

Lasse Hodne

The Turtledove: a Symbol of Chastity and Sacrifice

The topic of this article is the symbolical meaning of the turtle dove in representations of *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple* in European Late Antique and Medieval Art. The turtle dove is mentioned in a series of ancient and medieval sources, like the *Physiologus* and the *Bestiaries*. In the Old Testament we find it, first, in Genesis, where Abraham is commanded to sacrifice “a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon”. (Gen 15:10) Then, in Leviticus, we hear of a purification rite which includes “a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtle dove for a sin offering”. (Lev 12:6) The description of the Lord’s Presentation in the Temple in Luke refers explicitly to this tradition. After the consecration of the firstborn male to the Lord, a sacrifice is made, which is “in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons’.” (Lk 2:24)

The Medieval painted representations of *Christ’s presentation* are mainly based on these verses from Luke and the elaborated version of the same story in Pseudo-Matthew. The turtle doves, almost always present in the visual representations of this scene, refer to the sacrifice made on this day. The sacrifice is related to the rite of Purification, which, in the Middle Ages, corresponded to a marian feast. At some times in the Early Middle Ages the focus seems to shift from the consecration of Christ to the purification of the Virgin as the scene’s main subject.

My intention has been to describe the development from the earliest extant version of this motif, found among the 5th C. mosaics on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, to the Late Medieval depictions of this scene. Whereas the spectator’s attention in the first case (Santa Maria Maggiore) concentrates on the Presentation of Christ to Simeon and Anna, later versions tend to include various symbols of chastity as references to Mary’s virginity. The most important of these symbols is the turtle dove itself, which is in Medieval sources described as a chaste and monogamic. This development is described through a comparison with Medieval textual sources, which take as their point of departure, not only the mentioned biblical (sources) which relate the turtle doves to the Lord’s sacrifice, but just as much the “voice of the turtle” from the *Canticles*.