

The Sacred Threshold Visualizing the ‘Other’ on Buvina’s Doors within Dalmatian Artistic Context

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Abstract Andrija Buvina’s wooden doors of Split Cathedral (1214) exemplify the threshold as a symbolic passage between the profane and the sacred. Through twenty-eight panels depicting scenes from Christ’s life – from the Incarnation to the Ascension – they construct an anagogical narrative of redemption guiding the viewer into sacred space. While Ljubo Karaman’s 1942 study remains the most comprehensive iconographic interpretation, it addresses questions of religious alterity only in passing. This article reexamines that dimension, highlighting how visual strategies of representing the ‘Other’ deepen our understanding of Buvina’s programme.

Keywords Split Cathedral. Iconography. Christological narrative. Religious alterity. Medieval Dalmatia. Threshold symbolism.

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1 Introduction

According to modern interpretations of a fifteenth-century marginal note found in a copy of the manuscript of the *Historia Salonitana*,¹ the monumental wooden doors of Split Cathedral – crafted by the master Andrija Buvina – were installed on April 23, 1214.² The Cathedral of the

1 The manuscript is also known as the Codex Papali and is currently held in the Nemzeti Museum in Budapest.

2 The Latin marginal note found in a fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Historia Salonitana* states: “Hoc tempore Edificate fuerunt Ianue maiores cum figuris et Istorijs de nativitate et passione domini nostri ihiesu xpisti Ecclesie sancti Dompnij de Spaleto per magistrum Andream Buvina pintorem de Spaleto et sub eodem tempore depicta fuit ymago et figura sancti Xpofori in plancato Dompnij predicti per predicatum magistrum Andream sub annis domini nostri Yesu Kristi curentibus MCCXIII mensis aprilis die XXIII exeunte”. Although the note provides a precise date – 23 April 1214 (mensis Aprilis die XXIII exeunte) – this date is, according to the grammatical and syntactical structure of the sentence, linked specifically to the verb *depicta fuit* (‘was painted’), and thus applies only to the image of Saint Christopher. The making of the doors is placed within the same general timeframe but without an explicit date. Nevertheless, historiographical tradition has commonly interpreted 23 April 1214 as the date of the doors’ installation or consecration. This interpretation relies on the symbolic and historical significance of the doors within the cultural memory of the city and cathedral, as well as the fact that both works are situated within the same temporal context. For further discussion, see Bulić 1912, 72-4; Karaman, 1942, 1-113, esp. 62; Belamarić 2020a, 25-70; Tigler 2020, 71-118.



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Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, commonly referred to as the Cathedral of Saint Domnius after the city's patron saint, occupies Diocletian's late-antique mausoleum, which was adapted for Christian liturgical use during the early medieval period.³ Its octagonal structure and monumental western portal formed the architectural setting for Buvina's wooden doors. While the existence of earlier doors can be assumed, the portal preserves no physical evidence of them, nor do surviving written or archival sources provide any information regarding their appearance or construction. However, basing his argument on Georg Niemann's reconstruction of the mausoleum's portal – apparently modelled after the Pantheon prototype and identified as a porta clethera type with pannelli calatrati above the door openings – Belamarić has suggested that the mausoleum's original doors were likely made of bronze and removed well before the thirteenth century.⁴ Measuring 530 by 360 cm, Andrija Buvina's doors – originally gilded and polychromed – comprise twenty-eight framed, coffered panels illustrating episodes from the life of Christ [fig. 1].⁵ These scenes can be broadly divided into four narrative segments. The first comprises eight episodes from the Incarnation to the Baptism of Christ. This is followed by scenes from Christ's public ministry, ranging from the Wedding at Cana to the Lament over Jerusalem. The third segment depicts the Passion, beginning with the Entry into Jerusalem and ending with the Entombment. Finally, two scenes – Christ's Descent into Limbo and the Ascension – mark the culmination of his triumph over death.⁶ Composed as a structured visual narrative, the doors present a condensed theology of salvation, meant to be read as a sequential Christological programme.⁷ As both a literal and symbolic threshold, the doors mark the transition from the secular world into the redemptive space of the Church.⁸ Beyond their

narrative and artistic qualities, Buvina's doors also operate on multiple symbolic and communicative levels. Although Buvina's doors marked the cathedral's main western entrance, they were likely not used in everyday liturgical practice [fig. 2]. Instead, they remained closed for most of the year, reserved for major feast days and ceremonial events, while regular access occurred through the smaller southern portal.⁹ This limited use enhanced their aura of solemn dignity, while their closed state allowed for uninterrupted visibility and prolonged contemplation of the iconographic programme. Facing the main city square, the doors continuously presented their carved scenes to passersby, transforming the cathedral's western threshold into a fixed pictorial surface and an instrument of public religious pedagogy. In this sense, they functioned as a didactic tableau or even a monumental visual proclamation, visually articulating the theological and moral values of the Christian community. This dual function – as both a sacred threshold and a civic medium of ideological communication – frames the analysis that follows. While the doors have long been recognized for their artistic and theological significance, little attention has been paid to how they engage with the construction of religious alterity. This study focuses in particular on depictions of Jews, examining how Buvina's visual language employs iconographic conventions – such as distinctive costume elements and spatial positioning – to participate in broader theological and socio-political discourses. Significantly, these doors also represent one of the earliest surviving monuments in which Jewish alterity is explicitly marked in a public visual programme, making them a crucial point of reference for understanding the emergence of such strategies in the medieval Adriatic. Through comparison with contemporary visual sources, such as the Trogir Evangelistary, this article

³ There is an extensive scholarly debate concerning the timing and process of the mausoleum's conversion into a Christian liturgical space; recent syntheses advocate a phased appropriation rather than a single decisive date. See Basić 2016, 165-96; Basić, 2017, 241-71 with previous bibliography.

⁴ See Belamarić 2020a, 29 n. 5; cf. Niemann 1910, 66, 84-5, plates VI, IX, XI-XIV, XVII.

⁵ Although the original polychromy has not survived, faint traces of red pigment remain discernible in the lower sections of the reliefs. Scientific analysis has confirmed the presence of painted decoration on only five figural panels. For a detailed discussion, see Matulić Bilač 2020, 119-60.

⁶ Goss 2010, 118-26.

⁷ It is widely accepted that the doors collectively function as a "monumental anti-heretical poster", a phrase first coined by Vladimir Gvozdanović in 1978. His interpretation centers on scenes that articulate and affirm Christ's dual nature – both human and divine – a doctrine rejected by various heretical groups. See Gvozdanović 1978, 47-62; Goss 2010, 118-26.

⁸ The concept of the threshold has been widely explored in art history, particularly through the lens of anthropological theories on liminality and rites of passage, most notably those of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. In the field of visual studies, a pivotal contribution came from Michael Camille in *Image on the Edge*, where he interprets the margin as a generative space within medieval art. More recently, scholars such as Tina Bawden, Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, Emilie van Opstall, Klaus Krüger, and others have examined the relationship between liminality and sacred space. See Van Gennep, 1969; Turner 1967, 93-111; Camille 1992; Bawden 2014; Foletti, Gianandrea 2015; Van Opstall 2018; Foletti et al. 2018; Krüger 2018.

⁹ The conclusion that Buvina's doors remained closed for most of the time appears to derive from an analysis of their technical construction and the practical difficulties involved in opening them, rather than from direct documentary evidence. Belamarić 2020a, 33.



Figure 1 Andrija Buvina, *Doors of the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Split, west portal. 1214. Carved wood, 30 × 370 cm.*
Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split



Figure 2 Andrija Buvina, *Doors of the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Split, west portal. 1214. Carved wood, 530 × 370 cm.*
Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

explores how sacred art in thirteenth-century Split contributed to the formation and reinforcement of communal boundaries between Christians and perceived religious 'others.' In approaching these visual strategies, the term 'Other' is used in a nuanced and context-dependent sense. It functions as a relational category, reflecting

a spectrum of meanings from exclusionary to integrative, depending on narrative, iconographic, and theological context. This understanding allows for careful interpretation of Buvina's visual programme, where markers of difference convey varying degrees of alterity, liminality, or continuity within the Christian imagination.

2 Historical Context: Religious Alterity and Ecclesiastical Policy in Early Thirteenth-Century Dalmatia

The wooden doors of Split Cathedral were installed in 1214, during the episcopate of Bernard, a prominent figure in the political and ecclesiastical landscape of southeastern Europe.¹⁰ This moment coincided with a period of heightened efforts by the Catholic Church to combat heresy and enforce doctrinal conformity, culminating in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, convened by Pope Innocent III. While the Council addressed many issues, its decrees on heresy and religious alterity were particularly significant. Canon 68 mandated that members of other religions – primarily Jews and Saracens – must be visually distinguishable from Christians by their clothing.¹¹ Though the canon did not specify exact markers, enforcement was left to local authorities, resulting in varied regional practices. This canon formalized and reinforced a trend already present in medieval visual culture, where religious others were identified by distinctive attire.¹² Buvina's cathedral doors, crafted in 1214 – just before the Council – reflect this cultural and ideological context that the Fourth Lateran Council would soon officially codify. Among the Council's attendees was Archbishop Bernard of Split, likely accompanied by Bishop Treguan of Trogir. Upon their return, the impact of the Council's decisions was immediately felt; according to thirteenth-century chronicler Thomas the Archdeacon, Bishop Treguan publicly read and displayed the Council's decrees to the citizens of Split, marking the start of a more rigorous enforcement of orthodoxy.¹³ Archbishop

Bernard also authored a polemical treatise against heretics, underscoring his commitment to defending Catholic orthodoxy in the region.¹⁴ Local responses to religious difference were further codified in the Split Statute, which mandated the expulsion of heretics, Cathars, Patarenes, and similar groups from the city.¹⁵ In contrast to the explicit and frequent medieval references to heretics, documentation concerning local attitudes toward Jews is notably sparse. Although Jewish communities are widely believed to have existed in Split since antiquity, the limited records from the Middle Ages make it difficult to determine their precise status or treatment during the thirteenth century.¹⁶ Consequently, any understanding of local perspectives on Jews must be drawn from the broader religious and political climate of the period. In particular, the policies of King Andrew II of Hungary-Croatia (1205-1235) – including his leasing of tax collection rights to Jews and Saracens – contributed to social tensions described by nineteenth-century historian Tadija Smičiklas as provoking unrest and occasional violence.¹⁷ This volatile environment shaped both political actions and visual culture, providing an essential context for interpreting representations of religious others in early thirteenth-century Dalmatia. Within this setting – marked by heightened anti-heretical measures and emerging religious identity codes – artists and scribes in Split and nearby Trogir created works that reflected and reinforced the theological and socio-political concerns of their time.

¹⁰ For more information about the archbishop Bernard, see Armanda 2011, 33-48; Gál, Sardelić 2020, 253-71.

¹¹ Alberigo 1987, 272-75; Cutler 1970, 92-116.

¹² E.g. the sixth-century apse mosaic of the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč depicts the prophet Zechariah with a phylactery (tefillin) as a marker of Jewish priestly identity, while some of the earliest pointed caps can be traced from the eleventh century onward. See Noga-Banai 2008, 84; Lipton 2014, 25.

¹³ Toma Arhidakon 2003, 137.

¹⁴ Armanda 2011, 33-48.

¹⁵ The first Statute of Split, written in 1239, is unfortunately lost. The earliest copy, dating back to 1312, was used together with amendments until 1797. See Prijatelj 1987, 11; Kečemet 2010, 23.

¹⁶ Jews are first explicitly mentioned in written sources from Split only in 1397 – when an episcopal charter refers to a synagogue known as the Sdorium. See Kečemet 1998, 316.

¹⁷ Smičiklas 1882, 339.

3 Religious Alterity in Buvina's Narrative Panels: Visual Markers of Otherness across Christological Cycles

Among the 28 narrative panels that compose Buvina's monumental portal, six are of particular relevance to the present discussion: Judas's Betrayal, Jesus before Pilate, The Flagellation, The Crucifixion, The Massacre of the Innocents, and Christ's Descent into Limbo.¹⁸ These scenes, drawn from both the Passion and infancy cycles, as well as from Christ's posthumous triumph,

contain some of the clearest visual articulations of religious alterity – whether through physiognomy, clothing, or substitution of identity. Instead of following the chronological sequence of Christ's life, this analysis groups the scenes according to iconographic strategies for depicting religious otherness; the order is therefore thematic rather than linear.

3.1 Visualising Betrayal and Arrest: Judas, Malchus, and the Soldiers

The first scene examined here is Judas's Betrayal [fig. 3]. Judas is shown approaching Christ from the right, embracing him with both arms in an act of betrayal. Unlike the other apostles, whose heads are encircled by haloes, Judas is conspicuously without one – a visual cue that sets him apart and underscores his treachery. Behind them, the apostles appear faintly, their forms receding into the background. The right side of the panel is occupied by three Roman soldiers, unmistakable in their helmets, shields, and weapons. Just behind Christ and Judas, Peter brandishes his sword and severs the ear of the leading soldier.¹⁹ According to the Gospel narrative, this act was directed not against a soldier, but against the servant of the high priest – a man named Malchus – whom Peter struck while attempting to defend Jesus. A later medieval tradition identifies Malchus with the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew,

condemned to roam the earth without a homeland.²⁰ Yet in Buvina's relief, Malchus bears none of the visual signs typically used to denote Jewish identity. Instead, he is fully assimilated into the group of Roman soldiers, shown in classical military attire – a striking and highly unusual choice. Comparable examples are exceedingly rare: in the standard iconographic tradition, Malchus appears as a servant or civilian attendant, visually distinct from the armed cohort. Buvina's conflation of Malchus with the Roman soldiery thus constitutes a deliberate manipulation of typological roles, anticipating later developments in the visual coding of guilt within the Passion cycle. While Judas's Betrayal introduces the initial act of treachery and conflict, the subsequent scene shifts focus to the judicial confrontation between Christ and Pilate, where markers of religious otherness appear more pronounced.

3.2 Pilate's Identity: From Roman Governor to Visual Other

Turning to the subsequent narrative, Christ occupies the central position, aligned along the vertical axis and surrounded by four other figures. Behind him, two Roman soldiers are placed symmetrically, recognizable by their helmets and armour – echoes of their earlier appearance in the panel of Judas's Betrayal. One more soldier stands in front of Christ, facing him. To Christ's right, Pilate sits on an elevated, throne-like chair. His raised position, crossed legs, and uplifted right

hand in a rhetorical gesture convey authority and detachment [fig. 4].²¹ The arrangement emphasizes the contrast between Christ's composed stillness and Pilate's active role as judge, capturing the charged moment of political and spiritual confrontation. Of particular note in this scene is Pilate's headdress, a conical cap with a rounded tip, whose form raises questions regarding its symbolic and historical appropriateness. While such headgear could be interpreted as a form of

¹⁸ Several panels in the lower row are significantly damaged, making it impossible to determine with certainty whether they would be relevant to this study.

¹⁹ John 18:10.

²⁰ Anderson 1965, 14. For a depiction of the Wandering Jew, see for example the image commonly titled *The Wandering Jew* in Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, Part II (c. 1250s), MS 16, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, fol. 74v, where the Jewish figure is marked by a wide-brimmed hat.

²¹ For more about this gesture, see Frugoni 2010, 3-48. For more about the negative connotation of Pilate's gesture, see Hourihane 2009, 199.



Figure 3 Andrija Buvina, *Judas's Betrayal*. 1214. Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split



Figure 4 Andrija Buvina, *Christ before Pilate*. 1214. Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

medieval crown,²² this would be anachronistic for a Roman governor of Judaea, to whom royal insignia should not be attributed. Moreover, the Gospel of John states: "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who declares himself a king is a rebel against Caesar."²³ Despite this, in the European medieval tradition, Pilate is often depicted wearing a crown, frequently combined with the pointed Jewish hat or the Phrygian cap. In later iconography, he even assumes the attributes of an Ottoman sultan, including a turban.²⁴ These attributes reflect a substitution of Pilate's historical identity and suggest a theological or ideological reinterpretation rather than a commitment to historical accuracy. A comparable headdress can be seen on Herod in the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents on the pluteus of St. Nediljica in Zadar, generally dated to the eleventh century, which indicates that such visual conventions circulated in Dalmatian ecclesiastical sculpture even before Buvina.²⁵ Ever since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the religion of Rome

itself, Christian exegesis has consistently sought to downplay Roman responsibility for Christ's sentencing and death, shifting the blame instead onto the Jews.²⁶ As Colum Hourihane has pointed out, "to be able to identify Pilate as a Jew, it is important to consider the overall context of the work of art, his relationship towards other figures and the manner in which his face is depicted".²⁷ Whether the panel on the cathedral doors in Split truly depicts a crown or a Jewish cap is difficult to determine with certainty, although both Karaman²⁸ and Hourihane identify it as the latter. In light of Hourihane's detailed study of Pilate's iconography, his identification of the headgear as a Jewish cap appears well-founded and as the most plausible reading.²⁹ If Pilate is indeed visually identified as a Jew, this gesture extends beyond mere anachronism: it transforms him into a symbolic Other whose image absorbs the theological blame displaced from Rome onto Judaism. By marking Pilate with signs of Jewishness, the visual narrative participates in a broader medieval strategy of externalizing guilt and redefining spiritual

²² The crown with a pointed tip was depicted by an unknown master in the Lower Church in Assisi, in the *Allegory of Virtue* theme in the crossing vault above the main altar; by Andrea Pisano on the doors of the baptistry in Florence depicting the personification of Hope; and by Tino da Camaino on the head of Henry VII on a tomb in Pisa.

²³ John 19:12.

²⁴ Čapeta Rakić 2017, 107-34.

²⁵ Jakšić 2006, 98-107.

²⁶ Blumenkranz 2003, 117; Capriotti 2014, 77-8.

²⁷ Hourihane 2009, 192.

²⁸ Karaman 1986, 343.

²⁹ Hourihane 2009, 192.

authority, turning the Roman governor into an emblem of the rejected and culpable community,

a reading subtly reinforced by the subsequent scenes in the panel sequence.

3.3 The Flagellation: Shifting Blame from Rome to the Jews

The relatively simple composition centers on Christ, bound to a slender column that rises from a plant-like base [fig. 5]. On either side, two executioners strike him with a flagrum. Although the canonical text specifies that Roman soldiers carried out the scourging, Buvina's figures wear no military attire – unlike those in the preceding panels.³⁰ This choice, however, is consistent with broader medieval convention: executioners in scenes of the Flagellation were typically shown in simple tunics, a practice that likely reflects both artistic norm and historical plausibility. Their dress, therefore, cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of altered or ambiguous identity. However, when combined with other distinctive attributes – such as the round cap and beard worn by the flagellant on the right (the observer's right-hand side, often associated with negative connotations in iconography) – these elements serve as deliberate markers of alterity within the composition. His appearance and attributes suggest that he is a Jew, represented through the lens of a negative character type. Round caps – typically with a very narrow brim – worn by figures in Christian iconography have been identified by Ruth Mellinkoff as a recurring Jewish attribute, appearing in numerous manuscript illuminations across Europe from the eleventh century onward.³¹ This suggests a deliberate iconographic strategy, in which markers of Jewishness were retrospectively projected onto negative figures, reinforcing

notions of alterity through visual means. The substitution of Christ's flagellators with Jewish executioners, rather than Romans as described in the Gospels, also has a long exegetical tradition. According to certain sources, the flagellation is said to have taken place in the Sanhedrin or at the house of the high priest Caiaphas.³² In this regard, Buvina does not follow the Gospel narrative but, drawing on an unidentified source, reassigns the responsibility for the act from Romans to Jews. Within such a context, the depiction of Pilate's headgear in the previous scene functions less as a literal indicator of historical dress and more as part of a broader iconographic logic that reassigns responsibility for Christ's Passion. By aligning his visual attributes with those of negatively coded Jewish figures – such as the flagellators – Buvina's relief participates in a theological reinterpretation that externalizes guilt and underscores religious alterity. A comparable strategy appears on the twelfth-century doors of the Basilica of San Zeno in Verona, where Old Testament figures wear inverted-funnel caps, while Roman soldiers in the Flagellation and the two figures – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – who remove Christ from the cross share the same pointed headgear. This deliberate attribution of Jewish markers to non-Jewish actors in the Passion scenes reshapes their visual and moral significance, contrasting with the neutral markers used for genuinely Jewish figures.

3.4 At the Cross: Longinus, Stephaton, and Visual Ambiguity

The logic of visual substitution observed in the Flagellation scene extends into the Crucifixion panel, yet in a more nuanced and ambivalent form [fig. 6]. Here, too, the figures who interact with Christ are not dressed in recognizably Roman military attire, despite the Gospel texts identifying them explicitly as soldiers (*stratiōtai*). However, unlike the previous relief, where negative identity markers such as the round cap and profile pose suggest a deliberate reassignment of blame, the visual cues in this panel are more ambiguous. Longinus, the lance-bearer, and Stephaton, the

sponge-bearer, both wear knee-length tunics reminiscent of those worn by the flagellants. Yet other elements – such as Longinus's sword – reassert his military identity, while his headgear, a soft cap, resists easy classification. Notably, Stephaton's bearded face contrasts with the clean-shaven Longinus, subtly reinforcing a moral and theological polarity between the two. While Longinus's features and attributes point toward the possibility of transformation, Stephaton's physiognomy aligns him more closely with traditional visual codes of alterity. These visual

³⁰ Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:16; John 19:1.

³¹ Mellinkoff 1973,155-65;1993, 59.

³² Piccat 2005, 269-88; Capriotti 2014, 98;2016, 357-73.



Figure 5 Andrija Buvina, *The Flagellation*. 1214. Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split



Figure 6 Andrija Buvina, *The Crucifixion*. 1214. Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

choices raise questions not only about historical fidelity but also about the theological and ideological functions of representation. In contrast to the fixed alterity of the flagellators, Longinus occupies an in-between position: a Roman soldier who, according to Christian legend, undergoes a redemptive transformation. He is shown at the precise moment of piercing Christ's side. In Christian exegetical tradition and various textual sources, the anonymous Roman soldier mentioned in the Gospels was identified as Longinus, and numerous legends later developed around him. The most prominent among these is the story of his sight being miraculously restored when a drop of Christ's blood fell into his eyes, followed by

his conversion to Christianity – a transformation that ultimately led to his canonization as a Christian saint.³³ Owing to the interweaving of literary sources and theological interpretations, Longinus has been represented in art in multiple ways, including with attributes conventionally associated with Jews.³⁴ Clothing, pose, and headgear here operate as visual elements that introduce a degree of interpretive ambiguity. Unlike the more direct iconographic reassignment observed in the Flagellation, this panel seems less concerned with asserting blame than with evoking a moment of narrative and theological suspension – leaving the possibility of transformation open, but unresolved.

3.5 The Massacre of the Innocents: Herod's Agents as Visual Jews

Continuing the visual strategy of assigning altered identities to perpetrators of violence, the Massacre of the Innocents panel offers a further example of how markers of Jewishness were used to convey guilt and otherness within Buvina's composition [fig. 7]. This scene is located on the opposite wing of the portal and presents a striking contrast to the Flagellation. On the left side of the composition, King Herod sits

authoritatively on a throne, handing a sword to one of his subjects and ordering the execution of all first-born male children in Bethlehem. On the right side of the panel, the naked bodies of already slain children are depicted, while a soldier is shown in the act of killing another. Behind him, a desperate mother raises her hands to her face in a gesture of unbearable grief over the fate of her child.³⁵ According to current research on the

³³ Most likely one of the earliest records of this legend can be found in Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*, written in the twelfth century. See Sticca 1970, 159. For more about the various legends, see Jeffries Peebles 1911.

³⁴ See, for example: The crucifixion and brazen serpent. Initial to Psalm 68, from Peter Lombard, *Commentary on Psalms*, Paris (?), 1166, Bremen, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, ms. a. 244, fol. 113v.

³⁵ For more on the gestures of pain, see Barasch 1976; 1987; Frugoni 2010, 49-67.



Figure 7
Andrija Buvina, *The Massacre of the Innocents*. 1214.
Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy
of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

polychromy of Buvina's cathedral doors,³⁶ the two executioners in this panel most likely wore red caps with narrow brims – a highly explicit visual marker associated with Jewish figures in medieval anti-Jewish iconography.³⁷ These attributes, consistently used across manuscripts and monumental sculpture, function as immediate signifiers of otherness and guilt, situating the

executioners within a negatively coded typology. It is plausible that Buvina drew upon pictorial or textual models transmitted from other artistic centers,³⁸ which would explain the presence of these standardized Jewish markers within his composition and highlight the continuity of visual strategies for representing moral and religious alterity.

3.6 Alterity in the Nativity: The Trogir Evangelistary as a Comparative Model

The analysis of Buvina's programme of religious alterity can be further nuanced through comparison with related works from the same cultural and artistic milieu. One particularly instructive parallel is found in the so-called Trogir Evangelistary, produced slightly later than the cathedral doors but possibly based on an earlier visual model, and attributed to Benedictine scriptoria active in Split and Trogir [fig. 8].³⁹ Of special interest are the similarities between the two works in their depictions of the Nativity [fig. 9]. In both compositions, the Virgin Mary is positioned diagonally at the center, forming the visual and symbolic focus of the scene, and both are supplemented by the First Bath of the Infant Christ – an apocryphal motif frequently found in medieval representations. However,

unlike Buvina's cathedral doors, the Trogir Evangelistary also incorporates the Annunciation to the Shepherds as part of the Nativity sequence. Significantly, the Trogir manuscript features two figures marked by attributes of religious otherness. One of the shepherds wears a pointed yellow (or golden) conical hat, identifiable as a *pileus cornutus*,⁴⁰ while one of the two midwives bathing the Infant Christ wears a square yellow (or golden) headpiece. Both items of headgear function as visual indicators of alterity, consistent with broader iconographic conventions in medieval manuscript illumination. In the context of Dalmatian thirteenth-century works, a comparable motif is also attested in the frescoes of the Church of St. Chrysogonus in Zadar, where a shepherd wearing a yellow conical cap appears

³⁶ Matulić Bilač, Čulić 2020, 218-29.

³⁷ Mellinkoff 1973, 155-65; 1993, 59.

³⁸ Bužančić 2014, 8.

³⁹ Telebaković-Pecerski dates the style of the Trogir Evangelistary to the 1230s, while Elba links it with the new Venetian trends of the second half of the thirteenth century. Belamarić believes that the Trogir Evangelistary should be linked to the bishop Columbanus and dated to 1255. See Telebaković-Pecerski 1961, 69-75; Elba 2006, 107-47; Elba 2007, 362-69; Belamarić 2020b, 90.

⁴⁰ Lubrich 2015, 203-44.



Figure 8 Anonymous Dalmatian, *Nativity*. Thirteenth century. Miniature on parchment. Trogir, Trogir Evangeliary. Photograph by Živko Bačić

on the north wall.⁴¹ The First Bath of the Infant Christ does not appear in any canonical sources.⁴² In apocryphal writings – specifically the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Protoevangelium of James* – only the episode involving the two midwives is described. According to the *Protoevangelium of James*, Joseph went in search of a Jewish midwife in Bethlehem. The anonymous midwife who descended from the hill country was present at Mary's delivery, while a second woman named Salome arrived afterward. In the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, the two midwives are named Zelomi and Salome, and both are present at the birth. In both

accounts, Zelomi (or the unnamed first midwife) witnesses a miraculous light at the moment of Christ's birth and recognizes the virginity of Mary. Salome, however, expresses disbelief and seeks to verify Mary's virginity by physically examining her. Upon touching her, Salome's hand withers in divine retribution; after calling upon God and then touching the infant, she is healed – an act signifying her conversion and belief in the miraculous birth.⁴³ One of the earliest visual depictions of this episode appears in the early medieval frescoes of the Catacombs of Saint Valentine in Rome, where the two midwives are shown bathing the Infant

⁴¹ For an illustration, see Hilje, Tomić 2006, 82-3.

⁴² For early depictions in the visual arts, see Nordhagen 1961, 333-37.

⁴³ Metzger, Ehrman 2006, 76-8.



Figure 9
Andrija Buvina, *Nativity*. 1214. Carved wood, detail.
Split, Cathedral of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph courtesy
of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

Christ. The inscription beside one of them reads “Salome”, indicating that the formerly skeptical midwife was assigned the role of washing the child in visual representations.⁴⁴ Although it is not possible to determine with certainty which of the two midwives is distinguished by specific headgear in the Trogir Evangelistary, such visual differentiation does not appear on Andrija Buvina’s cathedral doors in Split. This conclusion, however,

must remain provisional: the loss of the original polychromy – an integral aspect of medieval iconography – significantly limits our ability to interpret visual markers of identity or alterity. As numerous studies have shown, colour was often a key semiotic component in conveying religious, ethnic, or moral distinctions in medieval visual culture, and its absence complicates any definitive reading of the figures in question.

3.7 Christ’s Descent into Limbo: Marking the Righteous as Other

The final panel considered in this analysis is also the penultimate scene in Buvina’s narrative cycle: Christ’s Descent into Limbo, or the so-called Harrowing of Hell [fig. 10].⁴⁵ This episode takes place after Christ’s death and burial but prior to his bodily resurrection on the third day following the Crucifixion. According to Christian theology, Christ descends into the Hell of the Righteous – the liminal realm where the unbaptized just awaited salvation – in order to defeat death and lead the souls of the righteous into eternal life. In Buvina’s rendering of this scene, nine Old Testament figures are shown in the ante-Inferno. Among them, three male figures appear to wear some form of *tefillin* on their foreheads – phylacteries traditionally used in Jewish prayer practice. In addition to these three, all male figures (with the exception of Adam) are

portrayed with long beards and draped in a tallit-like prayer shawl that also covers their heads – an attribute that, in the context of Christian iconography, typically signifies Jewish religious otherness.⁴⁶ This visual detail finds parallels in other medieval representations of Old Testament figures. In Christian visual culture, the *tefillah shel rosh* – the phylactery worn on the head – often appears as an attribute assigned to Old Testament righteous men, prophets, and Jewish priests.⁴⁷ Artists of different epochs varied its size and shape according to stylistic conventions. For instance, the prophet Daniel in the twelfth-century mosaics of Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice is shown with a rounded tefillin on his head.⁴⁸ A similar rounded form appears on the head of the biblical priest, the righteous Melchizedek, in the

⁴⁴ The frescoes are no longer preserved. For more about them, see Osborne 1981, 82-90.

⁴⁵ It is the panel on the left in the first row of the right door wing.

⁴⁶ Skolnik et al. 2007, 465.

⁴⁷ For more on depictions of Jews in visual arts prior to the Crusades and in Byzantine art, see Revel-Neher, 1992.

⁴⁸ Demus 1988, 27.



Figure 10
Andrija Buvina, *Descent into Limbo*. 1214.
Carved wood, detail. Split, Cathedral of the
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Photograph
courtesy of the Treasury of the Cathedral of Split

thirteenth-century mosaic depicting the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek in the vestibule of the same basilica.⁴⁹ These examples suggest that the tefillah shel rosh was not conceived as a sign of exclusion but functioned as a recognizable iconographic emblem of scriptural authority and priestly righteousness within the Christian visual tradition. In this light, Buvina's use of the attribute aligns his figures with a visual vocabulary of sanctity that articulates the theological continuity between the Old and the New Covenants. Within this framework, Buvina's figures appear not as outsiders but as righteous ancestors – those who, living under the Old Law, now encounter redemption through Christ's descent into Limbo. Their 'otherness' becomes a sign of liminality, a visual expression of transition from the Law

to Grace and of the inclusiveness of salvation, where the Jewish markers of the old covenant are transfigured by the new. The female figure, presumably Eve, is the only character not marked by these attributes. The exact identification of the figures wearing tefillin cannot be established with certainty. As John Dominic Crossan notes: "Apart from Christ grasping Adam's hand, the six names mentioned in the textual tradition are, in this literary sequence, Abraham, Isaiah, John the Precursor, 'the first father Adam', Seth, and David, but the visual examples could represent entirely different persons".⁵⁰ This ambiguity reflects the broader tendency in medieval art to collapse typological meaning into generalized visual signs rather than adhere strictly to narrative or textual specificity.

4 Conclusion

Buvina's cathedral doors remain Dalmatia's most significant public sculpture, notable for their early and systematic depiction of religious 'otherness' and their role in the visual codification of communal identity. Functioning both as a physical and symbolic threshold, the doors present a sequential Christological programme that guides viewers into sacred space while simultaneously shaping perceptions of social and religious boundaries. The deliberate use of iconographic markers – such as headgear, beards, garments, and spatial arrangement

– places Buvina's work within the broader European tradition of representing Jews and other distinct communities. These carefully considered choices, together with parallels in the Trogir Evangelistary, suggest that the artist drew on illustrated models, possibly akin to those brought to Split by Archbishop Bernard. In doing so, they illustrate how markers of difference can function variably – sometimes to delineate exclusion, sometimes to signify liminality or redemption – depending on narrative and theological context. Within the charged socio-political context of the

⁴⁹ Demus 1988, 139.

⁵⁰ Crossan, 2013, 5-32.

early thirteenth century, this imagery functioned as a potent instrument of civic-religious pedagogy, guiding the faithful in understanding

dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and shaping perceptions of belonging within both sacred and social space.

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