

The Dynamics of Tradition illustrated by the Magi

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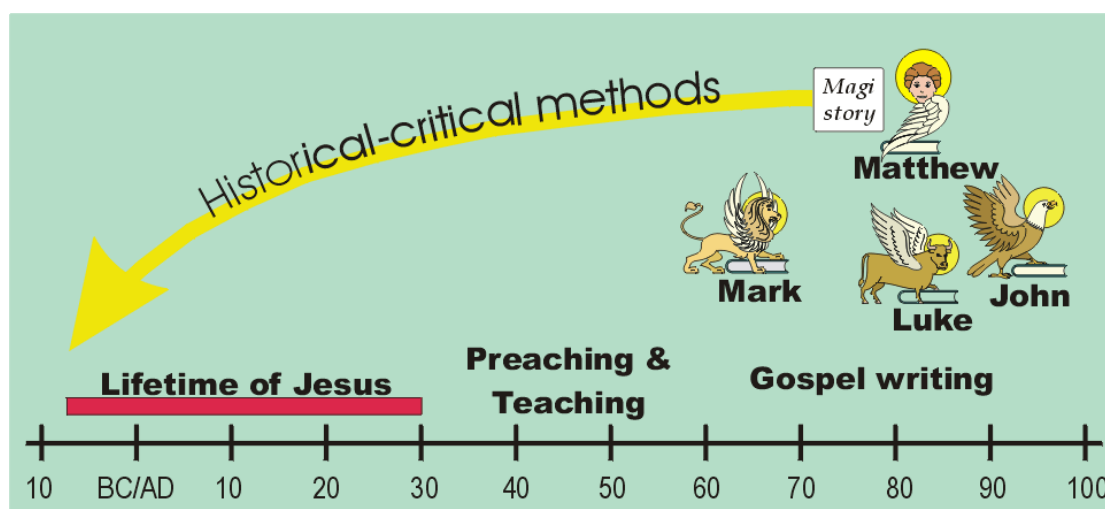
Abstract: Art is both a reflection of and a source for Theology. The Matthew 2:1-16 pericope has been depicted by Christian artists since at least the third century. Looking at representations of the Magi shows how believers have, across time, invested the story with differing theological interpretations. This paper attempts to identify some of those interpretations and to track the changes in them so as to identify mechanisms at work in the processes of Tradition.

In Roman Catholic Theology the notion of “Tradition” is extremely important.¹ We distinguish between “The Tradition of the Church” and the many little “traditions” within the Church. This article considers one of those “traditions” so that it may throw light on what is meant by tradition and how it operates. Medical researchers, trying to understand a process, inject a dye or stain that will enable them to track one aspect of the system they are observing. Theologians cannot inject barium into Salvation History to track the dynamics of tradition, but I claim that the Magi provide a naturally radiant item of that great Tradition which archaeology and art enable us to track across time.

The story of the Magi is only found in Matthew. It is encapsulated in sixteen verses of the infancy narrative and is not referred to again in that or any other canonical gospel. The Magi see a star, come “from the east”, meet Herod in Jerusalem, find Jesus at Bethlehem, present gold, frankincense and myrrh and “return to their own country by a different way” (note that “country” is singular). They are

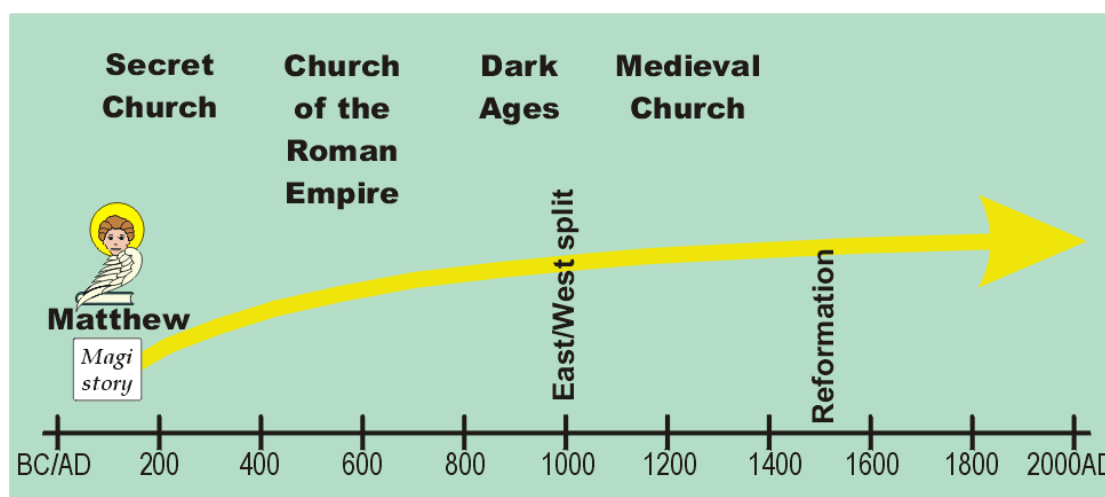
¹ Cf. *Dei Verbum* 7-10.

enigmatic figures and they have exerted a fascination on Christians throughout the lifetime of the Church.



1 Investigating the origin of the story

One intriguing path of scholarship is to the genesis of this story. Does it go back to an historical event? Was there a celestial phenomenon that Christians subsequently associated with the birth of Jesus? Why was this story told in Matthew’s church community?²



2 The role of the story in the Tradition

² A classic treatment of those questions is Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: a commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 1977, 1993. A more recent example is Edwin Freed, *The Stories of Jesus’ Birth: A Critical Introduction*, 2001.

Rather than follow that well-trodden path this article is going to plot some points on the *forward* trajectory of the story. As an incident of the good news the story of the Magi is taken up by the culture of the Church. It becomes a story that all Christians know, that preachers use, that writers comment on and, significantly, that artists illustrate. Patristic texts reflect the views of learned bishops. Artworks are commissioned by a wider range of patrons. I contend that the works of artists are more reflective of the faith of ordinary believers than are the contents of high-level theological discourse.

Paolo Berdini, describes the work of artists depicting Biblical subjects as a process of “visual exegesis.”³ David Cartlidge sets that notion within the wider context of Tradition by asserting: “The developing consensus is that oral traditions, texts (rhetorical arts) and the pictorial arts all interact so that *all* the arts demonstrate the church’s ‘thinking out loud’ in both rhetorical and pictorial images.”⁴



Attending to the Text

Since the passage is *now* read through the lens of two millennia of Christian contemplation, it is important to see what *it doesn't say*.



Matt 2:1 has “wise men” (*magoi* in Greek) - it does not say that there were



three of them, but 2:11 does mention three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gifts are named but not described – was the gold in form of



coins, ingots, jewellery? The other two gifts are types of incense and would be in either powder or nodules and could be expected to be in a covered



container. The passage has that the Magi came “from the east” – it does not give their country. *It does not call them kings*, the only king mentioned is



King Herod. It does not provide names for the Magi. We are not told how old they are. There is no description of them. They see “the child with his Mother, Mary” (2:11); Joseph is not mentioned in the gift-giving scene. No



animals at all, no ox, no ass, and above all, no camels, are mentioned in the story. One posture is referred to: “They fell down and worshiped him”

3 Not mentioned

³ Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997.

⁴ David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*. Routledge: London and New York, 2001, xv.

which could apply to genuflection or prostration. The fulfilment of prophecy could refer to kneeling or prostration. The prophet Micah (Mi 5:1) is explicitly, though loosely, cited. Light and sight are mentioned frequently.⁵

Artists *have* to fill in details not mentioned in the text; to put faces on the Magi, to clothe them, to particularise the gifts. The nature of the artist's task demands that they



go beyond the letter of the scriptural passage, interpreting it and developing it. All hearers and readers of the story engage in this process, more or less, as they imagine the incident recounted. Artists, however, leave evidence of their thought processes.

The *Adoration of the Magi* is enormously well represented in the surviving examples of paleo-Christian art. In the early church the Magi were among the most popular subjects for Christian

artists. In our age, the Lucan shepherds are more popular than the Matthean kings in nativity scenes. The situation in the early Christian period was quite the reverse. Depictions of the shepherds and the crib are later and less frequent.

The Earliest Artistic Representations:

The oldest known representation of *The Magi bearing Gifts* is a fresco, dating from the latter half of the third century. It is in a prominent position above an arch in a small chamber, the "Greek Chapel", the oldest part of the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. It shows three figures, each in a different colour, holding gifts before them striding in single file towards a seated woman holding a baby. The woman, though seated, is as tall as the magi. The context of the image is ritual, funerary and possibly liturgical. The space it decorates was used by Christians to pray for their dead. Why was this, of all possible Christian imagery, popular in Roman cemetery art? In this chapel context it is juxtaposed with other images. It faces a depiction of *The Three Young Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace*. That incident is from Daniel 3 where Shadrach,

⁵ A very good brief exegesis of the passage emphasising the themes of sight and light is given by Martin O'Kane, "The Artist as Reader of the Bible: Visual Exegesis and the Adoration of the Magi" in *Biblical Interpretation* 13 (2005), 337-73.

Meshach and Abed-Nego refuse to worship a statue of King Nebuchadnezzar and are thrown into a furnace, where they are miraculously preserved from death. Another illustration in the Greek Chapel, of *Susanna and the Elders*, shows further interest in the Book of Daniel.

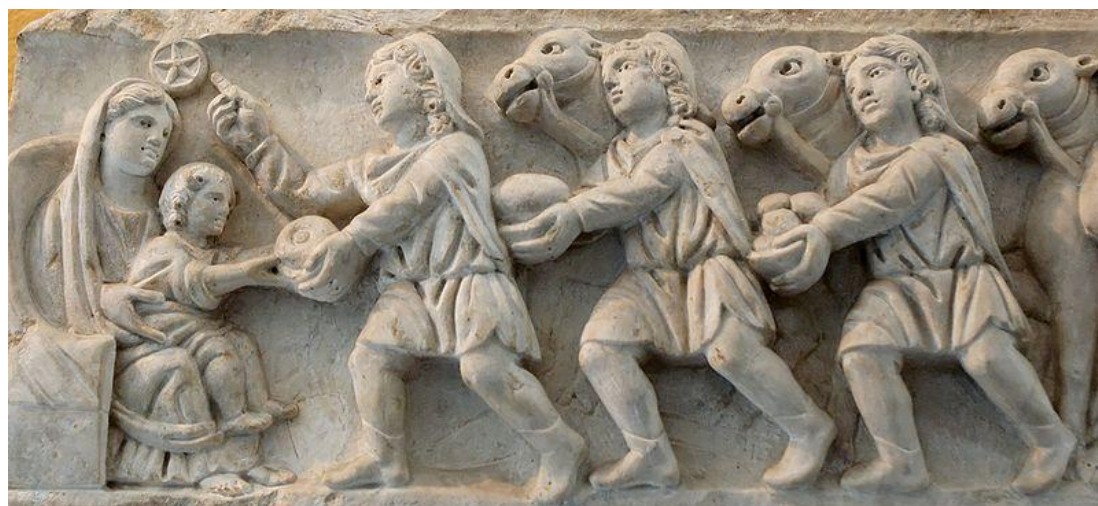
Thus, the Magi story is not considered in isolation. It is one of many stories that Christians told. It was told in the context of, and in dialogue with, stories of the Old Testament. Two elements of this dialogue are the notion of type/anti-type and the fulfilment of prophecy.

The Figure and Its Fulfilment

Familiar to us from ancient sermons, like the *Mystagogical Catecheses* of Cyril of Jerusalem, is the pairing of elements from the Old Testament with those in the New Testament. The manna in the desert is a type (*typos* in Greek) of the Eucharist. The crossing of the Red Sea is a type of Baptism. This catechetical and exegetical method remained in vogue for centuries and led to very elaborate systems of connections between scriptural passages.

The pairing of the *Magi bearing Gifts* with the *Three Young Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace*, evident in this first example, is frequent. The Three Young Hebrews are widely accepted as the type of the Magi. The Magi came to Jerusalem from the East which is the direction of the Kingdom of Parthia and the city of Babylon, where the Young Hebrews had been in the Imperial Court. On this slight connection is forged a link which may have provided the artists with some of their details and will lead the Magi to be often found in the company of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego.

Coping with persecution was an issue for Christians prior to the edict of toleration in 313 AD. The Book of Daniel is about persisting in the true faith as a minority group in a dominant pagan culture. This endurance, and God's presence with his people, is evoked in the image of the young men in the furnace.



5 Sarcophagus from the Catacomb of St Agnes, Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican. Start of the 4th century.

In this low relief carving from a sarcophagus from the catacomb of *St Agnes* in Rome the Magi are three very similar young men clad in Parthian garb – Phrygian caps, capes, short belted tunics, perhaps trousers, and low boots. They stride out in single file accompanied by camels. Their gifts are thrust out before them.

Fulfilment of Prophecy – A Webwork of Texts

The first Christians were Jews. The first proclamations of the good news were made to Jewish audiences. In this context, an effective form of presentation of the Christian message was to show how it fulfilled the prophecies of the Jewish scriptures. Isaiah was the work most frequently invoked. Verse 60: 6 reads:

The multitude of camels shall cover you, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praises of Yahweh.

This text mentions two of the gifts of the Magi so Christian preaching linked the Isaiah pericope to the Magi story. Isaiah mentioned camels, so, despite not being in Matthew's nativity, camels become a regular accompaniment for the Magi in art.

Similarly, when Isaiah used a metaphor for loyalty which happens to have the word manger/crib in it: “The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib; but Israel doesn't know, my people don't consider.” (Is 1:3) The details are taken as prophetic and the ox and ass become a standard feature in representations of the Lucan nativity and as background for later depictions of the Magi.

The star in the Magi story is taken as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Balaam.

I see him, but not now. I see him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A sceptre will rise out of Israel, and shall strike through the corners of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth. (Num 24:17)

This is shown by the frequent addition of a prophetic figure behind Mary in the *Magi bearing Gifts* scene. The figure carries a stick, points toward the star and usually has an off-the-shoulder tunic. This is *not* Joseph, those are the accoutrements of a prophet, perhaps intended to be Balaam himself.



6 Detail of a cast of the funeral plaque of Severa, original in Pio Cristiano Museum, Rome. c. 330 AD

This connection of a range of texts to Matt 2:1-16 illustrates the point made by Yves Congar:

Tradition is not disjunctive, it is synthesis and harmony. It does not skirt around the subject, isolating a few texts, but on the contrary operates from within linking the texts to the centre by situating the details in relation to the essential.⁶

Why Three?

There is a late third-century fresco in the Catacomb of Sts Peter and Marcellinus in Rome that has two magi presenting their gifts. A fourth century one in the Catacomb of Domitilla has four magi. These are exceptions; depictions of three are the norm. The number of gifts makes three reasonable; the connection with the three young Hebrews in the furnace may have encouraged this standardisation. Three is a common number in the bible. Balaam strikes his donkey three times, and then blesses Israel three times (Num 22:28, 24:10), Elijah douses his sacrifice with water three times

⁶ Yves Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*, Burns and Oates: London, 1964, transl. *La Tradition et la Vie de l'Église*, Volume 3 in the *Je sais-Je crois* series (Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris), 92-3.

(1King 18:34). “Three connotes significance, sufficiency and completeness.”⁷ Aristotle points out that “three is the first number to which the term ‘all’ has been appropriated.”⁸

Why in a Line?

The norm for early representations of the Magi bearing Gifts is for the three of them to be in single file with their gifts held out before them. The artistic precedent for this is a *tribute procession*. When a nation was conquered by another there was often an arrangement whereby independence was maintained but tribute was paid. The lesser king would send a periodic contribution to the greater. It would be conveyed by ambassadors and could include symbolic gifts. Hence our earliest representations depict the Magi as three young ambassadors from the kingdom of Parthia coming to pay tribute to Christ as a great king. They are often shown striding out, their haste such that their short cloaks billow behind them.

[Link to a photo of a tribute procession](#) carved on the stairway of the palace of Darius in Persepolis dating from the fifth century BC.
[Another tribute procession with genuflection](#) carved on the base of obelisk of Theodosius (Emperor 379-395) in Constantinople.

Why Parthians?

The Parthian Empire was a rival to the Roman Empire in scale and longevity. It stretched from the boundaries of Cappadocia all the way to India. It lasted for five centuries, coming to an end in 224 AD. The Parthians controlled much of the frankincense trade. A number of wars were fought between the Romans and the Parthians. In 197 AD Septimus Severus, the Roman Emperor with two legions traveled down the Euphrates to sack Seleucia, Babylon and Ctesiphon. Severus took the victorious title *Parthicus Maximus* and an arch was erected in the forum of Rome in honour of his great



7 Arch of Severus - Roman escorting a Parthian prisoner

⁷ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (1998), s.v. “Three”, 867.

⁸ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 1, 1.

victory. The arch shows Parthian prisoners wearing Phrygian caps, capes, short belted tunics, trousers and boots, exactly like to the earliest depictions of the Magi.



8 Mithras statue in the British Museum

Another place where members of the Roman Empire would have encountered people dressed in the Parthian style was in the worship of Mithras. The heroic figure of the bull-slayer is dressed identically to the Magi, and the head of the community (the *Pater*) dressed in the same fashion. A sub-text of the early Christian depictions of the Magi was that followers of the hero of the sun god were seeing the light and turning to worship of the Christ. A tradition will carry many elements. The ones that come to the

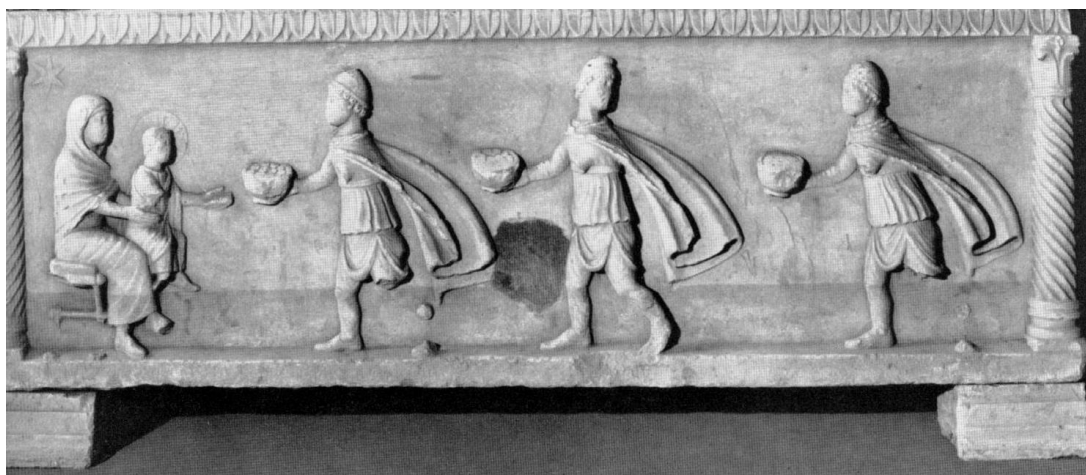
fore at a particular time are partially determined by the groups that Christianity is engaging in dialogue.

The First Gift

Matthew tells us that the Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The latter two, both being aromatic gums, can be shown as nodules or covered dishes. The problem for the artist was how to represent gold, which can be shaped into innumerable forms. A tribute procession brings gifts to a ruler. They understood the Magi as paying homage to Christ as *King*. Some of the Christian artists expressed this by forming the gold of the first gift into a crown.



9 Detail of the Sarcophagus of Adelfia, Syracuse, Regional Museum. c. 340 AD The first gift is a crown.



10 Early 5th Century Sarcophagus of the Armenian Exarch Isacio, Ravenna.

One of the attributes of the Emperor in pagan Roman art was the halo, living kings and queens were depicted with the circular nimbus of light about their heads. Jesus acquires this attribute from the beginning of the fifth century. Initially, only he has the halo, later Mary and the saints will be similarly honoured.



11 Detail of the Sarcophagus of Isacio

In this particular case the halo of Jesus incorporates the *chi-rho* monogram. The title “Christ” of which that monogram is the first two letters means “anointed one” and royalty were anointed at coronation. Later the halo of Jesus will be distinguished from other Christian haloes by having a cross within it, emphasising Jesus as Saviour, rather than as King.

Why so Popular?

The environment and history of the catacombs proved particularly suitable for the preservation of frescoes and sarcophagi, so funerary art is particularly well represented among our corpus of paleo-christian art. This being said *The Magi presenting Gifts* is surprisingly frequent and prominently located among tomb decorations. Since they are all from the same city it is unsurprising that the representations are very alike. When a single city dominates a large region there can be uniformity of interpretation across that area. The outlying areas do not feel free to innovate, and if they do their innovations are not accepted. By contrast, a change in the centre will spread out like a wave.

A major issue for the early Church was the relationship between Christians who were Jewish and those who were Gentile.⁹ An early fifth-century Roman mosaic in the church of Santa Sabina on the Aventine depicts the twin sources of the Church as two women: *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex gentibus*. Scripture scholars agree that Matthew intended the visit of the Magi as being a manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.¹⁰ Another convention of Roman art is the association of Jerusalem with the Church of the Circumcision and Bethlehem with the Church of the Gentiles.



12 Cast of funeral plaque of Severa, original in Pio Cristiano Museum, Rome. c. 330 AD

The date of baptism often features among the scant information given about the deceased in the catacombs. When the Magi are depicted there the artist may have meant us to understand that the dead person, like the Magi, was a gentile who through their baptism recognized the Christ. There is a line in T.S. Elliot's *Journey of the Magi* where he puts on the lips of the old king the words "I had seen birth and death but had thought they were different." That is a sentiment that Severa, "who lives in God," may well have understood. Hers is a gentile name – she identifies with the Church of Bethlehem, the church of the nations. Hence the popularity of the *Adoration of the Magi* reflects the composition of the Church. The *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* identifies herself with the Magi who came from outside Israel to acknowledge the Christ.

⁹ A work that gives a nuanced treatment of this topic is *Antioch and Rome* by R.E. Brown and J. Meier.

¹⁰ Cf. R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: a commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke: new updated edition*, Doubleday: USA, 1993, 182.



13 Reliquary of Sts Quiricus & Judith,
 Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna, c. 450 AD
Adoration of the Magi, Daniel in the Lion's Den
Christ giving the Law to Peter & Paul, Women at the Tomb

Popular Piety, Relics and Pilgrimage

The Peace of the Church (313 A.D.), and the legend of St Helen and the True Cross encouraged increasing numbers of pilgrims to visit the Holy Land in the fourth to the sixth centuries. The developing cult of relics (initially of martyrs and widened in the Carolingian period to include other saints) provided a

new, devotional context for sacred images. Expensive artworks like the reliquary shown would be commissioned by a church, but individual pilgrims also purchased cheaper “souvenir-type” artworks, especially if they visited Bethlehem or a place associated with the Magi. The British Museum has a bowl of tiny terracotta tokens stamped with the *Adoration of the Magi* on one side. They were found at Qal' at Sem' an in Syria, a pilgrimage centre associated with St Simeon Stylites (d. 459 A.D.).

[Gold Medallion with the Adoration of the Magi](#), originally from the Holy Land, now in the British Museum, dating from around 600 AD.

More expensive, but still mass-produced were the small flasks intended to contain oil or water from the Holy Land of which there are a collection in the Monza Cathedral. In that representation, the Magi are shown together with the shepherds. Incidents from the two different infancy narratives are combined in a single artwork. To remove any doubt as to what is being depicted the Magi are labelled with the word “*magoi*”. About this time, popular piety assigns to the Magi, travellers themselves, a patronage of voyagers. Pilgrims saw themselves as doing what the Magi had done, and hoped the Magi would protect them as they did so. The image of the Magi on this gold medallion, which can be seen by following the link below, would have been expected to function in a similar fashion to the prayer in the inscription: “Lord, protect the bearer.”

A more secular context is provided by the silver wine flask which was discovered in a treasure trove in Traprain Law in Scotland. Dating from the fifth century, and probably made in Italy, it shows that the Magi were a fit and recognisable theme for the tableware of the rich.



14 Ivory Tablet. British Museum.
c. 510 AD

Age Distinction

The early depictions of the Magi have them as three young men with little to distinguish them. An ivory from the early sixth century, now in the British Museum, breaks that trend by depicting one magus as having a beard. This is the start of a process which will end with the Magi clearly differentiated as one old, one middle-aged and one young. At Bethlehem the Magi represented the



15 Detail of Ivory Tablet

Gentiles who recognized the Christ. Believers come in all ages. A new, and enduring, feature in the artistic tradition will encourage viewers of the *Adoration of the Magi* to identify with the magus of their own age group.

Liturgy

Yves Congar defined Tradition and the “monuments of Tradition” thus:

In the first place Tradition is something unwritten, the living transmission of a doctrine, not only in words, but also by attitudes, modes of action, and which includes written documents, documents of the Magisterium, liturgy, patristic writings, catechisms, etc., a whole collection of things which form the evidence or monuments of Tradition.¹¹

It is a truism that art imitates life and life imitates art. When we are dealing with Christian art another component enters the dynamic: the life of the community is expressed in liturgy, art is at the service of liturgy and is used to decorate liturgical spaces. What is done in liturgy will also impact on the forms that art takes. Clearly,

¹¹ Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*, 10.

liturgy is a significant vehicle for the transmission of traditions and Tradition and the traditions are shaped by the liturgy in the process.

The Louvre has a pyx dating from the latter half of the fifth century. It is decorated with *The Resurrection of Lazarus* on the lid, *The Adoration of the Magi* on the front and *The Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace* on the back. A pyx is used for transporting the Eucharist to the sick. The scene of the *Resurrection of Lazarus* has an obvious connection with ministry to the sick. The Magi brought gifts to the Christ, the minister to the sick is bringing the gift of Christ.

The Cathedral of Venice, San Marco, has four alabaster columns supporting a baldachin above the altar. Looted by crusaders from Constantinople they are masterpieces of sculpture from about 500 AD. Small figures in niches around the columns depict various bible stories. *The Adoration of the Magi* is included (as is *The Magi search for Signs*) with the Magi bringing their gifts forward with their hands veiled. The representation of the procession of the Magi has been influenced by the offertory procession of the Eucharist. At the time it was the custom to bring the bread and wine to be used for the Eucharist forward with veiled hands. These Magi, with their respectfully carried gifts, are more a Christian offertory procession than a tribute procession.

The Scriptures, themselves objects carried in procession, also had their covers decorated with images that included the Magi. The treasury of the Cathedral of Milan has the ivory cover of a late fifth-century book of the Gospels. It is elaborately carved with sixteen narrative pictures. Given the range of stories contained in the gospels it is startling that three of the sixteen pictures on the cover are *The Magi bearing Gifts*, the



16 Mosaic, S Vitale, Ravenna. 547 AD

Magi sighting the Star, and the *Massacre of the Innocents*, all taken from within sixteen verses of one Gospel.

In the reign of Emperor Justinian a new Church was built in the town of Ravenna in the Po Valley in the North of Italy. The Emperor very publicly supported Christianity. Either side of the sanctuary of the Church mosaics were installed showing the Emperor and

Empress Theodora taking part in an offertory procession. Following a deacon, Theodora is bringing forward the wine for the Eucharist. The hem of Theodora's dress is decorated with *The Magi bearing Gifts*. Theodora's liturgical action is connected with what the Magi did. Already the Magi are suitable role models for royalty. When the citizens of that town take part in the liturgy they will feel that the Emperor and Empress share in that same Eucharist, and that they are all following the example of the Magi. Political patronage is a factor in the transmission of traditions, and in the production of monuments of the Tradition.

As soon as liturgical books were developed they provided yet another artistic context, though one that was much more under the control of the monasteries and hierarchy. From at least the seventh Century there are *Benedictionals*: books containing the formula of blessing to pronounced by the Bishop at Mass before the '*Pax Domini*'. A special formula existed for the feast of the Epiphany. The psalm for this mass (Psalm 72, Vulgate 71) included the lines

Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents;
The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.
And let all kings bow down before him, All nations serve him.

Æthelwold, the Bishop of Winchester (963-984), commissioned an illuminated Benedictional. The blessing for the Epiphany is decorated with a representation of the *Adoration of the Magi*. This is the earliest surviving portrayal of the Magi wearing crowns. This interpretation spreads and becomes the norm. The *Magi* become the *Three Kings*. It is hard to know which is prior – the liturgical use of the pairing of Psalm 72 and Matt 2:1-16 or the artistic presentation of crowned Magi. The point is moot: at this stage of the Tradition, the Church in its 'thinking aloud' connects the two texts and visualizes the Magi as royalty. Rather than a tribute procession from a single subordinate nation, each magus now represents his own kingdom *as its king* – not as a messenger from the king. The gift of gold had often been shown in the form of a crown. Once the Magi wear crowns this is less appropriate, they acknowledge the greater authority of the Christ by doffing their own crowns and other symbolism can be associated with the first gift. The artist of the Æthelwold image shows the Magi presenting Christ with the three gold diadems that had been a convention in Roman art to acknowledge the supremacy of the Emperor.

The Empire of Parthia had ceased to exist 224 AD. Art and Tradition are both conservative, and traces of the Parthian costumes of the Magi persist for centuries, but without the reference point they are eventually little understood. In the eleventh century mosaic in the monastery of Hosios Loukas in Boetia, Greece, the Phrygian



17 *Three Young Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace, Hosios Loukas. c. 1025 AD*

cap have shrunk to a mysterious knob on the head. The same thing has happened to the caps of the *Three Young Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace* who are still accompanying the Magi in the tradition. Once the Magi become kings, the connection with the Empire of Parthia is entirely broken, and despite the scriptural text referring to their (singular) country, the tradition will differentiate the Three Kings by their place of origin. Three kings imply three

different kingdoms, and the artists begin to differentiate the Magi by their place of origin as well as their age.

Return to the Sources

Tradition does not always move away from its origins, at times it loops back. Congar describes the phenomena in these terms:

Today, however, this appeal to “Tradition” is made in a new way; *ressourcement* is in fashion. This splendid word, coined by Péguy, implies a return to the origins, or more often an advance to the present day, starting from the origins.¹²

The artistic tradition does make efforts to return to its sources, not always successfully. In the *Bibliothèque Municipale* of Rouen there is a sacramentary that once belonged to Robert of Jumièges. I suspect the illuminator of the sacramentary was a monk who had made a pilgrimage to Rome. He had seen earlier representations of the Magi as a line of three young men wearing Phrygian caps. However, for him, the Magi were kings so he interpreted their caps as a kind of crown and consequently depicted King Herod wearing a Phrygian cap! He used his sources but related it to the world he knew, so his Magi are more like three young monks, and there are tonsured heads visible in the crowd beyond them in the Herod scene. He interprets the short tunics of the Magi as being a tucked-up monastic habit. He does not recognise that the

¹² Ibid., 12.

ancient art has them wearing trousers, nor does he know about camels. His Magi ride horses and present their gifts bare-legged. Tradition can be re-invigorated by a return to the source, but sources can also be misinterpreted.

Around 1300 AD there is a significant change in the portrayal of the Magi. It can be seen in Giotto's fresco below. The magi do have crowns, but they also have *halos*. The first magus kisses the feet of the Christ-child in homage. Where the early Magi were a tribute procession from a distant country paying homage to Christ as king, this magus is a king who humbles himself in pious adoration of the Son of God. The Magi are not only kings – they have become *saints*. Saints have relics. Relics of the Magi appeared late in the first millennium in Milan, and from there they went to Cologne in 1162 as part of the booty dispersed by the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa who had ravaged Italy. Today these relics remain in the Cathedral of Cologne in a magnificently enameled shrine.

The calendar of saints at Cologne provides a remarkable level of detail:



18 Giotto di Bondone, Scrovegni Chapel, Padova, Italy 1305 AD

“Having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel, the three wise men met at Sewa [Sebaste in Armenia] in A.D. 54 to celebrate the feast of Christmas. Thereupon, after the celebration of the Mass, they died: St Melchior on January 1st, aged 116; St. Balthasar on January 6th, aged 112; and St. Gaspar on January 11th, aged 109.”¹³

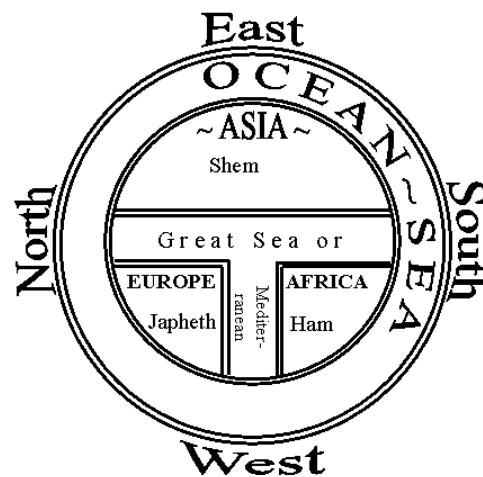
¹³ Cited by Michael Bulson *Preach What You Believe*, Paulist Press: Mahwah, NJ, 2005, 33.

They attended mass, they celebrated the feast of Christmas. The Magi are presented as good Catholics. A tradition can be misunderstood by people who think the past was the same as the present is.

New Knowledge

Also around 1300 AD, camels became known in Europe again. Giotto appears to have heard of camels rather than seen them; his camels look remarkably horse-like.

Scientific speculation had considered the possibility that the star of Bethlehem might have been a comet, so, when Halley's comet made its regular appearance in spectacular fashion in 1301, Giotto re-interpreted the star of the tradition as a comet like that of his own experience and established a convention that persists in virtually every Italian crib scene. Scientific discoveries and contemporary events impact on how the tradition is represented.



19 Earliest printed example of a classical T and O map (by Guntherus Ziner, Augsburg, 1472) and my translation. East is on top, each of the three continents is associated with a son of Noah.

Universality

The connection with Parthia being lost and the promotion to royalty opened the way to a new artistic convention to convey that the Magi represent “the nations.” Prior to the discovery of America, the Christian conception of the world involved three “continents” – Asia, Europe and Africa. Geertgen, painting in 1480,



20 Geertgen tot Sint Jans, 1480

depicts the old Magus in vaguely Turkish attire (Turkey is part of Asia), the middle-aged magus as European, and the young magus as a black African. Unlike messengers, Kings do not travel alone, they frequently are depicted as being accompanied by an entourage. In Florence, for example, the feast of the Epiphany was celebrated in the Middle Ages with three processions coming from different parts of the town, each procession accompanying one magus. The inclusion of the entourage enabled everyone to associate themselves with the Magi.

I stop at this point, not because the trajectory is complete, but because it grows increasingly complex. Protestant churches tended to react against the ‘Popish pomp’ of the Magi and to emphasise the Shepherds. The spread of Christianity around the world means that the story gets re-interpreted in many different cultural contexts.

What I have shown is that different Christian communities in different periods can visualize the same scriptures in strikingly different ways. Our readings are influenced by our context and by the history of our culture. The past affects, but does not determine, the present. The use and interpretation of Scripture in public worship is of major significance; Liturgy both conserves and reshapes the tradition. The story of the Magi is just one facet of the gospel, but it is plausible that the dynamics which operate in the presentation of that story impinge on other parts of the Tradition.

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