward women (Leviticus. 15:19; Leviticus. 15:24; Say. 19:11; Qur'an 2:222).

This is clearly articulated in Leviticus 15:19, which states: "When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her menstrual cycle will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening." This passage contributed to the increasing abstraction of a woman's position within society, particularly from Antiquity through the Middle Ages, due to this special condition (Englard-Schaffer, 1983, p. 132-145). The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived between 20 BCE and 50 CE, described a woman's life as one of seclusion, emphasizing that, beyond this special cycle, a woman should live isolated from society within the confines of the home (D'Angelo, 2007, p.63-88; Taylor, 2006, p.173-361). Essentially, all these views that affect a woman's life are considered as a consequence of Eve's sin.

This situation is also explained by the woman's inability to play an active role in the continuity of the lineage. Even within the Jewish tradition, which traces lineage through the mother, women have been viewed as having flaws and deficiencies that prevent them from ensuring the continuation of the family line (Berman, 1973, p.5-28). One of the clearest examples of this situation is the account in the Torah of Lot's relations with his daughters (Genesis 19:35). This narrative clearly illustrates a woman's inability to ensure the continuation of the family line through the male. Lot's daughters made him drunk and engaged with him, resulting in the birth of male children. This act may appear to be a way of securing the continuation of the family line. However, it also underscores the seductive and sinful role attributed to women, a role that has persisted since the original sin. In fact, this narrative clearly shows that, once again, the woman deceived and seduced the man after the original sin.

Therefore, throughout the Ancient and Medieval periods, particularly within Jewish and Christian traditions, women were considered ritually unclean during their menstrual cycles and postpartum periods. According to these beliefs, a woman who gave birth to a male child was regarded as ritually impure for a total of forty days: seven days during menstruation and an additional thirty-three days following childbirth. During this period, her participation in temple or church rituals was strictly forbidden (Leviticus 12:1-8). If a woman gave birth to a female child, the duration of this prohibition was doubled (Leviticus 12:5). Indeed, the concept of impurity attributed to women during this period, which is extended in the case of giving birth to a female child, is clearly reflected in these laws. In other words, these laws implicitly suggest that giving birth to a female child is viewed negatively. Furthermore, according to the Torah's laws, women were required to offer a sacrifice after the prescribed period following childbirth in order to reintegrate into the temple cult (Leviticus 12:6-8). Thus, it is emphasized that in order for a woman to return to worship, she must perform an atoning sacrifice (Hetto, 2023a, p. 131-142). In effect, a woman is obligated to pay the price of her impurity at every stage of her life.

Birds as Atonement Offerings and Their Iconographic Development

Birds, which acquired iconographic significance through their association with the Torah and the Bible in Christian art, held a prominent position in Byzantine art, serving a variety of purposes. In this context, bird figures in Byzantine art can be categorized and analyzed based on the locations of their depictions and the symbolic meanings they convey (Hetto, 2023a, p. 131-142). Among these categories, doves and turtledoves occupy a particularly significant place, especially in scenes of temple offerings.

Before examining the iconography of the dove and its

representations, it is essential to briefly review the rituals associated with women's offerings in the temple after childbirth. This tradition of offerings was influenced by the ancient customs of Mesopotamia and was transmitted to Christianity through Judaism. The following directive is explicitly stated in the Torah: "When the days of a woman who has given birth to a boy or a girl are completed, she shall bring a one-year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a pair of doves or two young turtledove as a sin offering, and present them to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." (Torah, Leviticus 12:6-8).

This statement indicates that women were required to make an offering in the temple after childbirth as part of purification rituals. Although the nature of the offerings varied according to the economic status of the women, burnt offerings, in particular, held significant importance. This practice should be regarded as a reflection of Judaism's deeply rooted and enduring tradition.

In Jewish beliefs and traditions, this form of offering, whose scope, content, and practice are detailed in the Torah, has been observed by Jews since ancient times (Watts, 2006, p. 125-137). As an expression of devotion and commitment to God, burnt offerings have never lost their significance in Jewish religious practice. Among the earliest examples of burnt offerings are Abel's sacrifice, through which he gained God's favor by offering the best of what he had, and Noah's thanksgiving sacrifice following the flood (Torah, Genesis, 4:4; Torah, Genesis, 8:20; Korucu Yağız, 2019, p. 201-203). In the story of Manoah and his wife, the burnt offering also appears as a symbolic element (Torah, Judges 13:19-23). When evaluated in light of the information provided in the Torah, it demonstrates that the offering is based on the principle of voluntariness.

Although large livestock, such as cattle or bulls, were generally preferred for burnt offerings, it is noteworthy that birds were recommended as burnt offerings after childbirth. The origin of this practice can be traced back to the Torah, specifically to Noah's sacrifice after the flood, where he offered birds on the altar. Genesis 8:20 states: "Noah built an altar to the Divine, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar." This narrative provided the foundation for the use of birds as burnt offerings, which gradually became more widespread (see Fig. 1.) Additionally, Leviticus 1:3-10 provides the following instruction: "If someone's offering is a burnt offering from the birds, they are to offer a dove or a pigeon." This passage highlights the specific types of birds to be offered, indicating that the details of these offerings were clearly defined. The preference for birds, especially in post-childbirth rituals, also suggests that such offerings offered an economic and practical alternative.



Fig.1. The Sacrifice of Noah, Church of San Marco, 13th century, Veneto-Byzantine School. (<https://www.mediastorehouse.com/fine-art-finder/artists/byzantine-school/life-noah-noah-offers-thanks-altar-22462314.html>)

¹The dove was also interpreted as a symbol of fertility in early Chinese mythology. In addition to this interpretation in Eastern beliefs, it is evident that this bird shares similar iconographic traits in many different societies across various geographical regions. (Bruce, 2008, p. 61; Lewis & Llewellyn-Jones,

The choice of doves and turtledove as burnt offerings becomes clearer when considering their deep iconographic interpretations, which help explain why these two birds were selected over others. Both of these birds are symbolically associated with love, compassion, and peace. Starting with the dove, we encounter a long and rich iconographic history.

Since nearly the earliest periods of human history, the dove has been associated with purity, peace, and beauty. In many Pagan religions, it was linked with goddesses, particularly within the contexts of love, beauty, and sexuality¹. This interpretation led to the depiction of the dove as a symbolic figure in various texts and representations, associated with the goddess Ishtar in Sumerian mythology, Aphrodite in Greek mythology, and the famous Semiramis, known for her beauty, in Syrian myths. In this context, doves have been symbolically linked with feminine power for an extended period, and as a symbolic figure, they have been depicted in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern regions from early times (Hetto, 2023a, p. 277).

With the advent of Judaism, the first of the monotheistic religions, the dove came to symbolize not only purity and cleanliness but also peace (Baldock, 1990, p. 92; Bruce, 2008, p. 61). In the Torah, the first encounter with this iconographic interpretation of the dove is found in the story of Noah's flood. Genesis 8:11 states, "The dove returned to him in the evening, and in her beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the waters had receded from the earth." With this narrative, the dove became a symbol of peace between God and humanity. Thus, in depictions related to the Torah, the dove is seen as a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation. Additionally, in Judaism, the dove also appears as a sacrificial animal offered by women to the temple after childbirth (see Fig.2.a).



Fig. 2. (a.) The dove returning to Noah on the ark, Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, 3rd century. (https://www.didatticarte.it/Blog/?page_id=23258) (b.) The Annunciation, 12th century, Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, Palermo (<https://www.christianiconography.info/sicily/annunciationMartorana.html>) (c.) Ravenna Arian Baptistery, Dome Mosaic, Detail of the Baptism of Christ, 5th century (Stierlin, Stierlin, & Buchet, 2014, p. 84).

When it comes to Christianity, the dove is found to be the most frequently mentioned bird in the Bible compared to other species (Hetto, 2023a, p. 278). In Christian art, depictions of the dove often appear alongside the cycles of Christ and Mary, as well as in scenes selected from the life stories of various religious figures.² Perhaps the most unique iconographic interpretation of the dove can be found in the Annunciation scenes. In Byzantine art, the dove is frequently depicted in scenes such as the Annunciation to Anna or the Annunciation to Mary, where it is often associated with the Holy Spirit (see Fig. 2.b). However, beyond its representation as the Holy Spirit, the primary iconographic interpretation of the dove in these scenes is that of the announcement of good news. Just as the dove, returning to the ark with an olive branch after the flood, heralded life, it also takes on the role of a messenger of life (birth) in this context, acquiring a specific iconographic meaning (Hetto, 2023a, p. 278).

Another interpretation of the dove in Christian iconography is its association with the Holy Spirit. The only instance in the biblical texts

2018, p. 254)

² For further iconographic details on doves, see also. Poeschke, 1972.

where the dove is explicitly described as the Holy Spirit occurs during the baptism of Jesus. As stated in the Gospel of Matthew, "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). As can be understood from this passage, the Holy Spirit is clearly depicted in the silhouette of a dove. In Byzantine art, although the Holy Spirit is represented in various forms, the most common depiction is that of a dove (see Fig.2.c). Apart from this dove interpretation, the Holy Spirit is also depicted as a cloud in the scenes of the Metamorphosis/Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36) and as fire in the Pentecost scenes (Acts 2:1-5; Cavarnos 2001, s. 63)³.

Another type of burnt offering, which women presented as a dedication to the temple after childbirth, is the turtledove. There is limited information available regarding the iconography of the turtledove. Similar to the dove, the turtledove appears as a symbol of purity and devotion in the history of world religions, and it is a bird species that has been associated with women in many belief systems.

For example, in Hindu mythology, the turtledove appears as a symbol of the love attributed to women in creation myths. In Albanian mythology, the turtledove is depicted as a being that women transform into (Bonney, 2000, p. 64). Apart from its associations with women, turtledoves, particularly in the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern hinterland, have been interpreted as symbols of mother goddesses, much like doves. For instance, in Crete and Canaan, sculptures dedicated to goddesses or temple priestesses often depict the turtledove as a sacred source of inspiration (Stone, 2000, p. 235). In Greek mythology, this bird has gained significance within the context of beauty, love, and loyalty. In this regard, it has become one of the symbolic animals of goddesses, especially those like Athena, who embody sacred virginity (Olgunlu, 2010, p. 75).

In pre-Christian Judaism, the turtledove, which came to symbolize purification and forgiveness, was a type of offering brought by women to the temple after childbirth, similar to the dove. In this context, its offering to the temple and the associated rituals share the same characteristics as those of the dove. However, compared to the dove, turtledoves are depicted much less frequently in Byzantine painting.

Depictions of Birds as Offerings to the Temple in Byzantine Painting

In the Byzantine world, one of the rituals that developed following childbirth was the ritual of presentation at the temple and the subsequent return to worship. This practice was shaped particularly by narratives found in sacred texts. In Byzantine painting, it is evident that a specific compositional scheme was developed based on these narratives. Among the scenes depicting significant moments in the lives of Jesus and Mary, the "Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" stands out with its extensive visual repertoire. The Gospel of Luke provides a detailed explanation of this ritual, serving as the iconographic foundation for this scene (Luke 2:22-40).

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary's purification ritual and the presentation of Jesus at the temple are described in detail. The recognition of Jesus as the Messiah by two elderly individuals, Simeon and Anna, is also part of this narrative. However, the other three Gospels (Matthew,

Mark, and John) do not mention this event. Luke's account connects this ritual to certain Jewish laws referenced in the Old Testament (Exodus 13:2, 12-15; Leviticus 12:2-8).

In the visual depictions of this scene, the gestures exchanged between the priest and Mary are frequently emphasized. Jesus is portrayed either in Mary's arms or standing alone on the ground. Behind Mary stands her betrothed, Joseph, who is often depicted holding a pair of birds. These birds symbolize the offerings brought to the temple as a purification sacrifice. In some scenes, the birds appear in the hands of a different figure instead of Joseph, reflecting variations in iconographic representation.

An intriguing transformation in the composition of this scene is observed in medieval and later European painting, specifically in the depictions of the Presentation at the Temple. In these scenes, the figure of the infant Jesus is brought into a central position within the composition. A particularly notable element is the depiction of the infant Jesus holding a bird in each hand. The representation of these birds, originally offered by women as purification sacrifices in the temple, in the hands of Jesus reflects a distinct iconographic evolution. However, as the scope of this study is limited to examples from the Byzantine period, European painting will not be addressed in this context.⁴

Returning to Byzantine painting, bird figures prominently appear in scenes related to the "Presentation of Jesus at the Temple." These scenes generally display a certain harmony and a partially standardized composition, which is evident upon examining various examples within Byzantine art. In this context, bird figures are often depicted in the background as subtle details behind the central figures of Jesus, Mary, and the priest. However, while some presentation scenes completely omit bird figures, those that do include such representations are notably abundant, demonstrating their significant presence in the visual repertoire.

In most of these depictions, sacrificial offerings represented as a pair of white doves are prominently shown being brought to the temple in the hands of specific individuals. However, an early and significant example, the "Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" scene in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, presents a depiction that diverges from this classical compositional arrangement. In this instance, a pair of doves and a pair of turtledoves, brought as offerings to the temple, are depicted directly at the entrance of the temple, in front of the architectural structure behind the priest (see Fig.3). The placement of the doves not in the hands of Mary and Joseph but directly at the temple's doorway stands out as an intriguing iconographic innovation. This arrangement represents an interpretation that departs from the classical iconographic composition of the scene and carries a symbolic significance emphasizing the temple's doorway.

³ The depiction of the dove frequently encountered in these representations gaining the meaning of the Holy Spirit, particularly from the early Byzantine period, led to objections from religious figures. It is especially evident that key proponents of the Monophysite movement repeatedly rejected this depiction. During the debates surrounding the concept of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the Trinity) established at the First Council of Nicaea, Monophysite clergy argued that the dove should not be depicted as the Holy Spirit. They contended that it was wrong to personify the Holy Spirit, who is above all, in such a physical form (Mango, 1972, p. 43-44; Maguire, 2012, p. 33). Referencing events in the Bible, they maintained that the Holy Spirit only took the form of a dove once and that this did not correspond to the true appearance of the Holy Spirit. However, despite these debates, the iconographic interpretation of the dove as the Holy Spirit, especially in its depiction as gliding from above to below, could not be prevented in Christian and Byzantine iconography. The white dove, depicted gliding downward in many

scenes or compositions, gained symbolic meaning as the Holy Spirit, not just in the Baptism of Christ scenes.

Apart from these three distinct iconographic interpretations, the dove was also used in specific associations. For instance, in artistic depictions, a dove emerging from the mouth of a dying person symbolized the soul, while its inclusion in representations of the Virgin Mary or certain saints linked it to spiritual inspiration (Clement, 1871, p. 4-5). In this context, the doves associated with various religious figures could be seen as a proof of the sanctity of the individuals they accompanied. In addition to the interpretation of sanctity, the presence of doves also alluded to the chastity and purity of these figures (Clement, 1871, p. 11).

⁴ For detailed information on this subject, see. Key & Inanan, 2020



Fig.3. The Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Detail of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple Scene (<https://www.alamy.com/stock-image-fifth-century-mosaics-in-the-basilica-di-santa-maria-maggiore-rome-162547845.html>)

It is believed that the birds in early Christian and Byzantine art represent the souls of the believers (Cirlot, 2001, p. 28; Hetto, Koroğlu, & Çorağan, 2022, p. 212; Hetto, 2023a, p. 271; Hetto, 2023b, p. 271). In this context, the temple, as the place where God's words reach people, forms an important iconographic detail.⁵ In this scene, the two doves preparing to enter the temple through its door symbolize Mary's devout nature and the vow accepted by God in terms of their representation. Furthermore, the depiction of the doves and pigeons as freely roaming suggests that the birds were included in the scene as a reflection of the Old Testament tradition. This is because, considering the theological debates of the early centuries of Christianity, Mary's pregnancy as a divine gift from God and her giving birth to Jesus should not be regarded as a situation requiring atonement from a theological perspective.

A similar example with an iconographic meaning can be found in a mosaic uncovered during excavations at the ruins of the church known today as Balatlar Church, located in the center of Sinop, in the northern part of Anatolia. This mosaic, dating to the 6th century, is a floor mosaic (see Fig. 4). According to a Greek dedication inscription found in the mosaic, it was commissioned as an offering to the church by a prominent aristocratic woman of the city named Pelagia. In the center of the mosaic, a pair of doves are depicted eating at a bird feeder that symbolizes the church. One of the doves is reaching its head toward an opening in the feeder. These birds, by consuming the seeds that represent God's word, symbolize people who take in and internalize God's divine message⁶. The composition of the mosaic suggests that it represents an offering made after childbirth. Similar to the example in Santa Maria Maggiore Church, the birds are not depicted in the hands of a human figure but directly at the threshold of the temple. This characteristic is notable both iconographically and symbolically. Additionally, the white dove depicted flying down toward the feeder in the Pelagia mosaic represents the Holy Spirit, indicating that the scene is a depiction of a sacred moment. Another white dove, located in the upper left part of the composition, is added to the scene as a symbol of a woman's innocence and purity, frequently found in annunciation scenes (Hetto, 2023b, p. 280). The manner in which the composition is presented is significant in terms of how it handles well-known subjects with an entirely new compositional arrangement in Byzantine art.



Fig.4. Sinop Balatlar Church Excavation, 6th Century, Pelagia Mosaic Detail (Hetto, 2023a, fig.5)

One of the significant features of the Pelagia mosaic in the Sinop Balatlar Church is that it represents an offering made by a woman after childbirth, as part of the ritual prescribed by the Torah. As mentioned earlier, according to the Torah laws, women were required to wait for a period after childbirth, according to their strength, and once this period had passed, they were expected to make a donation to the temple and offer burnt offerings (see Fig.5). The Pelagia mosaic, as can be inferred from the iconography of its composition, represents such an offering made by an aristocratic woman from Sinop after childbirth. Not only the depiction of doves and turtledoves in the central composition but also the various bird representations placed within the geometric patterns of the mosaic panel show the birds dedicated to the church (Hetto, 2023a, 131-142).



Fig.5. Sinop Balatlar Church Excavation, 6th Century, Pelagia Mosaic (Hetto, 2023a, fig.3).

As is well known, in Christianity, the act of Jesus sacrificing himself on the Cross (or, in other words, his self-sacrifice) permanently abolished the need for animal sacrifices (Moscicke, 2018, p. 66). By sacrificing himself, Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial duty, meaning that Christians no longer needed to offer animal sacrifices. As a result, instead of the bird offerings typically seen in the Torah laws,

⁵ For detailed information regarding the shape of the temple, the position of the birds, and the identity of the other figures added to the scene, see. Grabar, 1936, p. 216-217; Warland, 2003, p. 127-141.

⁶ In one of His parables, Jesus compares the word of God to seeds. For this narrative, see Hetto, 2023a, p. 134; Hetto, 2023b, p. 281.

symbolizing burnt offerings, the Pelagia mosaic presents a scene where the donor, a woman who remains faithful to Christian teachings while also adopting aspects of Torah law, creates a mosaic panel that reflects this dual approach. This mosaic can be interpreted as a way of fulfilling the ritual of offering a bird to the church without shedding blood, in accordance with both Christian doctrine and the Torah. This aspect should be considered an important detail in the study of both Byzantine art and Christian rituals.



Fig. 6. Menologion of Basil II, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple Scene, Vat.gr.1613, 11th century (https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613/)

After these early examples in Byzantine painting, especially from the 11th century onwards, Temple Presentation scenes, in which birds are typically depicted as offerings presented by Mary's betrothed, Joseph, are frequently encountered in Byzantine art and follow a specific iconographic pattern. One clear example of this is the Menologion of Basil II (see Fig. 6). In this example, one of Joseph's hands is covered by his garment, while the other hand is shown openly. The depiction of figures surrounding sacred figures with their hands covered by their garments or their hands shown in a closed position is a common motif in Byzantine art, symbolizing respect and humility. In this example, Joseph's hands are also depicted in this manner, conveying the same meaning. The pair of white doves he holds represents the burnt offerings Mary presented at the temple.

Depictions of these sacrificial birds are also found in several examples, including the Karabaş Church in the Kayseri Soğanlı Valley, dated to the 11th century, the Gümüşler Monastery in Niğde, the Palatine Chapel in Palermo from the 12th century, the Santa Maria Basilica in Trastevere, Rome from the 13th century, and an icon from the Saint Catherine Monastery in Sinai, also dated to the 13th century (see Fig. 7). In all of these examples, the birds presented by Joseph are held in his hands, which are covered by his garment. In each case, the birds depicted as white are understood to be doves. The more frequent depiction of a white dove, as opposed to a turtledove, in this ritual is particularly noteworthy. The white dove, in line with the iconographic meanings discussed earlier, likely had a more prominent role in these scenes. This is because, in addition to its other symbolic connotations, the dove also represents Mary's purity, chastity, and divine blessing.

In various examples of post-Byzantine painting, it can be observed that the birds held directly by Joseph are now depicted inside a basket or cage. This shift may be considered a trend of the period. However, this is a question that can only be answered after careful thought and

extensive research.



Fig. 7. a. Karabaş Church in Kayseri, Detail of the Presentation in the Temple Scene of Jesus (https://www.instagram.com/gezsen_kayseri), b. Santa Maria Basilica in Trastevere, Rome, Detail of the Presentation in the Temple Scene of Jesus (<https://corvinus.nl/2016/01/11/rome-santa-maria-in-trastevere/>), c. Gümüşler Monastery in Niğde, Presentation in the Temple Scene of Jesus (<https://arkeofili.com/>)

Conclusion

The depiction of women as the central figures of sin in religious history, since the first sin, reveals a situation in which their sin is perpetually present. However, this situation does not seem to be fully resolved even with the atonement brought by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross for humanity. As is understood from the holy texts, women have had to repay the guilt of the original sin with every newborn child. Therefore, women have been subjected to a series of purification rituals after childbirth. Among these rituals, the bird offering, which particularly appears in visual arts, reflects a significant moment in the purification practice of women.

In art historical research, the focus is often placed on the person being offered to the temple, namely Jesus or the Virgin Mary, during these offering scenes⁷. However, another crucial detail tends to be overlooked. The primary perception that forms the focal point of these scenes is the person being presented at the temple. However, in the standardized presentation scenes of the temple in Byzantine art, the artists or patrons who created these depictions have often left the background elements of the woman's purification and her offering to God in the background. This detail is symbolized by a pair of doves or turtledoves in the temple offering scenes of Byzantine art. Even though these birds find their place as the faint heroes of the standard scene in Byzantine art, sometimes, as seen in Santa Maria Maggiore, they are added as symbols freely wandering in the scenes on their own. What is even more interesting is that an early Byzantine mosaic

⁷ In the scenes of the Presentation of Mary at the Temple, the offering of birds is generally not depicted. Instead, in Byzantine representations, Mary is not shown as a young virgin child but rather as a miniature adult, emphasizing that she is already filled with grace and virtue. Since these scenes primarily focus on Mary's chastity and purity, the offering made by her mother, Anna, is typically not included. This is because, as previously mentioned, in Jewish tradition, the ritual of temple presentation and sacrificial offering was to be performed within a specific timeframe. However, Mary's presentation at

the temple occurred outside this prescribed period and represents a distinct act of dedication. Unlike the ritual offerings made by women after childbirth for purification, Mary's presentation signifies the consecration of a pure and untouched virgin to the temple. Therefore, it should be considered separately not only from these postnatal rituals but also from the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, which belongs to a different theological and ritualistic context.

found in the excavations of the Balatlar Church presents this concept of offering, drawn from the laws of the Torah, in a Christian synthesis. In Byzantine art, the birds, which have always appeared as burnt offerings, are given a new Christian identity and a new breath with this example. This is one of the unique examples where, with the symbolism of the offering at the center of the composition and the depiction of birds throughout the panel, an offering of birds without shedding blood is immortalized through painting. At this point, it is clearly seen how an unshakable Christian identity, which also absorbs the laws of the Torah, integrates the burnt offering after childbirth into the order of the new religion.

In this context, doves and turtledoves, symbols of purity, cleanliness, love, and peace, once again appear in the depictions as intermediary figures in women's salvation. These birds, once again, are closely associated with women and their rituals, symbolizing their connection to women's lives and their roles in rituals.

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