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The Massacre of Innocents. Representing the Biblical Suffering in the mosaics of Chora

This paper focuses on the way Byzantine Christianity gave space and attention to the theme of pain in the mosaics of the Massacre of the Innocents in Chora. In this church, with the well-preserved mosaics in the exonarthex, there is a composite scene which is among the most dramatic of Chora's iconography. It has an articulated progression: beginning from King Herod's decision to enact the massacre, followed by the fulfilment and application of his order, concluding with the mourning mothers. A large space, encompassing three entire lunettes, was given to the theme of this event in the mosaics of Chora. The Massacre of Innocents constitutes a real complete iconographic cycle, probably inspired by images taken from an illuminated manuscript, inside the greater cycle of the Infancy of Christ. In the Byzantine religious universe, the sacred image occupies a theological function, and it has the task of expressing Christian dogmas in a complementary way to Sacred Scripture. The scene of the Massacre of innocents does not appear often in the Byzantine iconography monumental program. The choice of the founder of Chora, Theodore Metochita, to reserve a considerable extension to this episode went beyond the biblical pain and epitomizes the fears of all his contemporaries: the tragedy and the suffering caused by the forth crusade (1204) and about the fear of a definitive end to the millennial Byzantine empire. It was undoubtedly a social and political situation that justified the abundance of ferocious details, not taken from biblical literature, but more than likely from the reality of a violent world invited to meditate on the meaning of pain in Christian history.