

# THE BED IN IMAGES OF THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE 14<sup>TH</sup> AND 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES A Dogmatic Symbol According to Greek-Eastern Patrology

EL LECHO EN IMÁGENES DE LA ANUNCIACIÓN DE LOS SIGLOS XIV Y XV:  
UN SÍMBOLO DOGMÁTICO SEGÚN LA PATROLOGÍA  
GRECO-ORIENTAL

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**ABSTRACT** • The purpose of this article<sup>1</sup> is to interpret the deep doctrinal meanings underlying the bed that appear in the symbolic depiction of some images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries. To do so, we adopt two complementary methodological strategies, based on comparative analysis. In essence, from the outset we analyze an abundant *corpus* of explanatory texts by Fathers of the Greek-Eastern Church when they interpret some quotations from the Old Testament that include metaphorical terms such as *thalamus*, *Sponsus*, and *Sponsa*; second, we analyze twelve images from the Annunciation of the period that include a bed. Based on the fact that these Greek-Eastern Church Fathers unanimously consider that these metaphorical expressions signify the dogmas of the human incarnation of God the Son in the womb of the Virgin, and, as a consequence, also the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, we conclude that the bed included in these Annunciations is an eloquent visual symbol or metaphor for both dogmas.

**KEYWORDS:** Christian Iconography; Medieval Art; Annunciation; Christ's Incarnation; Virginal Divine Motherhood.

**RESUMEN** • Este artículo tiene el propósito de interpretar los profundos significados doctrinales subyacentes en el lecho que aparece en la escenografía de algunas imágenes de la Anunciación de los siglos XIV y XV. Para ello adoptamos dos estrategias metodológicas complementarias, basadas en análisis comparativos: de entrada analizamos un abundante *corpus* de textos exegéticos de Padres de la Iglesia Greco-oriental cuando interpretan algunos textos del Antiguo Testamento que incluyen términos metafóricos tales como *thalamus*, *Sponsus* y *Sponsa*; en segundo lugar, analizamos doce imágenes de la Anunciación del período que incluyen un lecho. Basándonos en el hecho de que dichos Padres greco-orientales consideran unánimemente que esas expresiones metafóricas significan los dogmas de la encarnación humana de Dios Hijo en el vientre de la Virgen, y, como consecuencia, también la virginal maternidad divina de María, concluimos que el lecho incluido en esas Anunciations es un elocuente símbolo o metáfora visual de ambos dogmas.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Iconografía cristiana; arte medieval; Anunciación; Encarnación de Cristo; Virginal maternidad divina.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the iconography of the Annunciation to Mary experienced a broad and profound evolution throughout the centuries. In the Late-Antiquity and during practically all the High Middle Ages, the stage composition of the Annunciation was straightforward and bare, with the simple representation of the two protagonists, the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, in suggested solitary dialogue, in the almost complete absence of scenography, which used to be reduced to some piece of furniture (recliner, seat) or some synthetic architectural element, in the metonymic representation of a house or town. During those long centuries, the two characters were sometimes cut out isolated on an abstract background, such as a homogeneous color in the frescoes, or the brilliant gold leaf in paintings on wood.

The artistic representations of the Annunciation were gradually enriched with architectural elements and furniture, until reaching an extreme complexity in the Late Middle Ages, especially in the 14th and 15th centuries. In fact, in these last two centuries, thanks to the growing appreciation of the underworld, the scene of the Annunciation was structured on a realistic representation of houses, furniture, domestic utensils, everyday objects, clothing, characters, landscapes and even episodes of the urban life of the moment.

Now, in the increasingly complex and detailed images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries, some narrative details are almost always included –such as a stem of lilies,<sup>2</sup> a prayer book, a temple-shaped house,<sup>3</sup> a beam of rays of light descending, with the dove of the Holy Spirit, towards Mary–, whose own symbolism has been highlighted, with more or less success, by numerous experts. These Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries also very frequently incorporate a bed, which, as we will explain later, is an eloquent symbol that is invested with deep, rich dogmatic meanings. However, this symbolic bed in the Annunciation has gone unnoticed by many iconographers and art historians, and, when some mention it, they either consider it a mere compositional or decorative detail without significant value, or they interpret its meaning gratuitously, without documentary basis.

For this reason, in the current article we propose to iconographically analyze the symbol of the bed in the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries, using two complementary methodological strategies: a) In the first instance, and above all, we will proceed to analyze an abundant *corpus* of exegetical texts through which numerous Greek-Eastern Fathers between the 3rd and 9th centuries dogmatically interpreted some metaphorical expressions such as the *thalamus*, *Sponsus*, *Sponsa* or similar terms alluding to married coexistence. b) Second, we will iconographically analyze a select set of pictorial images of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries that include a bed, to try to show that, based on the multisecular doctrinal tradition of Christian Fathers and theologians, that bed has outstanding symbolic-doctrinal value, as a metaphor for the supernatural God the Son's incarnation in the immaculate womb of Mary, and, therefore, also a metaphor for the virginal divine motherhood of Mary.

Furthermore, this article is complemented by another, in which we have already interpreted the same symbolic meaning of the bed in other representations of the Annunciation

2. We have studied the symbolic meaning of the lily stem in the Annunciations of the XIV and XV centuries in the following papers: Salvador-González, 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2015c.

3. We have studied the symbolism of the temple-shaped house in the following articles (Salvador-González, 2020a and 2020e).

in light of the exegetical comments that many Latin Church Fathers and theologians made on these same metaphorical expressions for more than a millennium (4th-15th centuries) (J. M. Salvador-González, 2019a).

### **GREEK-EASTERN FATHERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF THE *THALAMUS* (3RD-9TH CENTURIES)**

During our constant and accurate research into the primary sources of Christian doctrine, we found, with great surprise, an abundant pile of exegetical comments by Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches on sentences from the Old Testament that include the concept *thalamus* or other terms related to it, like *Sponsus* or *Sponsa*. In most cases, these exegetes take as their basis for reflection the sentence of the Psalms «*in sole posuit tabernaculum suum et ipse tamquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam*».<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, they also refer to the *Song of Songs*, attracted by the constant loving praise that the Bridegroom or Husband (*Sponsus*) and the Bride or Wife (*Sponsa*) exchange with each other.

It is good to specify, from the outset, that in Latin the concept *thalamus* means both «nuptial bed» (or simply «bed») as well as «nuptial room». And it is to that double meaning that the consulted Christian writers constantly refer to.

What we offer below is only a selection of exegetical texts by Greek-Eastern Fathers and theologians on the topic under analysis. As a necessary clarification, we specify that, to facilitate their transcription, the textual quotations that we present from these authors in the current article are extracted from their Latin translation given by Jacques-Paul Migne in his *Patrologia Graeca*.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of the 3rd century or in the first decades of the 4th, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260/265-c. 339/340) comments on two Old Testament sentences to prove the supernatural God the Son's incarnation in Mary's womb: referring back to the Old Testament sentence according to which God «put his tabernacle in the Sun», Eusebius says that the Sun gave his consent to the divinity in which he placed his seat as his tabernacle, in the sense that he took from the Virgin Mary a human body, which was like the tabernacle of divine power that remained in it.<sup>6</sup> That is why Eusebius concluded with another Old Testament sentence to assure that, incarnating himself in human nature, God the Son is «like the husband who comes out of his bridal bed; and he was glad like a giant to run the road».<sup>7</sup>

Six or seven decades later St. Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 310 / 320-403) ponders with admiration the marvelous miracle that occurs in heaven by the fact that the Father of the centuries, God, is at the same time the son of a woman, Mary, because the bridal bed of the

4. «In the sun he set up his tent / And he, as a husband coming out of his bedroom, / exulted like a giant to run the road» (Ps 18,6-7).

5. To facilitate the writing in our alphabet, we will quote the texts of the Greek-Eastern Fathers in our footnotes according to the Latin translation given by Jacques-Paul Migne in his *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*. This collection will be identified with the abbreviation PG.

6. «'in sole posuit tabernaculum suum'; sol deitatem innuit, in qua sedem suam et quasi tabernaculum posuit, vel quod ex Virgine sumpsit corpus, quod quasi tabernaculum erat divinae potestatis in eo permanentis» (Eusebius Caesariensis, *Ecllogae propheticae. Liber II, 10; PG 22, 1.105*).

7. «Hic est 'tamquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo; exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam'» (Ibid.).

Virgin begets the Son of God, Christ, God the husband, and because the Lord of angels has become the child of a Virgin.<sup>8</sup>

In the first half of the 5th century the patriarch Proclus of Constantinople (c. 390 / 395-446), in an oratory piece in honor of Mary, describes the Virgin Mother of God as «the pristine treasure of virginity, the spiritual paradise of the second Adam [Christ], the factory of the union of the [two] natures [human and divine]», «the bridal bed in which the Word of God married to himself the flesh [the human body], the animated bush of nature that the fire<sup>9</sup> of the divine birth does not consume». <sup>10</sup> In another writing in praise of Mary, Proclus states that she is the Bride of the *Song of Songs*, who received reverently in her thalamus (that is, in her womb) the Bridegroom (Christ), and is also the tabernacle of the witness of which the one the true man Jesus, being God, came out after staying there for nine months as an embryo.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in another text of Marian praise, Proclus says that we venerate Mary because she has been made mother and slave, clouds and bridal bed, and the ark of the Lord: she was made mother because she gave birth to the One who wanted to be born; slave, by her nature and grace; clouds, for she conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth preserving her virginity; it was turned into a bridal bed since the divine Word lived in it as in a matrimonial bed; and it was made an ark, not because it carries the law, but because it gave birth to the Lawgiver himself (God).<sup>12</sup>

Approximately a century later Leontius of Byzantium (c. 485-c.543), in a treaty against the Nestorians, begins by affirming that we praise the Virgin Mary, recognizing her more and more as the true Mother of God, because in her and from her the Word of God, after marrying the flesh (the body or human nature), came out as the husband of his bridal bed.<sup>13</sup> Leontius then assures that the divine Word came out spiritually with the power of his flesh (human body) through the untouched vulva of the Virgin at birth, in the same way, that he was not compressed when entering without flesh through the vulva when being

8. «*Stupendum miraculum in coelis, mulieris filius, qui et ipsius, et saeculorum est pater. Stupendum miraculum in coelis, thalamus virginis, habens filium Dei, Deum sponsum Christum. Stupendum miraculum in coelis, Dominus Angelorum, infans virginis factus est*» (Epiphanius, *De laudibus B. Virginis Mariae*. En *Sancti Patris nostri Epiphanius Constantiae, sive Salaminis in Cypro Episcopi, Operum omnium. Tomus Secundus*, Parisiis, Michaelis Sonni, Claudii Morelli et Sebastiani Croamoiisy, 1622, p. 295. <<https://books.google.es/books?id=7SFUAAAACAAJ&pg=PA295&dq=Thalamus+virginis&hl=es&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiaeOGs7TgAhUE1-AKHTM1BA04KBD0AQhAMAQ#v=onepage&q=Thalamus%20virginis&f=false>> 11-2-2019).

9. Proclus means here the burning bush of Moses, which was not consumed. (Ex 3,1-6).

10. «*Hic nos quippe modo, sancta Dei Genitrix ac Virgo Maria in unum coegit: impollutus ille virginitatis thesaurus, spiritalis secundi Adami paradus, unionis naturarum officina, salutaris commercii nundinae, thalamus, in quo sibi Verbum carnem desponsavit, animatus naturae rubus, quem divini partus ignis non combussit*». (Proclus Constantinopolitanus. *Oratio I. Laudatio in sanctissimam Dei genitricem Mariam*; PG 65, 682).

11. «*Haec, pulchra Canticorum Sponsa, quae veterem exiit tunicam, lavitque legales pedes, ac Sponsum immortalem in quo ipsius thalamo reverenter suscepit. [...] Hoc, tabernaculum testimonii, ex qua verus Jesus cum Deus esset, post statum embryonis novem mensium tempus, egressus est*» (Proclus Constantinopolitanus. *Oratio VI. Laudatio sanctae genitricis Mariae*; PG 65, 755).

12. «*Adoratur et Maria, tamquam quae mater ancillaque, et nubes thalamusque, ac arca Domini effecta sit; mater, eum namque peperit, qui voluit nasci; ancilla, quippe naturam confiteor, et praedico gratiam; nubes, concepit enim de Spiritu sancto, quem illaesa integritate pepererit; thalamus, in ea etenim ut nuptiali thalamo Deus Verbum habitavit; arca, non quae legem portaverit, sed quae legislatorem pepererit*». (Proclus Constantinopolitanus, *Oratio V. Laudatio Virginis Mariae*. PG 65, 719).

13. «*Quomodo ergo non omnino magis magisque propterea Deiparam vere agnoscentes, laudabimus Virginem istam, in qua et ex qua cum Verbum carnem sibi despondisset, processit tanquam sponsus de thalamo suo?*» (Leontius Byzantinus seu Hierosolymitanus. *Tractatus contra Nestorianos. Liber IV, 9*; PG 86-1, 1.670-1.671).

conceived.<sup>14</sup> Leontius concludes by saying that, by infusing the Virgin with his goodness, God the Son, who existed without flesh (being God), was carnally formed of the Virgin in a divine way, and espoused the flesh (the human nature).<sup>15</sup>

In that same 6th century, the prestigious Syrian hymnographer St. Roman the Melodist, author of some exquisite hymns versified in Greek, assures in one of his canticles that, honoring virginity, God dwelt in the virginal womb of Mary, from which he was born without needing intercourse and without breaking the seals of his mother's virginity.<sup>16</sup> Romanus later asserts that Mary is a holy bridal bed, because she produced Heaven as a husband, and the One who created all things with wisdom did not reject the nuptial ties, despite being born from a virginal and most holy womb.<sup>17</sup>

Towards the last decades of the 6th century, Gregory of Antioch († 593), rhetorically putting himself in place of God the Father, says:

The one [Son of God] who exists without separating from my womb, occupied the womb of Mary; he who remained inseparably in me exists uncircumcribed in it; the one who is indivisibly in Heaven, lived in the immaculate womb of the Virgin.<sup>18</sup>

Hence Gregory of Antioch goes on to say that the one (Son of God) who came out of Virgin's blessed womb, came out joyful as the husband comes out of a virginal nuptial bed; and the same one who with his begetting honored the begetting of humans, sealed in his birth the virginity of his mother.<sup>19</sup>

Still, in that same 6th century Abraham of Ephesus affirms that it is worthy to praise the Virgin and mother of God, since she has been made the mother of God, being a mother and remaining at the same time virgin, the nuptial bed of the great King (Christ), the vineyard that germinated the cluster of life, the wife not married.<sup>20</sup>

In the second half of the 7th century Anastasius Sinaita († *post* 700) declares in an exegetical treatise on Hexameron that the sentence of Holy Scripture, according to which God «put his tabernacle in heaven», means that he united his flesh (the human body) to the divinity of the Word; and, when saying that «he came out as a husband from his nuptial bed», he alludes to the fact that God the Son was given in marriage to human nature

14. «Cum ipsa enim spiritaliter exeundi et prodeundi per infractam Virginis vulvam carni suae Verbum virtutem contulit; sicut ipse sine carne per eam ingrediens non comprimebatur» (Ibid.).

15. «Cum enim sua benignitate se in Virginem infundit, ex ipsa qui sine carne erat se carnaliter formavit divino modo, et ab ipsa carnem sibi copulavit». (Ibid.).

16. «Virginitatem honorans Deus ventrem habitavit virginalem; natus autem ex ea sine semine sigilla non solvit castitatis eius: hic Ecclesiam puram et virginem sibi desponsavit» (Romanus Cantor. Hymnus 18, 1. In S. Alvarez Campos (comp.). *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. Burgos, Aldecoa, 1979, vol. IV/2, 165).

17. «Thalamus autem sanctus, coelum enim sponsum effecit. Quamvis igitur natus sit ex virginali et sanctissimo ventre, non horret tamen nuptiarum vincula ille qui omnia cum sapientia fecit» (Ibid.).

18. «Hic est qui a meo sinu non separatus, Mariae sinum occupavit; qui et in me mansit inseparabiliter, et in illa existit incircumscriptus: qui est in coelis est indivisibiliter, et in Virginis utero habitavit intemerate» (Gregorius Antiochenus. *De Baptismo Christi Sermo II*; PG 88, 1.875).

19. «Hic est qui de beato ventre processit, tanquam ex thalamo virginali sponsus hilaris; qui generatione sua generationem terrigenarum honoravit, partuque virginitatem parentis suae obsignavit» (Ibid.).

20. «Dignum autem, fratres, celebrare Deiparam et Virginem. Et quis potest illam laudare? Dei enim mater effecta est, mater simul et innupta manet, thalamus magni regis, thesaurus benedictionis, orbis gaudium, vinea quae vitae racemum germinavit, sponsa innupta». (Abrahamus Ephesinus. *Oratio in festivitatem occursus*. PO 16, 450-454. In S. Alvarez Campos (comp.). *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. Burgos, Aldecoa, 1979, vol. IV/2, 246-247).

by God the Father who begot him, having as his wife the uncorrupted flesh, that is, to his mother, the Virgin.<sup>21</sup>

Towards the first decades of the 8th century the patriarch St. German of Constantinople (c. 634/635-c.733 / 740), in a sermon on the presentation of Jesus to the temple, praises the Virgin Mary calling her «sacrosanctly built, immaculate palace and most pure of God, Supreme King», who now «is founded as the royal palace of the Lord and as His holy temple», in which «without being made with human hands, and resplendent with much beauty, the nuptial bed of the Spiritual husband [God the Son]», «in which the Word, wanting to rescue the wandering Humanity, married the flesh [the human nature]», to reconcile with God the Father those who had been expelled from Paradise for their own free will.<sup>22</sup>

Around the same time, St. Andrew of Crete (c. 650/660-c.740), in a sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin, praises her, indicating that Holy Scripture has prefigured her with many praiseworthy names, among them, «Virgin, young lady, prophetess» and also «nuptial bed, house of God, a holy temple, second tabernacle».<sup>23</sup> In another sermon on the Annunciation, Andrew of Crete greets Mary with these laudatory terms: «Hail, truly blessed, hail, illustrious, hail, magnificent temple of divine glory: hail, the palace of the King of the sacred enterprise: hail, nuptial bed, in which Christ married human nature».<sup>24</sup>

Probably by the same years, St. John Damascene (675-749), in a first sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin, greets her as the daughter of Joachim and Anna, who lived in the nuptial bed of the Holy Spirit and was kept spotless so that she become the wife and mother of God.<sup>25</sup> In another passage from that same homily, he continues saying that Mary is «entirely the nuptial bed of the Spirit, the complete city of the living God», the «all beautiful, all close to God», superior to the Cherubim and the Seraphim and close to God.<sup>26</sup> In his second sermon on the Nativity of Mary, John Damascene greets the Virgin as the «proper and true Mother of God», the «tremendous conjugal union of mankind with God, by which heavenly things are united with earthly things, and human beings with God», before ending by praising her with the following compliment: «Hail, nuptial bed, built with the clear gifts of virginity for the One who says in the *Song of Songs*: *I have entered my garden, my sister, wife*».<sup>27</sup>

21. «In coelo posuit tabernaculum suum: hoc est Verbi divinitati uniit suam carnem: Et ipse tanquam sponsus. Datus est enim ad nuptias humanae naturae a Patre qui eum genuit. Cum incorrupta autem ejus sponsa, nempe carne: Procedens ex thalamo suo: Matre scilicet». (Anastasius Sinaita. *Anagogicarum contemplationum in Hexaemeron ad Theophilum libri duodecim. Liber IV*; PG 89, 898).

22. «Ave, sacrosancte aedificatum, et immaculatum purissimumque Dei, summi Regis, palatium, ejusdem (Dei Regis) magnificentia circumornatum, omnesque hospitio recipiens ac mysticis reficiens deliciis; quod nunc in aula Domini, in sancto nempe illius templo, fundaris; in quo non manufactus, et vario decore nitens, situs est spiritalis sponsi thalamus; in quo Verbum, errantem (humanam stirpem) revocare volens, carnem sibi desponsavit, ut eos qui voluntate propria extorres facti fuerant, (Patri) reconciliaret». (Germanus Constantinopolitanus. *In praesentationem SS. Deiparae. Sermo I*; PG 98, 306).

23. «Vide itaque multimodis eam honestatam nominibus, multisque Scriptura; locis perspicue declaratam : ut cum v. gr. nominat virginem, juvenulam, prophetissam : tum nuptialem thalamum, domum Dei, templum sanctum, secundum tabernaculum» (Andreas Cretensis. *Oratio IV. In sanctam Nativitatem praesentiae Dominae nostrae Dei Genitricis, semperque virginis Mariae*; PG 97, 867).

24. «Ave, vere benedicta, ave, illustris, ave, magnificum divinae gloriae templum: aosis, molitionis sacrae Regis palatium: ave, thalame, in quo Christus humanam sibi naturam desponsavit». (Andreas Cretensis. *Oratio V. In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae Annuntiationem*; PG 97, 894-895).

25. «O Joachim et Annae sacratissima filia, [...] quae in Spiritu thalamo versata es, et sine macula custodita, ut sponsa Dei, naturaque Dei mater esses» (Ioannes Damascenus. *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*; PG 96, 671).

26. «Tota thalamus Spiritus, tota civitas Dei vivi, quam laetificant fluminis impetus; sancti, inquam, Spiritus gratiarum fluctus. Tota pulchra, tota Deo propinqua: haec enim Cherubim superans, et super Seraphim evecta, proxima Deo exstitit» (Ibid., 675).

27. «Ave, proprie et vere Deipara, tremenda hominibus cum Deo copula, per quam conjuncta terrenis coelestia, et humana Deo, vicissimque homini rependens divina. Ave, nuptialis thalamus, praeclearis virginitatis dotibus exstructus illi qui in Canticis

Already around the mid-9th century, the famous poet St. Joseph the Hymnographer (c. 816-886), in a poem in honor of the Virgin Mary, after pointing out that «You have been made temple and palace of the King, in which the Being supersubstantial making his room, turn the faithful into the domicile of the Most Holy Trinity», points out that Mary is «the nuptial bed of the only Beauty, the highest throne of God [...], in which the One who sits according to the flesh [at incarnate] raised, by his goodness, those who sat in the darkness of perdition to the light of wisdom».<sup>28</sup> In another Marian canticle, the holy Hymnographer fills the Virgin with lyrical compliments, designating her with numerous metaphorical figures, among them «the Lord's throne, a door, and a mountain; spiritual chandelier, the splendid nuptial bed of God, the manifest tabernacle of glory».<sup>29</sup>

This select sample of Greek-Eastern explanatory texts on the metaphorical expressions studied here is complemented, as we have already said, with another abundant series of comments proposed by more than a millennium (4th-15th centuries) by countless Latin Fathers and theologians on those same metaphors. As if that were not enough, within the Latin Church, we have also documented many medieval liturgical hymns that use the metaphorical expressions of reference over and over again with great poetic finesse.

Now, after this long research on the Greek-Eastern primary sources of Christian doctrine, two remarks seem necessary to us before analyzing the images of the Annunciation with a bed:

- a) In the current state of our knowledge, we cannot reliably demonstrate to what extent the writers of the Latin West knew first-hand the writings of the Greek-Eastern Fathers. We believe, however, plausible the conjecture that the most learned Latin thinkers knew at least in part –probably by translation of full texts into Latin, or by fragmentary quotations– the accepted theses and essential writings of the most influential Greek-Eastern Fathers, such as St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Eusebius of Caesarea, St. Athanasius, St. Basil the Great, St. Cyril, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, St. John Damascene, St. German of Constantinople, and other Eastern masters of similar intellectual caliber. That is because the recognized guides of Christian doctrine, both those of the East and those of the West, were read, translated, commented, copied, and paraphrased in the main centers of medieval knowledge (monasteries, cathedral schools and finally universities). This would explain why the exegetical positions of the Greek-Eastern writers on the *thalamus* that we have analyzed could have had some influence on the intellectual authors of the images of the Annunciation that we will examine next.
- b) In any case, these Eastern exegetical positions fully coincide with those that the Latin Fathers and theologians adopted for more than a millennium on the metaphorical

*dicít: Introivi in hortum meum, soror mea sponsa» (Ioannes Damascenus. Homilia II in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae; PG 96, 695).*

28. «*Templum et palatium Regis facta es, in quo faciens habitationem suam ille supersubstantialis, efficiat fideles domicilium sanctissimae Trinitatis. Unicae pulchritudinis thalamus, Dei thronus altissimus es, o Virgo; in quo ille sedens secundum carnem eos qui in perditionis tenebris sedent excitabit ad lucem scientiae propter bonitatem suam*». (Josephus Hymnographus. *Mariale. I. In pervigilio Nativitatis SS. Deiparae Canon I; PG 105, 983-986*).

29. «*Te portam imperviam, et agrum a cultura immunem; et arcam manna continens et urnam, et candelabrum, et immaterialis carbonis turibulum nominamus, o pura. Virginem solam parientem, et vulvam incorruptam servantem: thronum Domini, portam, et montem; spiritale candelabrum, thalamum Dei lucidissimum, tabernaculum gloriae manifeste; arcam, urnam, et mensam, te laudamus, o casta*» (Josephus Hymnographus. *Mariale. Theotocia Sive Allocutiones ad beatam Virginem Deiparam; PG 105, 1.398*).

expressions under scrutiny. For this reason, it is logical to think that the intellectual authors of the Annunciations to be analyzed, although they did not directly know the writings of the Greeks, undoubtedly knew the interpretations that the most influential Latin thinkers had given on such metaphorical expressions, regardless of whether the latter would have received or not some influence from the great Greek-Eastern Fathers.

### ICONOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION OF SOME IMAGES OF THE ANNUNCIATION WITH A BED IN THE 14<sup>TH</sup>-15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES



Fig. 1-a. Giovanni del Biondo, *Polittico dell'Annunciazione*, c. 1380-1385. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. Photo Wikimedia Commons.





Fig. 1-b. *The Annunciation*, central panel of the *Polittico dell'Annunciazione*, c. 1380-1385 (detail).

Giovanni del Biondo (1356-1399)<sup>30</sup> structures *The Annunciation* of the central panel of the *Polittico dell'Annunciazione*, c. 1380-1385, today in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence [figs. 1-a and 1-b]<sup>31</sup> according to a precise composition and of high narrative efficacy. In the anteroom of the house, the archangel Gabriel, kneeling on the ground with his right knee and bowing respectfully before his Lady, crosses his arms over his chest as a sign of coming in peace. Sitting in the living room, Mary tries to cover her chest demurely with her right hand, while with her left she holds the closed prayer book on her legs, after having interrupted her prayers due to the unexpected interruption of the archangel. At the center of the top of the painting, surrounded by a large cohort of angels, God the Father emits a beam of light (symbol of God the Son) towards Mary in whose wake the Holy Spirit flies in the form of a white dove. So Gabriel's announcement, «The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you», become real.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from these details, foreseeable in the representation of this Marian event, it is essential to highlight here the bed, covered with a red bedspread,

which can be seen through the fancy half-open curtains at the back of the room where the Virgin is. It seems unquestionable that, by giving this bed so clearly relevance, in the center of the scene and as a link between Gabriel and Mary, the intellectual author of this altarpiece –perhaps a cleric who, as an iconographic programmer, instructed Giovanni del Biondo in this *Annunciation*– wants to illuminate this bed as a *visual metaphor* capable of illustrating the dogmatic meanings that, as we already explained, the Greek (and Latin) Fathers revealed when interpreting the *textual metaphor* of the *thalamus Dei*.<sup>33</sup>

30. On Giovanni del Biondo, see Richard Offner, 1967-1969.

31. Giovanni del Biondo, *The Annunciation*, central panel of the *Polittico dell'Annunciazione*, c. 1380-1385, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. Photo Wikimedia Commons <[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polittico\\_con\\_1%27Annunciazione\\_e\\_santi#/media/File:Giovanni\\_del\\_biondo,\\_polittico\\_dell'annunciazione.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polittico_con_1%27Annunciazione_e_santi#/media/File:Giovanni_del_biondo,_polittico_dell'annunciazione.jpg)> 21-4-2020.

32. «*Spiritus Sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbravit tibi*» (Lc 1,35. In *Biblia Sacra*, 2005: 1011).

33. We have studied the dogmatic meanings of the bed symbol in images of the Annunciation in the article Salvador-González, 2019a.



Fig. 2. Pere Serra, *The Annunciation*, c. 1404. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Photo Pinacoteca di Brera.

fetus (God the Son, Christ) who, wrapped in a transparent circular halo (the placenta?) and preceded by the Holy Spirit's dove, descends towards the Virgin in the wake of the ray of light coming from God the Father. This exceptional detail is intended to illustrate, in a somewhat naive way, the immediate conception/incarnation of God the Son in the bowels of Mary, at the very moment of her acceptance of the plan of the Most High.

Now, apart from all these narrative details, it is worth highlighting for our purposes the monumental bed included in this panel. It seems logical to suppose that the intellectual author of this Annunciation (the painter himself or, more likely, an ecclesiastical mentor) has placed this enormous bed with such outstanding prominence –filling almost half of the

Pere Serra (active in Catalonia between 1357 and 1406) imposes his *Annunciation*, c. 1404, from the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan [fig. 2],<sup>34</sup> in the context of an aberrant perspective scenography. Inside a house, whose constructive elements are offered separately in capricious anarchy, the angel kneels before the Virgin, pointing to her his right index finger to indicate that she has been chosen by God the Father to be the mother of her divine Son incarnate as a man. Mary bows her head and raises her outstretched right hand as a sign of unconditional acceptance of the divine plan that Gabriel announces to her. That unrestricted acceptance is indicated in the phrase written in the book that she keeps open on her belly, which reads: ECCE ANSILLA [sic] DOMINI FIAT MICH I [sic] SECUNDUM VERBUM TU[U]M.<sup>35</sup> Inscribed in the other book open on the table is Isaiah's prophecy ECCE VIRGO CONSCIPIET [sic] ET PARIET FILIUM ET VOCABITUR NOMEN EIUS EM[M] ANUEL.<sup>36</sup> In the middle of both interlocutors some stems of lilies emerging from a vase placed in the soil symbolize the deep christological and mariological meanings that we have explained in other works.<sup>37</sup> It is especially attractive that Pere Serra incorporates here the unusual detail of the miniaturized image of a naked child /

34. Pere Serra, *The Annunciation*, c. 1404, Tempera on panel, 39 x 59 CM. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milano. Photo: Wikimedia Pinacoteca di Brera <<https://pinacotecabrera.org/collezione-online/opere/annunciazione-2>> 21/04/2020).

35. Lc 1,38. In *Biblia Sacra*, 2005: 1011.

36. Is 7,14.

37. See the previous Note 2.

scene and setting it as a link between Gabriel and Mary– with the probable scope of offering it as a symbol of the Mariological and Christological meanings already explained.

The Master of Brozzi Annunciation (identifiable perhaps with Giovanni dal Ponte), in his *Annunciazione tra ss. Eustachio e Antonio Abate*, c. 1400-1420, from the Church of Sant'Andrea (San Donnino) in Campi di Bisenzio in Florence [fig. 3],<sup>38</sup> raises the issue even more directly and forcefully, by reducing the house of Mary to her only nuptial room, occupied mainly by a large red bed. This bridal bed works here as a direct link between the kneeling angel and the seated Virgin, a link that is not only physical or compositional but also conceptual. In fact, with the heavenly message of which he is the bearer and with the massive stem of lilies that he carries in his left hand, the angel symbolically represents the virginal conception/incarnation of God the Son that at that time occurs in the womb of Mary. It is that same virginal incarnation that is symbolized in the painted bed, which serves as a *visual metaphor* for the *textual metaphor* of the *thalamus Dei*. It should be remembered that some Church Fathers interpreted this *thalamus Dei* as the womb of the Virgin into which God the Son entered to incarnate, while other Fathers interpreted it as the body or human nature to which God the Son married the divine nature incarnating.



Fig. 3. Master of Brozzi Annunciation, *Annunciazione tra ss. Eustachio e Antonio Abate*, c. 1400-1420, Chiesa di Sant'Andrea (San Donnino), Campi di Bisenzio (Florence). Photo Wikipedia.

38. Maestro dell'Annunciazione di Brozzi (maybe Giovanni dal Ponte), *Annunciazione tra ss. Eustachio e Antonio Abate*, c. 1400-1420, Chiesa di Sant'Andrea (San Donnino), Campi di Bisenzio (Florence). Photo Wikipedia <[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maestro\\_dell%27annunciazione\\_di\\_brozzi\\_forse\\_giovanni\\_dal\\_ponte,\\_annunciazione\\_tra\\_i\\_ss.\\_eustachio\\_e\\_antonio\\_abate,\\_1400-20\\_ca.\\_01.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maestro_dell%27annunciazione_di_brozzi_forse_giovanni_dal_ponte,_annunciazione_tra_i_ss._eustachio_e_antonio_abate,_1400-20_ca._01.jpg)> 21-4-2020.

Unlike the three preceding artists, Bicci di Lorenzo (1373-1452)<sup>39</sup> modifies somewhat in his *Annunciazione con committente, e santi*, c. 1420, from the Convent of Fuligno in Florence [fig. 4]<sup>40</sup> the compositional structure of the scene, in the context of a synthetic house of arbitrary perspective: the placement of both protagonists is reversed, with the angel on the right, and the Virgin on the left; he also places Mary on her knees before a lectern, instead of imagining her sitting, as in the three preceding paintings. For the rest, Bicci di Lorenzo shares with the three painters previously studied a similar interest in highlighting the significant importance of the bed and the bridal room, seen through the curtains drawn at the end of the main room. In fact, Bicci magnifies with even greater emphasis the leading role of this bridal bed—a perfect link between the angel and the Virgin—, rebutting it unnaturally, until it almost brushed the ceiling, and completely filled the bedroom, leaving no space for anything else. Due to its vibrant red color, its exceptional size and its centrality in the scene, this bed is affirmed, without a doubt, as a symbol of rich doctrinal meanings, in accordance with the patristic interpretations that we have explained.



Fig. 4. Bicci di Lorenzo, *Annunciazione con committente, e santi*, c. 1420. Convento di Fuligno, Florencia. Photo Wikimedia Commons (Sailko).

39. On Bicci di Lorenzo see Frosinini, 1987; and Sonia Chiodo, 2000.

40. Bicci di Lorenzo, *Annunciazione con committente, e santi*, c. 1420. Convento di Fuligno, Florencia. Photo Sailko in Wikimedia Commons <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bicci\\_di\\_lorenzo,\\_\\_annunciazione\\_con\\_committente,\\_e\\_santi,\\_1420\\_ca.\\_03.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bicci_di_lorenzo,__annunciazione_con_committente,_e_santi,_1420_ca._03.jpg)> 21-4-2020.

Gentile da Fabriano (1370-1427)<sup>41</sup> imagines The Annunciation, c.1423-1425, of the Vatican Art Gallery [fig. 5],<sup>42</sup> inside a house that, beyond its summarized geometry, assumes the appearance of a small palace or church,<sup>43</sup> with some Gothic elements (geminated pointed windows) mixed with others loosely «Renaissance» (semicircular arches). Just passed through the outer door, Gabriel, with his hands crossed on his chest, begins the gesture of kneeling before the Virgin. Sitting on a showy throne, articulated at a right angle to a large bench, Mary looks up to contemplate, through the round window above the door, God the Father while sending the fertilizing beam of rays of light towards her, carrying in its wake the dove of the Holy Spirit. The glow of rays, after passing through the window panes «without breaking or staining them», impinges on the Virgin's womb, instantly fertilizing her, as revealed by the gesture of Mary, feeling with both hands her already bulging abdomen.



Fig. 5. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Annunciation*, c.1423-1425, tempera and gold on wood. Pinacoteca Vaticana. Photo Web Gallery of Art.

41. On Gentile da Fabriano, see De Marchi, 2006 (1992); Marcelli, 2005; Laureati & Mochi Onori (a cura di), 2006; De Marchi, Laureati & Mochi (a cura di), 2006.

42. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Annunciation*, c.1423-1425, tempera and gold on wood, Pinacoteca Vaticana. Photo: Web Gallery of Art <<https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer/z.html>> 21-4-2020.

43. In the representation of the house of Mary in some images of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries, a close relationship can be seen between those in which the house looks like a palace and those in which it looks like a temple. We have studied the doctrinal meaning of the temple-like house of Mary in some Annunciations in the articles Salvador-González, 2020a, b, c, d & e.

Apart from these details, it is crucial to bring to light the red bed that you can glimpse by the drawn curtain on the door of the bedroom. Featured again in a central place between the angel and the Virgin, this bed symbolically illustrates – according to the intention of the intellectual author of this Annunciation of the Pinacoteca Vaticana– the doctrinal meanings revealed by the Church Fathers when interpreting the metaphorical figure of the *thalamus Dei*. Therefore, it is astonishing that some commentators on this panel, such as Lasse Hodne<sup>44</sup> and Vera-Simone Schulz,<sup>45</sup> have not even mentioned the presence and symbolic significance of this bed.

Dello Delli (1404-c. 1466) organizes his Annunciation, a scene from the *Main Altarpiece of the Old Cathedral of Salamanca*, c. 1430-1450 [fig. 6] in a complex palace of incorrect perspective, whose spaces open generously towards the outer space. The angel, after having entered, without opening it, through the closed door behind him,<sup>46</sup> is kneeling in a courtyard that precedes the porticoed «room» or *loggia* where the Virgin prays on her knees before an elegant lectern. Aside from the anecdotal detail of the boy and the woman who contemplate the scene on the upper balcony –the woman looking at the angel; the boy is looking at God the Father, who, levitating in the heights between seraphim, sends the beam of rays of light to Mary's ear<sup>47</sup>–, what is remarkable here is the huge and impeccable bed which can be seen in the background through the open entrance to the bridal room. This prominent bridal bed –an essential link between the heavenly herald and the Virgin– symbolizes here the deep Mariological and Christological meanings that we have already explained from the doctrinal tradition of the Church Fathers. For this reason, it is surprising that such meanings go unnoticed by the commentators on this painting, as happens with Francisco Javier Panera Cuevas.<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 6. Dello Delli, *The Annunciation*, scene of the *Main Altarpiece of the Old Cathedral of Salamanca*, c. 1430-1450. Photo from Panera Cuevas 2000.

44. Discussing this panel Hodne (2015) says nothing about the bed.

45. Schulz (2018) say nothing about the bed of this painting of Gentile da Fabriano.

46. This closed door refers to the temple's eastern *porta clausa*, announced by the prophet Ezekiel. We have studied the dogmatic meanings of this *porta clausa* in images of the Annunciation in the texts Salvador-González (2020c & 2020f).

47. This detail illustrates the curious thesis of the *conceptio per aurem*. We have studied this symbolic detail of the ray beam penetrating through Maria's ear in J.M. Salvador-González (2015b).

48. In his comment on this Annunciation, Panera Cuevas (2000) says nothing about the meaning of the bed.

Fra Carnevale (1420-1484) stages *L'Annunciazione*, c. 1445-1450, at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich [fig. 7],<sup>49</sup> in a lavish Renaissance palace,<sup>50</sup> with vast settings and luxurious furnishings, opening onto a lush garden of tall, vertical trees. In the space adjacent to the main room, the angel Gabriel initiates the gesture of kneeling before the Virgin, while pointing towards her with his right index finger to signify that the Most High has chosen her to be the Mother of God the Son when incarnating as a man. Standing before a precious prie-dieu/lectern, on which she keeps her prayer book open, Mary –towards whom the dove of the Holy Spirit descends flying–lowers her head and eyes with modesty and compliance, ready to accept the divine design as humble «slave of the Lord». Behind her, the Virgin's nuptial room stands, through whose open door you can see the red bed, with its partially closed protective curtains. It is clear that in this painting, Fra Carnevale wants to give the bed and the nuptial room (*thalamus*) an explicit, significant function as an eloquent symbol of the Mariological and Christological dogmas already explained. It is therefore strange that the relevant meanings of this symbolic bed go unnoticed by many commentators on this painting.



Fig. 7. Fra Carnevale, *L'Annunciazione*, c. 1445-1450, Alte Pinakothek. Munich. Photo Wikimedia Commons.

49. Fra Carnevale, *L'Annunciazione*, c. 1445-1450, painting on oak wood, 69, 8 x 78 cm. Alte Pinakothek. Munich. Photo Wikimedia Commons <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra\\_carnevale,\\_annunciazione.JPG?%20uselang=it](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fra_carnevale,_annunciazione.JPG?%20uselang=it)> 21-4-2020.

50. We have studied the doctrinal meanings of the house of Mary with the appearance of a palace in images of the Annunciation in the article J. M. Salvador-González (2020b, in press).

Francesco Pesellino (1422-1457) organizes the diptych of his *Annunciation*, c. 1451-1455, in the Courtauld Gallery in London [fig. 8],<sup>51</sup> placing Gabriel kneeling on the outside porch or *loggia* of the house, while Mary, also on her knees and in a submissive and shy attitude, is inside the room, in perfect symmetry with regarding the angel. At the end of the room, you can see, through the open door, the Virgin's nuptial room, with its red bed arranged in visual proximity to Mary, as if to suggest the mutual symbolic relationship/identity between the two, Mary and bed. Such a relationship/identity is confirmed in the Mariological interpretations that, as we already explained, many Church Fathers gave about the *textual metaphor* of the *thalamus Dei* for the supernatural incarnation of the Son of God and, therefore, the virginal divine motherhood of Mary.



Fig. 8. Francesco Pesellino, *The Annunciation*, c. 1451-1455. The Courtauld Gallery, London. Photo Web Gallery of Art.

Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510)<sup>52</sup> composes *L'Anunciazione di San Martino alla Scala*, 1481, originally in the Ospedale di San Martino alla Scala in Florence, and today in the Galleria

51. Francesco Pesellino, *The Annunciation*, c. 1451-1455. The Courtauld Gallery, London. Photo Web Gallery of Art <[https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer\\_m/z.html](https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer_m/z.html)> 21-4-2020.

52. To know more about the production of Sandro Botticelli, you can consult, among others, the following studies: Horne 1908; Schneider, c. 1911; Bettini, 1947; Argan, 1957; Mandel, 1967; Lightbown, 1978; Horne, 1980; Lightbown, 1989; Grömling & Lingesleben, 2000; Arasse, de Vecchi & Nitti, 2003; Magaluzzi, 2003; Cecchi, 2005; Deimling, 2007.



degli Uffizi [fig. 9]<sup>53</sup> within a luxurious Renaissance palace of beautiful pillars with vegetal reliefs and precious polychrome marble pavements, widely open towards a garden surrounded by battlements (*hortus conclusus*) and towards a vast landscape of mountains and sea. Still flying with his arms crossed over his chest in the *loggia* that serves as the anteroom, the angel Gabriel bows to Mary with reverence, to announce her imminent virginal divine motherhood, symbolized in the stem of lilies that he carries on his shoulder. In the main hall of the palace, the Virgin, kneeling before a lectern under a curious white gauze canopy, turns to the heavenly messenger in a somewhat unnatural *contrapposto*, while, covering her chest with both hands, humbly and demurely lowers her head and eyes as a sign of unrestricted compliance with the will of the Most High. Even in the absence of the dove of the Holy Spirit, the painter depicts here the wide beam of rays of light that, leaving through the door through which Gabriel enters, goes on through the anteroom towards Mary. It is interesting to note here that, at the end of the room where Mary stands, her bridal room opens, through whose drawn curtains, you can see a large and spotless bed.



Fig. 9. Sandro Botticelli, *L'Anunciazione di San Martino alla Scala*, 1481. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florencia. Photo Wikipedia.

It seems evident that by depicting in this fresco the bed with such monumental relevance and in such a central position between the Virgin and the angel, the intellectual author of the painting (perhaps Botticelli himself) wants to give that bed the significant importance already explained, as a symbol of the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son in the immaculate womb of the Virgin, and, therefore, as a symbol also of the virginal divine maternity of Mary. So it is surprising that many commentators on this painting

53. Sandro Botticelli, *L'Anunciazione di San Martino alla Scala*, 1481, fresco, 243×555 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo Wikipedia <[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione\\_di\\_San\\_Martino\\_alla\\_Scala#/media/File:Botticelli\\_-\\_Annunciation,\\_1481\\_\(Uffizi\).jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciazione_di_San_Martino_alla_Scala#/media/File:Botticelli_-_Annunciation,_1481_(Uffizi).jpg)> 21-4-2020.

say nothing about the bed, as is the case with Alessandro Cecchi,<sup>54</sup> while others mention it only as a mere compositional detail, as Ronald W. Lightbown,<sup>55</sup> and Alexandra Gromling and Tilman Lingesleben<sup>56</sup> do.

Sebastiano Mainardi (1460-1513) poses *The Annunciation*, 1482, frescoed in the *loggia* del Comune, Collegiata di San Gimignano [fig. 10],<sup>57</sup> in a rather unusual arrangement, imagining the Marian event in a richly paved, open square completely towards the landscape and outside the house of the Virgin. In that square, Mary appears kneeling in devout prayer before a strange kneeler/locker, which reveals several closed books on the lower shelf (perhaps symbolizing the books of the Old Testament) and an open book on the upper shelf (possibly meaning the New Testament). Along with the well-known gesture of the kneeling angel, holding a stem of lilies in the left hand and pointing up with the right index finger, it is essential to highlight here the double room and the red bed that is glimpsed by its open door and its drawn curtain. The fact that the figure of the Virgin overlaps and visually continues that of the bed (as signifying the essential doctrinal relationship between the two, Mary and bed), seems to demonstrate the knowledge that the intellectual author of this fresco had on the Mariological and Christological meanings already explained in light of the Greek Patristics.



Fig. 10. Sebastiano Mainardi, *The Annunciation*, 1482, Collegiata di San Gimignano. Photo Wikimedia Commons.

54. In his comment on this *Annunciation* of Botticelli, Alessandro Cecchi (2005: 168-170, 172-173) says nothing on the bed.

55. In his comment on this Botticelli's *Annunciation*, Ronald W. Lightbown (1978, Vol. II, 80, repr. 78-79, pl. 30) says on the issue this only sentence: «Mary's chamber, shown as if it were a box with angled sides, and the front removed, is aligned to the orthogonals of her tessellated chamber floor» (p. 80).

56. In their comment on this Botticelli's *Annunciation*, Alexandra Gromling & Tilman Lingesleben (2000) are content to say only this about the subject: «María se encuentra delante de su alcoba, mientras que el ángel tiene tras de sí un jardín que se abre a un vasto paisaje montañoso» (p. 42).

57. Sebastiano Mainardi, *The Annunciation*, 1482, Loggia de Comune, Collegiata di San Gimignano. Photo Wikimedia Commons <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenico\\_Ghirlandaio\\_-\\_Annunciation\\_-\\_WGA\\_08776.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenico_Ghirlandaio_-_Annunciation_-_WGA_08776.jpg)> 21-4-2020.



Fig. 11. Hans Memling, *The Annunciation*, c. 1480-1489. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Photo The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

protected by a canopy and curtains of the same color, which is seen behind the Virgin, in perfect continuity/identification with her, fulfills here. That doctrinal symbolism enclosed by this bed –whose rich dogmatic meanings, already explained, many commentators of this painting do not succeed in seeing– is further reinforced by the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the form of a dove and wrapped in a red halo, the Paraclete flies over the head of Mary, cutting itself over the curtain at the head of the bed, as if to imply that it is the Holy Spirit who «nuptially» impregnates Mary to achieve in her womb virginal the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son made man.

Hans Memling (1430-1494)<sup>58</sup> structures his *Annunciation*, c. 1480-1489, from the Metropolitan Museum of New York [fig. 11]<sup>59</sup> in an entirely original manner. In the framework of Mary's receipt or living room, luxuriously equipped with elegant furniture, rich polychrome tiling and luminous glassed windows generously open to the outside, the archangel Gabriel, dressed in exquisite cope embroidered in gold threads, points with his index finger right upwards to indicate the origin of the message of which it is the bearer. On the right side of the painting, in an upright position, but slightly bending her legs, the Virgin seems to fade away, while two other angels hold her upright. It could perhaps be conjectured that with this alleged fainting, the intellectual author of the painting wanted to suggest the circumstance that, after accepting the plan of God announced by Gabriel to her, Mary is already pregnant, as her bulging belly seems to suggest.

In any case, it is interesting to highlight the profoundly significant function that the great red bed, pro-

58. On Hans Memling see Fierens, 1939; Mcfarlane, Wind & Harris, 1971; de Vos, 1994; Borchert 2005; Mihiels, 2012.

59. Hans Memling, *The Annunciation*, c. 1480-1489, Oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 76, 5 x 54, 6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Photo Metropolitan Museum, New York <<https://www.metmuseum.org/es/art/collection/search/459055>> 21-4-2020.



Fig. 12. Gerard David, *The Annunciation*, c. 1490. The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit. Photo The Detroit Institute of Art.

Gerard David (1460-1523)<sup>60</sup> raises *The Annunciation*, c. 1490, from the Detroit Institute of Art in Detroit [fig. 12]<sup>61</sup> according to a relatively conventional arrangement, except for the fact that the angel is still in flight, and not standing or kneeling on the ground, as he almost always appears in other Flemish representations of this Marian theme. Descending from the heavenly heights with his herald staff in his left hand, Gabriel surprises Mary, who, kneeling before a stool on which she keeps her prayer/prophesy book open, turns her face towards the unforeseen visitor while putting up her right hand on his chest as a sign of modesty and consent to the design of the Almighty. In the context of this room luxuriously equipped with stately furniture, a large bed stands out with particular prominence, the privacy of which an elegant canopy and semi-open curtains protect. Undoubtedly, the author of this panel is aware of the symbolic meaning of this bridal bed, in essential doctrinal relationship with the Holy Spirit who, in the form of a shining white dove, flies over

Mary to supernaturally fertilize her through his divine power: thus the Paraclete produces the supernatural conception/incarnation of the Son of God made man while making her become the virginal Mother of God the Incarnate Son.

60. On Gerard David see Van Miegroet, 1989; Harbison, 1995; Ainsworth, 1998; Ainsworth & Christiansen, 2009; Campbell, 1998; Nash, 2008.

61. Gerard David, *The Annunciation*, c. 1490, oil on oak panel, 34.8 × 23.3 × 2.5 cm (unframed); 43.2 × 32.2 × 6 cm (framed). The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit. Foto The Detroit Institute of Art <<https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/annunciation-42103>> Wikimedia Commons 21-4-2020.

## CONCLUSIONS

From this comparative analysis of texts and images, we can logically infer the following conclusions:

1. All the Greek-Eastern Fathers analyzed here coincide in interpreting the Old Testament metaphor *thalamus* as a symbol of the supernatural God the Son's incarnation in Mary's womb, although this substantial agreement admits two exegetical variants, not antithetical, but complementary.
2. According to the first variant, which we could define as Mariological, the metaphor of the *thalamus* symbolizes Mary, and more specifically, her virginal womb, in which the conception/incarnation of God the Son was operated upon as man. The defenders of this Mariological variant are St. Epiphanius of Salamina, Proclus of Constantinople, St. Romanus the Melodist, Gregory of Antioch, Abraham of Ephesus, St. German of Constantinople, St. Andrew of Crete, St. John Damascene, and St. Joseph the Hymnographer.
3. According to the second interpretative variant, the Christological one, the expression *thalamus* symbolizes the human body or nature with which God the Son espoused his divine nature by incarnating, thus constituting a hypostatic «connubium» in which the only person, Christ, has at the same time two natures, divine and human. The holders of this Christological variant are Eusebius of Caesarea, Leontius of Byzantium, and Anastasius Sinaita.
4. Whatever the exegetical alternative they chose, all the Greek-Eastern Fathers analyzed defend that the *thalamus* metaphor necessarily implies the defense of three correlative dogmas: a) the supernatural conception/incarnation of God the Son in the womb of Mary; b) the hypostatic union of two natures, human and divine, in the only person, who is Christ; c) the virginal divine motherhood of Mary, who is authentic *Theotókos*, and not only *Christotókos*.
5. Although we cannot specify the degree of knowledge that medieval Latin thinkers had of the interpretations of the Greek-Eastern teachers on the subject studied, nor can we measure the extent of the influence of the latter on the former, the truth is that the exegetical-doctrinal positions of the Eastern and Western masters are substantially concordant, nurtured and legitimized by the communion in the same orthodox doctrine.
6. Sustained by the background of this solid and multiseccular dogmatic tradition, established and confirmed by the Greek-Eastern Fathers (and by the Latins), the bed (*thalamus*) included in some Italian, Flemish, German, French, and Spanish images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries cannot be considered a mere chance, an insignificant decorative or compositional detail, or a mere whim of the artist.
7. It is not a trivial circumstance that so many, and so different artists from so many countries include in their images of the Annunciation a bed –generally large, always spotless, and in a prominent position, as a link between the angel and Mary– reveals that they consider it a symbol full of deep doctrinal meanings.
8. In light of the Christological and Mariological interpretations given by the Greek-Eastern Fathers on the Old Testament metaphor of the *thalamus*, the bed in the Annunciations analyzed reveals itself as a symbol of the supernatural incarnation of God the Son in the womb of the Virgin, and the complementary virginal divine motherhood

of Mary. After all, both dogmas are the two doctrinal nuclei condensed in the Annunciation to Mary.

9. It is not necessary to suppose that all the painters who embodied a bed in their Annunciations had a theological culture so refined as to be able to «ground» iconographically –by knowing in their primary sources the texts or the theses of the Church Fathers in this regard– the symbol of the bed they painted in their Annunciations. It is more reasonable to think that the artist who received the commission for an Annunciation with a bed always had an iconographic programmer (probably a monk or clergyman) by his side who would dictate the conceptual guidelines for representing this Marian episode. With his solid theological training, this ecclesiastical mentor would instruct the artist on what symbolic elements he should include in the painting of the Annunciation –in the specific case, a bed– and how he should «harmonize» them with other symbolic elements no less rich in dogmatic meanings, like the stem of lilies, the ray of light coming from God the Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit, a closed door, a window crossed by the beam of light, a transparent vase with water, and other *visual metaphors* capable of illustrating many other *textual metaphors* that (re)veil deep doctrinal meanings. But these last symbolic elements require, each of them, as many long-range analytical studies and demanding preparation.

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