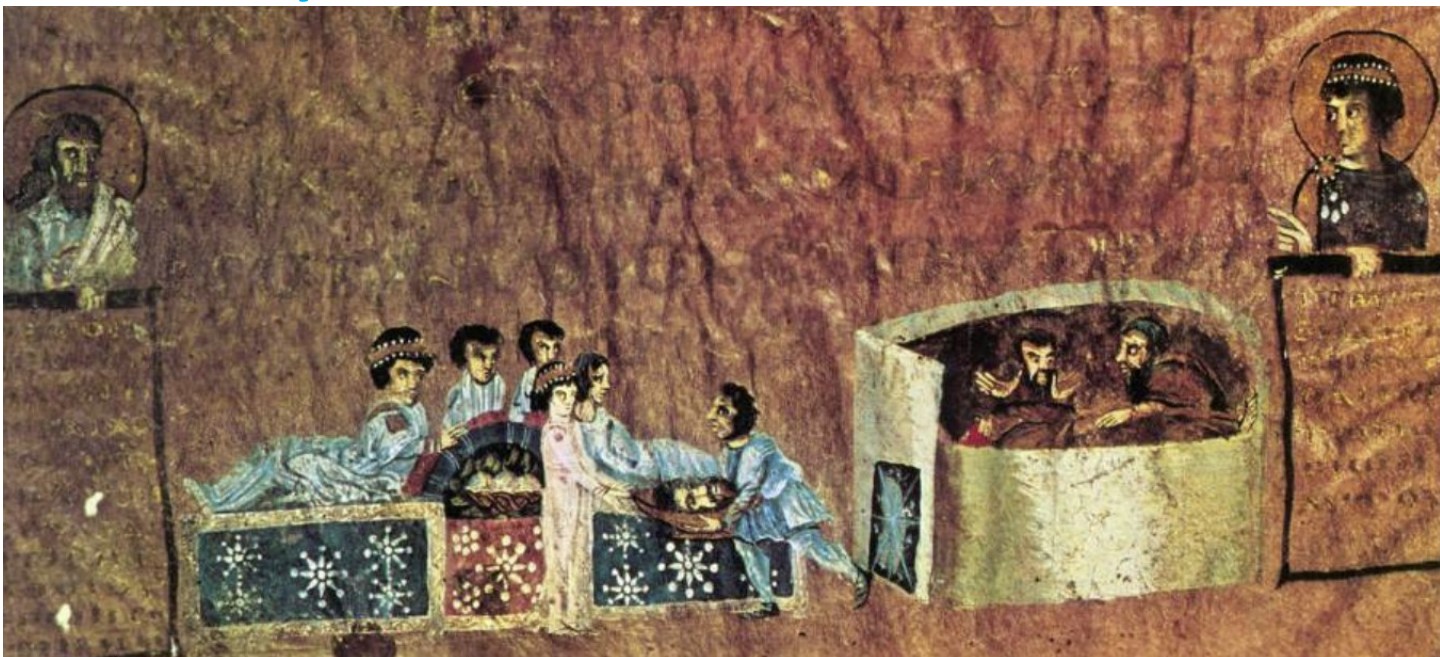


# The *Albero* of the Iconography of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* by Caravaggio, 1608.

By John T. Spike, 28 May 2021

## 6th century Asia Minor / Mesopotamia

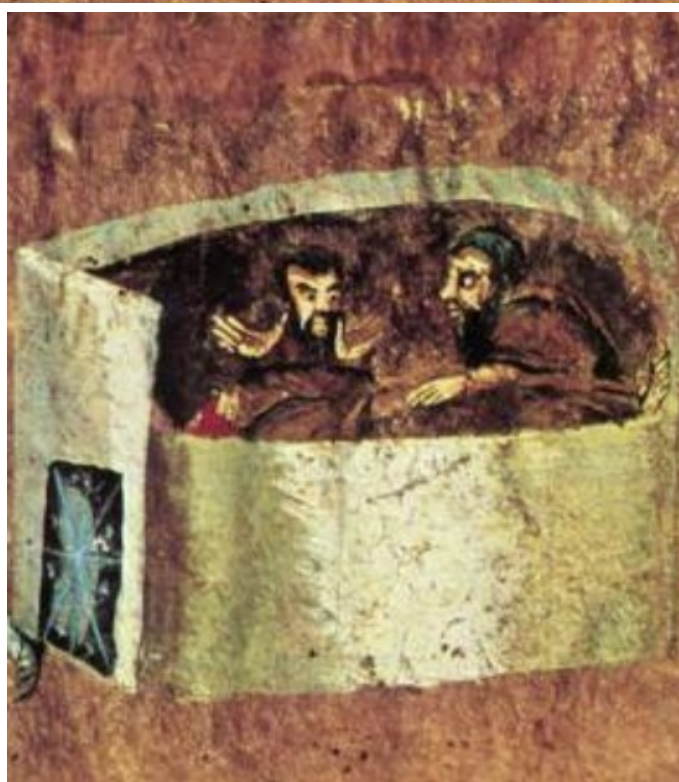


The *Presentation of the Head of John the Baptist at the Banquet of Herod*. At right: *John's disciples discover his decapitated body left behind in the prison*. The scene is flanked by the busts of Moses and David, who hold scrolls with prophecies of martyrdom.

Codex Sinopensis, folio 10 verso, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Manuscrits occidentaux, suppl. grec 1286

This page in the Sinope Gospels is one of the earliest representations of the death of St. John the Baptist. The proto-Byzantine style indicates a 6<sup>th</sup>-century painter in Constantinople, Syria or Mesopotamia.

The Sinope miniature does not display any of the iconographical motifs in Caravaggio's *Beheading*, 1608. The bluish figure with pointing lines on the wall has been interpreted as a sundial. The rare subject of *John's disciples finding his body* is the antecedent of the subject of the *Burial of St. John the Baptist*. ↗



*Herod's banquet, and the burial of St. John the Baptist*, 1262, T'oros Roslin Gospels, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.



c. 1190 Canton Grisons, Switzerland



*The Beheading of John the Baptist and the Banquet of Herod with the dance of Salome*

Fresco, Saint John Abbey, Müstair, Canton of Grisons, Switzerland.

The Benedictine abbey in Val Müstair in the Alps was founded by Charlemagne in c. 775. This Romanesque fresco is curved in a small apse, part of an extensive cycle completed at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

At left: the prison is seen as a castle tower with a barred door through which John's headless body falls out. The executioner holds up his sword. His other hand lowers the Baptist's head into a large bowl held by a servant.

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

3. Arched portal of the prison

7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head



1230 La Sauve, Bordeaux, France



*Capital with the  
Beheading of St  
John the Baptist  
and the Banquet  
of Herod, Sauve-  
Majeure Abbey,  
Gironde*

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

2. Barred prison window

7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head to expose his neck



## 1240-1300 Baptistery, Florence



Battistero di San Giovanni, Firenze, designed by an unidentified Florentine painter

Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

- 2. Barred prison window
- 3 Arched portal of the prison
- 8. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head



1329-1336 Florence



↑ *St. John the Baptist Visited in Prison by his Disciples.*



*Beheading of St John the Baptist.*

Andrea Pisano (1329-1336), two bronze, quadrilobed relief sculptures on the south door of the Baptistery in Florence, ca. 1330-1336.

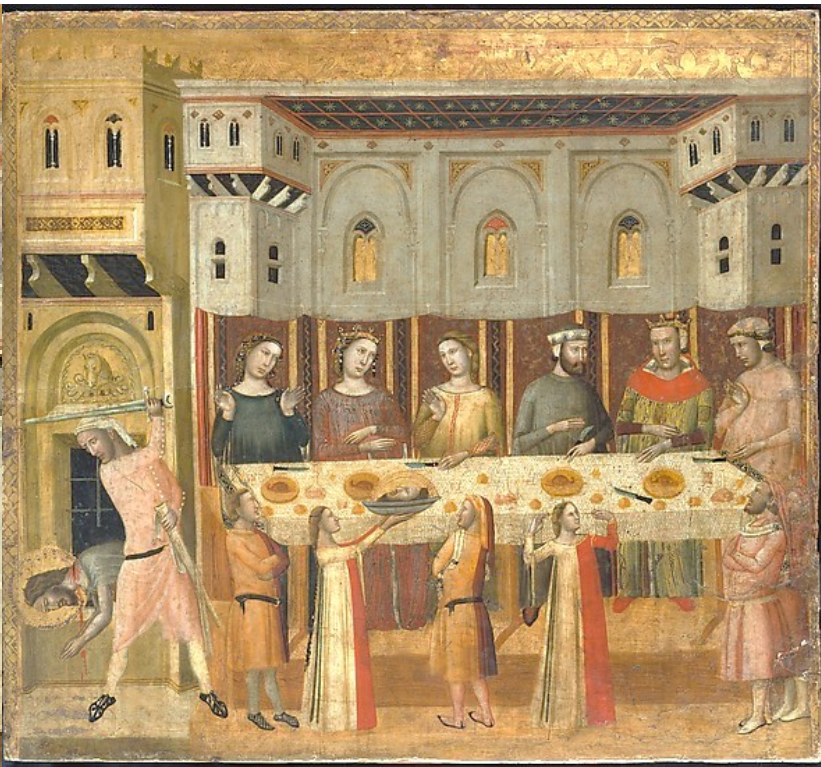
Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

2. Barred prison window

8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.



c. 1320 – 1350 Rimini



Baronzio, Giovanni (Rimini, c. 1320 – 1350), *Beheading of St John the Baptist and the Banquet of Herod*, 1330 35, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison window



1365-1370 Florence



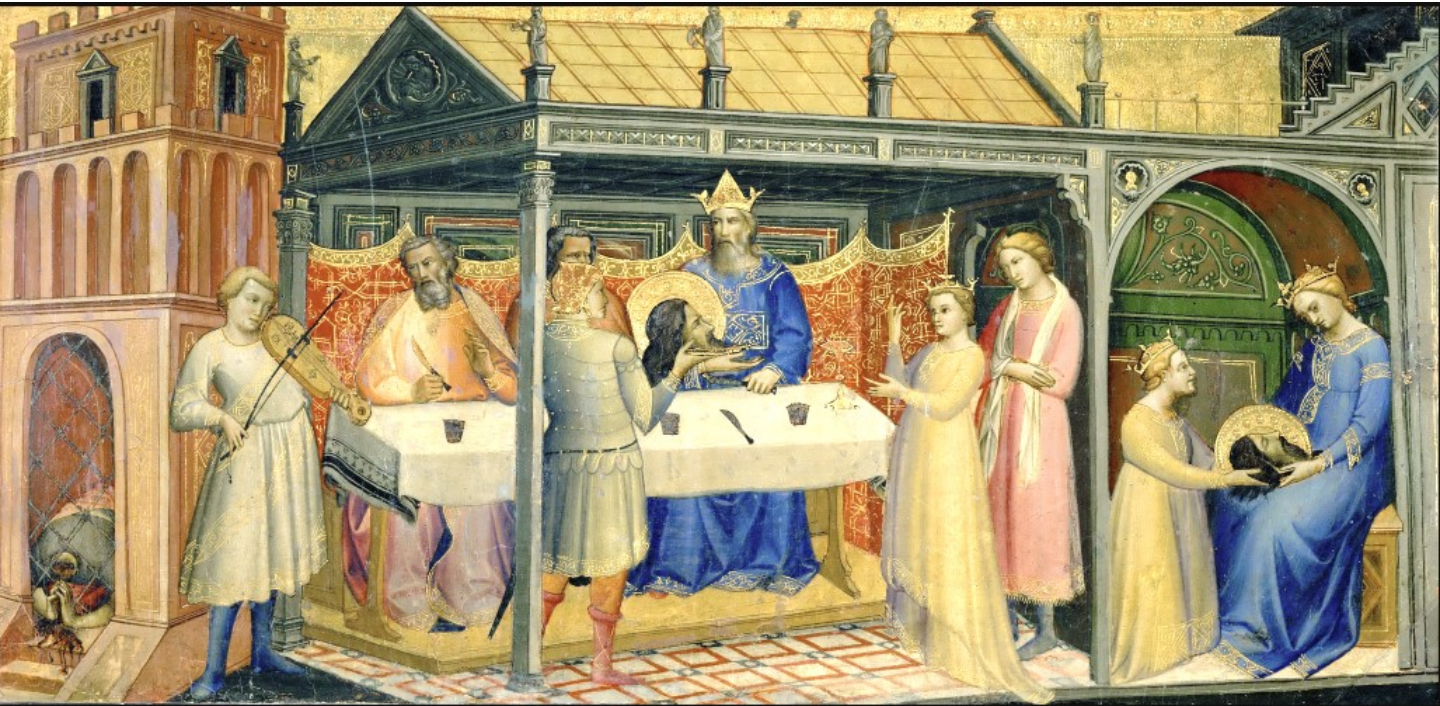
Giovann del Biondo (Florence, doc. 1356 to 1398), *Beheading of John the Baptist*, panel from the St John the Baptist, formerly the altarpiece in the the Ginori chapel in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, Uffizi

Antecedent for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison window
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head



1380-1390 Florence



Lorenzo Monaco, *Beheading of St John the Baptist and the Banquet of Herod*, 1380-90, Louvre, Paris

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison door



c. 1410 Milan



Tomasino da Vimercate, attributed to, (active Milan, c. 1390–1415), *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, c. 1410, V&A Museum, London.

This cut-out initial came from a larger liturgical manuscript.

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window



1426 Florence



Masaccio, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1426, pala di Pisa, Berlin

Antecedents for five motifs in Caravaggio 1608

2. Barred prison window
5. Jailer commands the executioners
7. An executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head to expose his neck
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom



## 1435-1445 Catalonia



Bernat Martorell (1390 – 1452) was an important Late Gothic painter in Catalonia. This *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1435-1445, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, is from the predella of an altarpiece of the two Saints John. The faces of the Executioner and of Herod have been scratched out.

Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head



1435 Castiglione Olona, Lombardy



Masolino Da Panicale, *Beheading of John The Baptist*. 1435.  
Baptistry of San Giovanni Battista, Castiglione Olona.

Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison window
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom



1447 Siena



Sano di Pietro (1405-1481), *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, c. 1447, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison window
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom



c. 1450 Catalonia



Spanish (Catalan) Painter, *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Mid-15th century, c. 1450, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.

Antecedents for four motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of Blood
2. Barred prison window
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome\*



## 1455–1460 Siena



Giovanni di Paolo, ↑  
*John the Baptist visited in  
Prison by his disciples,*

*Beheading of St John the  
Baptist,* →  
Art Institute of Chicago



Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

- 1. Fountain of blood
- 2. Barred prison window
- 11. Rope or chain on the façade of the prison



c.1455 Rogier van der Weyden and early  
Netherlandish painting.

Continues next page...



Rogier van der Weyden  
(1399–1464),  
*Beheading of St John  
the Baptist*, panel from  
*Altarpiece of Saint  
John*, c. 1455,  
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Antecedents for six motifs in Caravaggio 1608

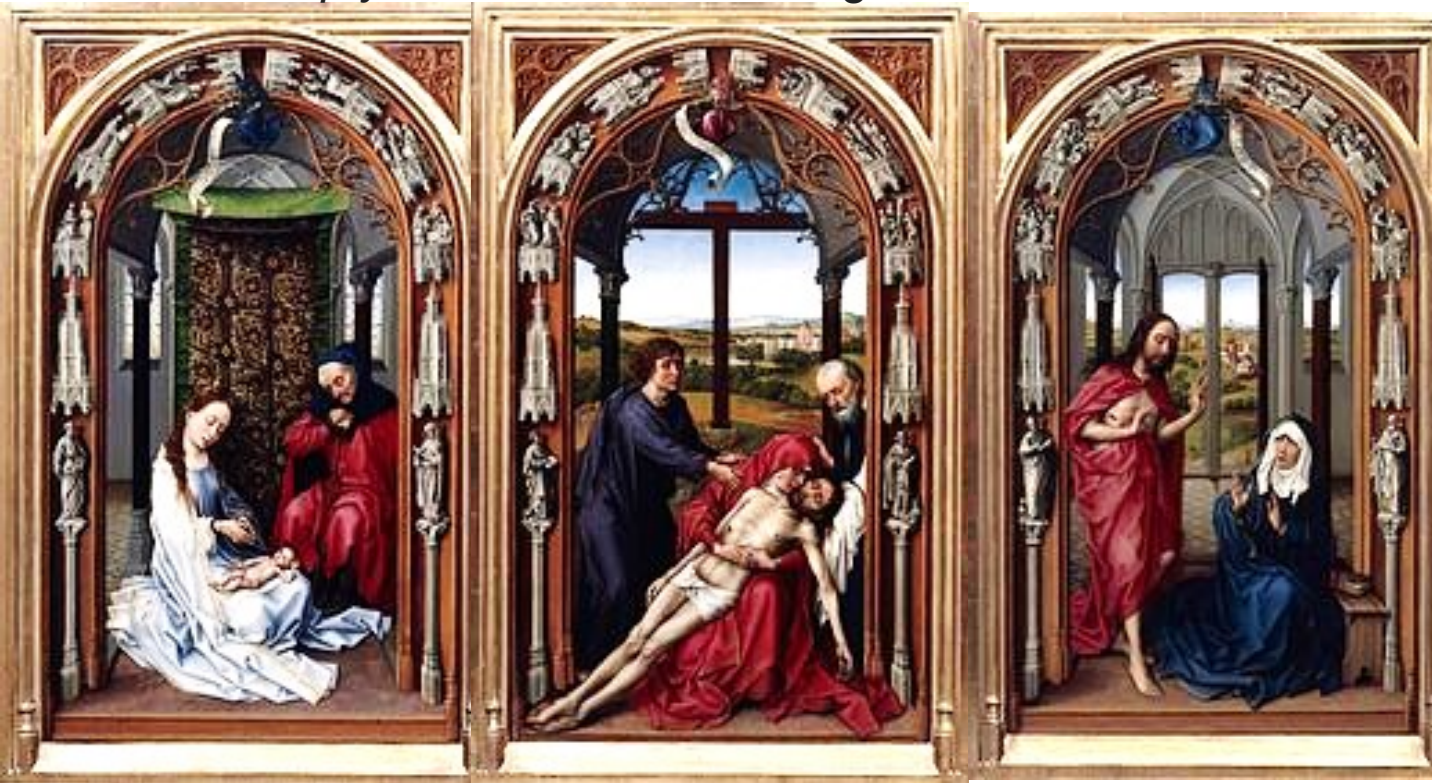
1. Fountain of blood
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



c.1455 The arch-motif in the Miraflores triptychs by Rogier van der Weyden



*Saint John Triptych*, c. 1455, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.



*Mary or 'Miraflores' Triptych*, c. 1437, Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.

The Saint John Triptych, c. 1454, and his earlier altarpiece, the Mary or 'Miraflores' Triptych, c. 1437, are only two works in which Rogier employed the 'arch motif'. The sacred scenes seem to take place inside an arch or doorway that resembles a church portal. The arch was first fully developed as a symbol of sanctity in Netherlandish painting by Rogier van der Weyden, followed by Petrus Christus and Dieric Bouts. It was eventually replaced by more naturalistic tendencies, but then also revived as a deliberate archaism in the Renaissance.

K.M. Birkmeyer, 'The Arch Motif in Netherlandish Painting of the Fifteenth Century', *Art Bulletin* 43, 1961.



c. 1496 Hispano-Flemish



Juan de Flandes  
(1450-1519),  
*Beheading of St John  
the Baptist*, Musée  
d'art et d'histoire di  
Ginevra, c.1496.

Antecedents for six motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
4. Window with a spectator
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



c.1508 Germany



Lukas Cranach, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*,  
c. 1508, British Museum

Antecedents for two motifs in Caravaggio 1608

6. Spectators are divided into separate groups of  
women and men

8. Execution in the street



## 1510 Germany



Albrecht Dürer, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1510, woodcut.

Antecedents for six motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
6. Spectators are divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## 1512 Regensburg, Bavaria, Germany



Albrecht Altdorfer (c. 1480 -- 1538), *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1512, woodcut, British Museum, London.





### Antecedents for seven motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
5. Jailer commands the executioner
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



1512

The arch-motif in *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* woodcuts by Albrecht Altdorfer



Altdorfer, *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, 1512, British Museum [detail]



Altdorfer, *Death of the Virgin*, c. 1513, British Museum



Altdorfer, *Circumcision*, c. 1513, British Museum

One of the hallmarks of Altdorfer's art, and especially his woodcuts, is his consistent use of the arch-motif as a symbol of a sacred place or as a heavenly portal. In Romanesque churches, the arched portal symbolized the passage from daily mortal life into the realm of God. "I am the Door, if one enters through me, he shall be saved" (John 10:9). During the 15th and 16th centuries, the phrase, 'the heaven of the church' was often used in texts on domes or vaulting (Timothy Verdon, *Sotto il cielo della Cupola*, Florence, 1997)



## 1514-1514 Brussels, Belgium



Bernard Van Orley, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1514-1514, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC Benedictine abbey church of Marchiennes (from about 1514; probably commissioned by Jacques Coëne, abbot of Marchiennes);

Antecedents for nine motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
5. Jailer commands the executioner
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom.
10. Executioner stands astride the body of the Baptist
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome

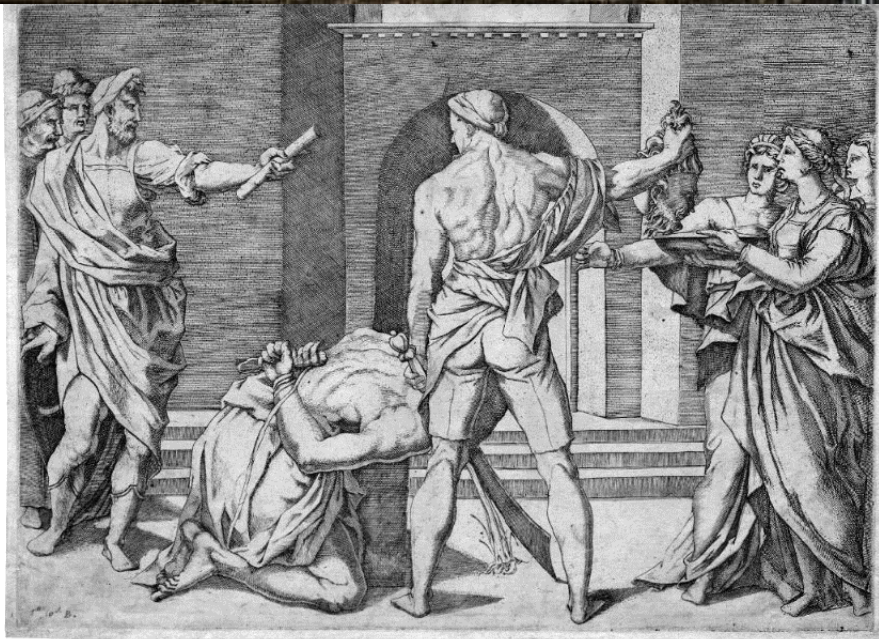


1523



Andrea del Sarto,  
Beheading of St John the  
Baptist, 1523, grisaille.  
Chioostro Scalzo, Florence

Enea Vico, attr.,  
engraving in reverse after  
Sarto, 1550-70 British  
Museum



Antecedents for eight motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
3. Arched portal
4. Window with spectators
5. Jailer commands the executioner
6. Spectators are divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## 1535-1540 Florence



Bacchiacca, Decollazione del Battista, 1535-1540, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Antecedents for eight motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
5. Jailer commands the executioner
6. Spectators divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## 1547 post-Byzantine Cretan School, Mount Athos



Tzortzes (of Crete), *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1546-47, wall painting, Dionysiou monastery , Mount Athos, Greece..

By the third decade of the 16th century, the icon painters of Crete were designing and painting **hagiographic** frescoes in the important monastic centers on Mount Athos and Meteora.

Antecedents for three motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
9. Execution in the street in front of the prison



Mid 16th century, Perugia



Orazio Alfani (Perugia c. 1510-1583 Rome), *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, c. 1545, (photograph during conservation), Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia

Antecedents for six motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
6. Spectators divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



1550-1555 Rome



Daniele Volterra, *Beheading of John the Baptist*, Galleria Sabauda, Torino

Antecedents for four motifs in Caravaggio 1608

- 1. Fountain of blood
- 2. Barred prison window
- 4. Window with spectator
- 9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom



## 1553 Oratorio San Giovanni Decollato, Roma



*Unidentified artist following Francesco Salviati, Beheading of the Baptist (Decollazione del Battista), 1553, left wall at the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato, Rome.*



Antecedents for eight motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
4. Window with spectator
6. Spectators are divided into symmetrical groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
8. Execution in the street
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom



## 1553 Chiesa di San Giovanni Decollato, Roma



Giovanni Battista de' Cavalieri (Trento. c. 1525 - 1601, Roma), engraving after Vasari, 1578 ↓

Giorgio Vasari, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1553, main altarpiece, San Giovanni Decollato, Rome

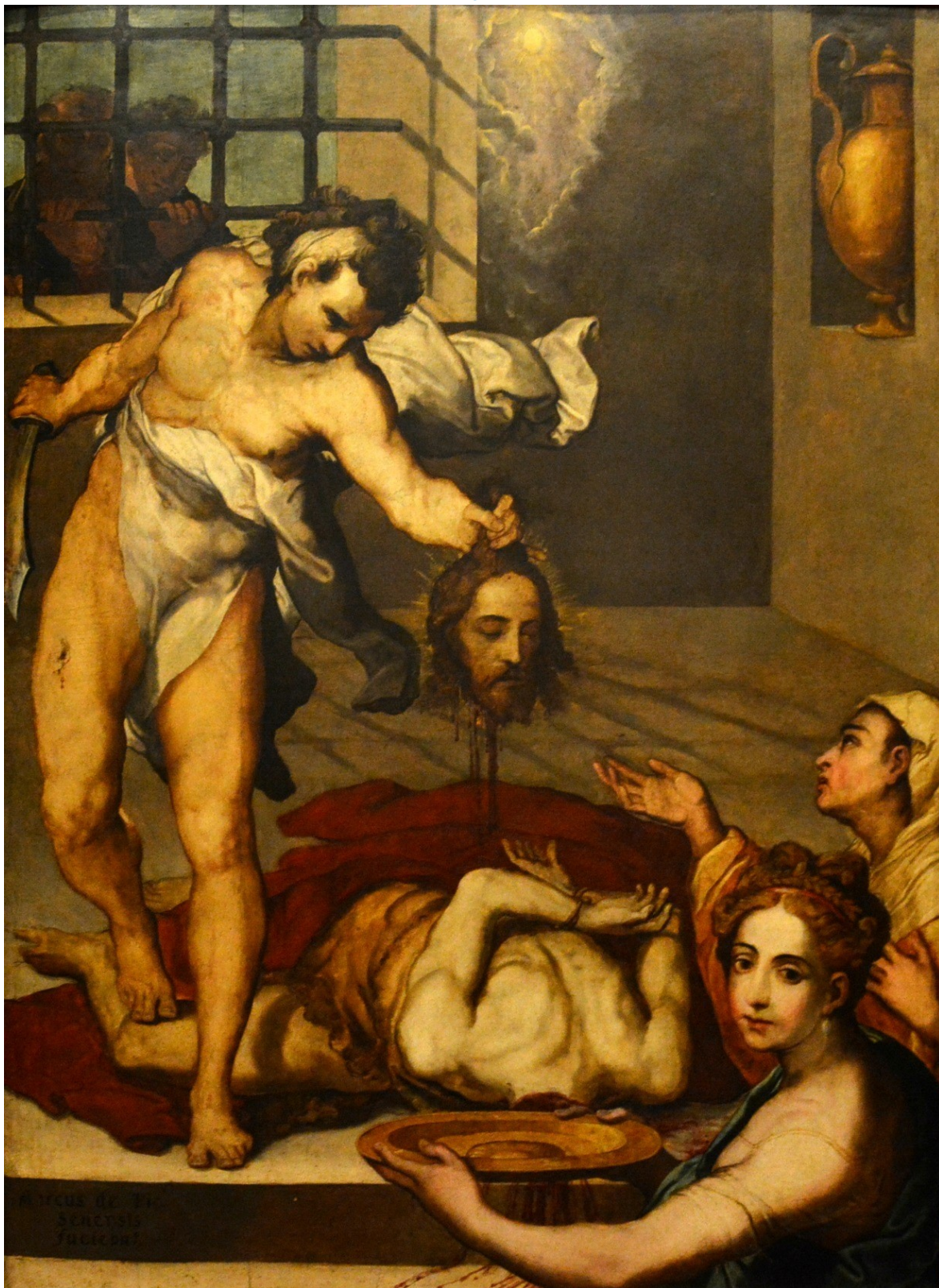
Antecedents for seven motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
4. Window with spectators
6. Spectators are divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome





1564 Siena, Rome, Naples



Marco Pino, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1564, Capodimonte Museum, Napoli

Antecedents for six motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
4. Window with two spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## 1574 Antwerp



Antecedents for seven motifs  
in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
11. Rope descends the façade of the prison
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome

Marten de Vos, *Beheading of John the Baptist*, 1574, Panel in the St Thomas altarpiece originally in the Cathedral, Antwerp, today in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts.



## 1580-1590 Antwerp



Jan Sadeler after Marten de Vos *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, engraving 1580-1590, British Museum

Antecedents for motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rustication
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## c. 1590 Post-Byzantine Cretan School



Venetian-Cretan painting, 16th century, The Beheading of St John the Baptist, location unknown (cf J.T. Spike, *Caravaggio*, 2nd ed., 2010, p. photo via Artnet.com)

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. while Crete was under Venetian possession, more than two hundred painters were active in Candia (present day Herakleion). Some of these painters chose to follow the post-byzantine tradition of Constantinople, while others were influenced by the masters of the Venetian Renaissance.

Antecedents for motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rustication
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



## c. 1600 Flemish painter in Rome



Follower of Aert Mijtens (Brussels c.1541-1602 Rome), *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, c. 1602, San Lorenzo in Miranda, Rome. The painting between 1602-1607, during the re-construction of the old church.

## Antecedents for motifs in Caravaggio 1608

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
4. Windows with spectators
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome



1608 Caravaggio    Oratory of the Beheading of St John the Baptist,  
Co-Cathedral of St. John, Valletta, Malta

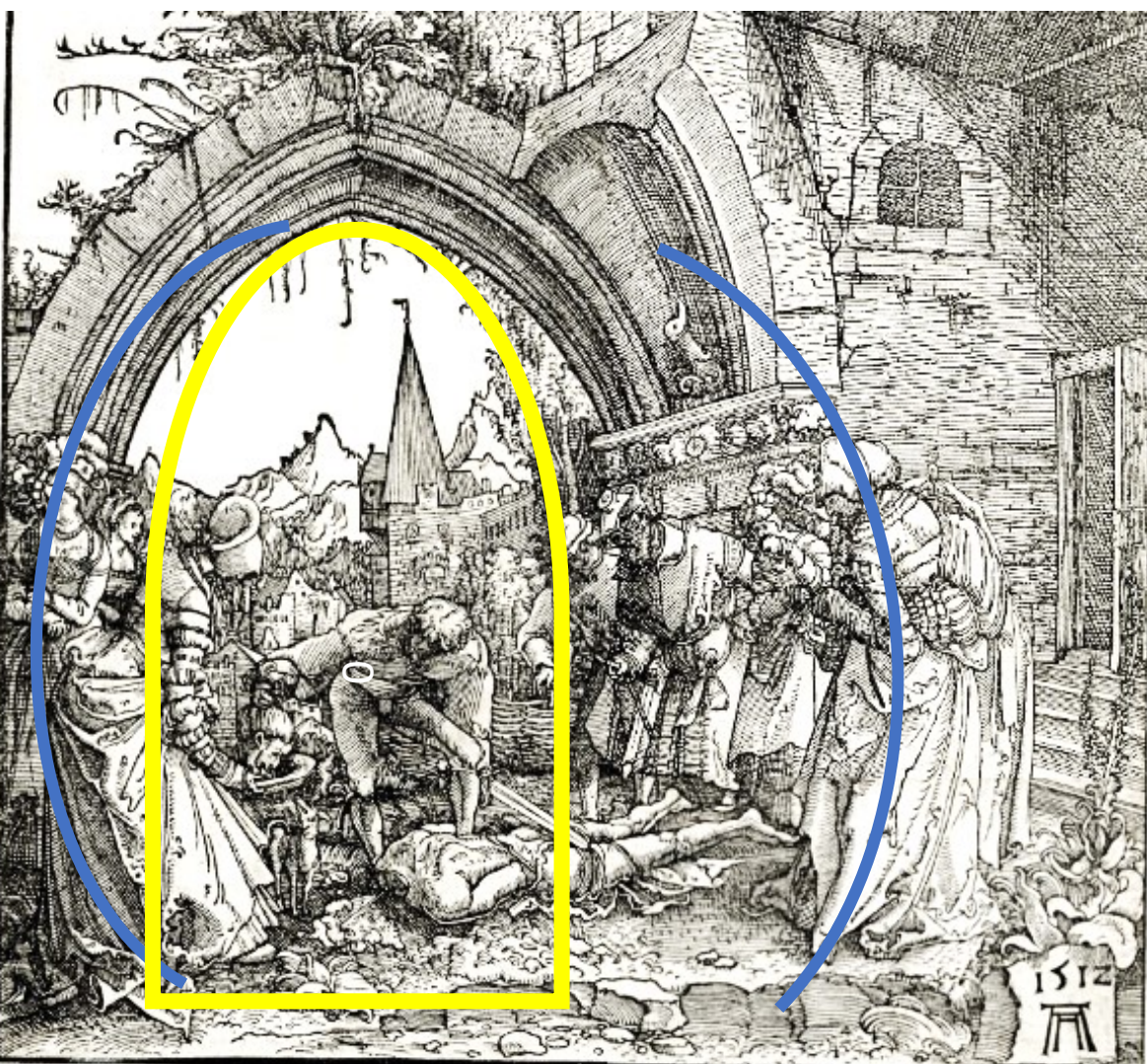
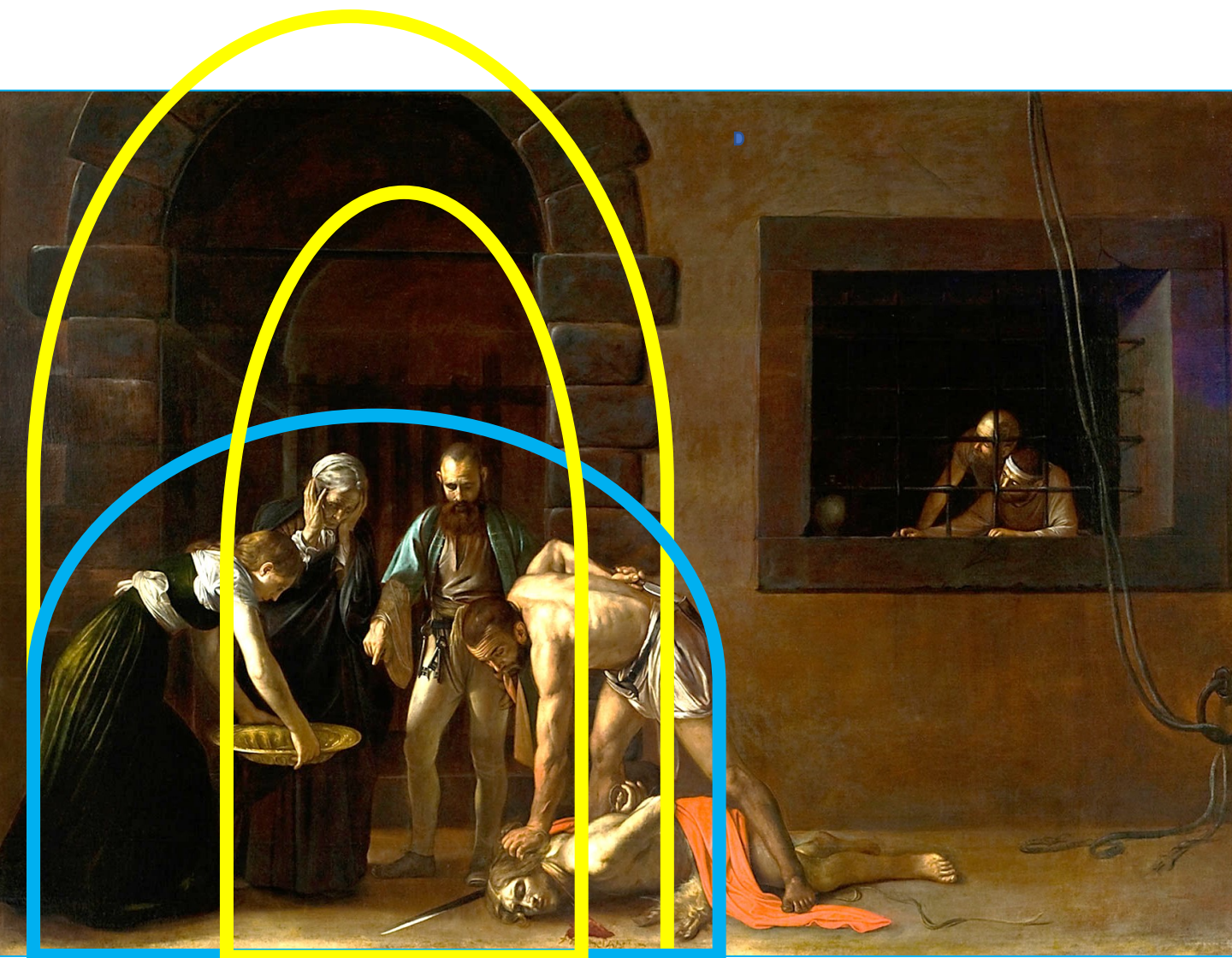


Twelve motifs that identify this painting as *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*. All of These compositional elements are found in the *Albero* of this Biblical subject.

1. Fountain of blood
2. Barred prison window
3. Arched portal with rusticated quoins
4. Window with spectators
5. Jailer commands the executioner
6. Spectators are divided into separate groups of women and men
7. Executioner holds the hair of the Baptist's head to expose his neck
8. Execution in the street in front of the prison.
9. John's red garment is a symbol of martyrdom.
10. Executioner stands astride the body of the Baptist
11. Rope descends the façade of the prison.
12. Executioner gives the Baptist's head to Salome. Caravaggio makes two variations on this traditional motif: a maidservant replaces Salome and the jailor commands the executioner to place the baptist's head on the salver.



1608 Caravaggio Comparison of the arch-motif in the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* with Altdorfer 1512.





# 1608 Caravaggio: i rami dell'Albero iconografico...



In this page, we illustrate an icon (first published in 2010) that might have directly inspired Caravaggio's composition of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*. It seems likely that in deference to the Order of St John's devotion to Greek icons, he invented a magnificent life-size version of [c. 1590](#).



←By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the post-Byzantine painters of Crete under Venetian rule often found inspiration in Italian or Flemish works of art.

Reviewing this *Albero*, it seems possible that the Cretan painter knew this engraving → or others similar, by the Antwerp artists Jan Sadeler and Marten de Vos [1580-1590](#).







The martyrdom of John the Baptist ensured his reward in Paradise. Loss of life exchanged for eternal life has been the universal prayer of warriors from time immemorial. The Knights of St John sought from Caravaggio a reading of this mighty theme that would be comforting to men who risked such deaths. The painter responded with a poignant meditation on death that contains a promise: «He that loses his life for my sake shall find it» (Matthew 10:39). The unconscious poses of the witnesses to his martyrdom, selected in universal pairs of young and old, male and female, evil and sympathetic, form a *tableau vivant* of perfect symmetry as they stand over the fallen prophet. The curved arc of their backs is repeated in the great portal behind them. An arch is a sacred shape, symbolic of the vault of heaven. St. Augustine wrote of the Christian martyrs, «He who has no tomb has the sky for his vault».