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Jesus' trinitarism  
and the differentiation  
of the Magi



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*Jesus' trimorphism and the differentiation  
of the Magi*

When Marco Polo visited Iran on his way to China he was told the following story about the Three Wise Men:<sup>1</sup> Jesus had appeared to them, as they separately entered the stable at Bethlehem, in three different forms corresponding to the age of each, namely, as a young man, an adult, and an old man.

In 1951 Leonardo Olschki<sup>2</sup> saw the source of this conception in the three- or fourfold manifestation of the Iranian god of time, Zurvan. He also adduced the Ismailite belief that the *imam* combines the three ages in his person, while his divine substance remains unchanged.

Olschki's article was cited by Monneret de Villard in his book *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici*, published the following year, in which he also quoted from the Armenian *Gospel of the Infancy* about Jesus appearing in three forms corresponding to the three gifts. But he concluded as follows:<sup>3</sup> 'questo problema . . . attende chi saprà compiutamente risolverlo'.

Elsewhere<sup>4</sup> I have tried to show that the representation of the Magi themselves as a youth, an adult and an old man stemmed from the Hellenistic cult of Aion, no matter whether this cult had been influenced by the Zurvan belief or not.

Only in 1966-7 did H. Puech briefly take up this theme in his seminar of the *École Pratique des Hautes-Études*, Paris, and announce<sup>5</sup> his intention to seek an explanation of the threefold appearance

1 *Il Milione*, chapters 31 and 32.

2 'The Wise Men of the East in oriental traditions', *Semitic and Oriental Studies presented to W. Popper* (1951), pp. 381-6.

3 *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici* (1952), p. 79.

4 'Die drei Weisen aus dem Morgenlande', *Antaios* (1965), pp. 234-52; 'Addenda et corrigenda', *Iranica Antiqua* (1967), pp. 1-3; 'Espace et Temps dans l'Iran ancien', *Revue de synthèse* LV-LVI (1969), pp. 259-80. Parts of these articles have been translated here.

5 *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études*, 5e section (Sciences religieuses) (1966-7), p. 130.

of Jesus in his assimilation to the personified Aion, 'cette sorte de réplique occidentale de Zurvan akarana'.

As a first stage in his research he gave two parallels to the Marco Polo testimony. The first is an illustrated ms. from the eleventh century in the Library of the Patriarchate in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> The three Magi, of different ages, see Jesus in the grotto in three different forms and later on exchange their impressions. 'The first said, I saw him as a little child, the second, I as a man of thirty, the third, I as an old man. And they wondered at this change in the appearance of the new-born.' This homily is attributed by Franz Dölger to John of Euboea.

The second text, cited by Puech (after Abbé Marcel Richard) in the following year, is an illustrated gospel book of the eleventh century in the Bibliothèque nationale:<sup>7</sup> Jesus is represented on a miniature in three forms and with three names, as an old man, *Παλαιὸς τῶν ἡμέρων*, as an adult, *Χριστός*, and as a youth, *Ἐμμανήλ*. The text is a homily of John of Damascus, in which the symbolism of the three ages is combined with that of the three gifts: to the first of the three kings, who offers Jesus gold, as to a king, he appears as a three-year-old child, like a son of God; to the second, who offers him frankincense as to a god, he appears as a man of thirty; to the third, who offers him myrrh as to a mortal man, he appears as an old man with white hair, looking like the 'Ancient of Days'.

If we survey the whole material, including the Marco Polo story, it becomes apparent that two different themes are here merged, which ought to be sorted out, namely: (1) the appearance of Jesus in different forms; (2) the differentiation of the Magi as a youth, an adult and an old man. Of the two themes, Puech has treated only the first, adducing a wealth of texts from the 'occidental' tradition,<sup>8</sup> in which Jesus appears in different forms:

- 1 In the Armenian *Gospel of the Infancy*, already cited by Monneret, Jesus appears in different forms according to the gifts offered, namely, as a child in the manger, as the son of an earthly king, and as Christ dead and resurrected. In another chapter of the same apocry-

6 Ms. 14, with illustration on folio 106v, a photograph of which was made available to me through the kindness of the Archbishop and of Professor R. J. Zwi Werblowsky of the Hebrew University.

7 Ms. gr. 74, f. 167, reproduced here, plate 8.1.

8 'Occidental' here means Mediterranean, as opposed to the Iranian tradition referred to by Olschki.

- phal gospel Jesus transforms himself into child, an adult and an old man, later to resume his former appearance.
- 2 According to Photius, Jesus appears to his disciples as a child, a youth and an old man.
  - 3 In Peter—Acts 21 and chapter 29 of the *Vita Aberci* Jesus appears to three old women, or to two groups of old women, as an old man, a beardless youth and a little child. It is to be noted that the persons to whom he appears are not themselves of different ages, as will be the case with the Magi.
  - 4 In John—Acts Jesus appears once as a 'handsome man', then as a bald old man, then, to James, as a child and as a youth.
  - 5 In chapter 14 of the *Martyrdom of Peter* Simon the Magus (the first of the Gnostics) transforms himself successively into a child, an old man, a youth.
  - 6 In the prologue to the *Apokryphon Johannis* Jesus appears to John in three different forms, two of which are specified, namely, as a child and as an old man.

Puech comments illuminatingly:<sup>9</sup>

Autant deviner que Jésus est ici conçu sur le type de l' *Ἀιών* en qui coexistent passé, présent, avenir, qui englobe et réunit en soi les trois dimensions du temps, les trois stades successifs d'une durée totale, correspondant, pour ce qui est de l'homme, aux trois âges de la vie: enfance ou jeunesse, maturité, vieillesse. Le sens et l'origine du thème de la 'trimorphie' appliqué à Jésus sont par là, nous a-t-il déjà semblé, susceptibles d'être découverts: Jésus doit être, en l'occurrence, une figure, une personnification de l' *Ἀιών*.

I propose here to develop this point a little, then briefly to tackle again the second one, left aside by Puech, namely, the differentiation of the Magi.

## I

In order to explain the role of Aion in the emergence of Jesus' trimorphism we must recall, however succinctly, the origin of the Epiphany.

The anniversary of Mithra's birth was celebrated on 25 December—on the very day, that is, which was later chosen, at Rome, for the date of Christmas. Until then the birth of Christ, the adoration of the Magi and the baptism of Christ had all been celebrated on 6 January. This

<sup>9</sup> *Annuaire*, p. 130.

day had been, before Christianity, notably in Egypt, the birthday of Aion, the god of time, and it is probably from Egypt that the Christian festival on that day spread to the whole of Christendom, including the West. In a reverse movement, the 25 December Christmas festival spread from Rome into the whole orient. There were thenceforth the two successive feast days we know: Christmas on 25 December, Epiphany on 6 January.

Leaving the latter aside for the moment, we may first consider the 25 December festival before Christianity. It commemorated Mithra's birth, but, as its date implies, it regarded this birth as a periodic event, namely, the annual return of the solar brilliance after its greatest diminution at the winter solstice. That birth or its memory was therefore celebrated as a forthcoming event. However, the new-born Mithra is never represented as a suckling baby in swaddling clothes, but as a young boy, called *saxigenus* or *πετρογένης*.

What exactly did that epithet mean? To judge by all the figurations, it meant that Mithra had been born from the stone as fire from the flint, or rather, as the sun rises from behind mountains. On the other hand, we must not forget that this festival was celebrated in the Mithra temples, which had—in allusion to the vault of heaven—the shape of grottoes. From there to the conception of Mithra as born in a grotto was but a short step.

We may now put ourselves in the new perspective created by the birth of Jesus and the gospel story. We must first note that according to the canonical gospels Jesus was born in a crib: it is nowhere said that it was in a grotto. Thus three notions ran parallel to each other:

- 1 The infant Jesus born in a stable.
- 2 The boy Mithra springing from the stone.
- 3 Mithra's birth celebrated in grotto-shaped temples.

How did these three notions coalesce? A passage in Justin Martyr gives the impression that the similarity had been noticed. Hence it is that, from Justin onwards, with Origen and in the apocryphal *Gospel of James*, Jesus was deemed to have been born in a grotto.

There is little doubt that the three elements Virgil welded together in his fourth Eclogue, namely, the return of the golden age, the solar kingship and the infant saviour, already existed a long time before him, even if they had not yet been welded into a synthesis. The Babylonian doctrine of the Great Year and, earlier, the conception of a periodic renewal and an eternal return had spread the hope in a new era as far



Plate 8.1

Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale, Paris



Plate 8.2

Courtesy Princeton University Press



*Plate 8.3*

*Courtesy Osvaldo Böhm, Venice*

as Italy. This is proved by Roman coins at least since Caesar's death. The idea of a new era was attached, particularly in Egypt, to that of the emergence of a new king. Also in Egypt the king was expressly conceived of as solar. Moreover, we recall, each year on 25 December the return of the solar light was celebrated and on 6 January the renewal of Aion.

Finally—and this introduces the third theme—the return of the sun was represented as the birth of a child, Isis the virgin giving birth to the boy Horus, the solar child.

We may now pass to the 6 January festival. On this day, as we saw, the birth of Aion was celebrated. But Aion was conceived and represented now as a child (by Heraclitus, Euripides, etc), now as an adult in the prime of life (in the picture described by John of Gaza, under Justinian), now as an old man (by Claudian, in 400): he totalised in himself, like Jesus in his different appearances, the three ages of life.

The conception that human life was divided into three ages seems hoary and certainly reached back to classical antiquity. It was shared by authors like Aristotle. Admittedly, no pictorial representation of it has survived, earlier than the eighth century fresco in the bath of Quseir Amra<sup>10</sup> in Jordania, in which we see the old man, the adult and the youth. But although the painting is late, its motif, like that of all the others in this building, belongs to the old, classical style. The central figure, the adult with his vine grapes, might allude to Dionysos, who was identified with Aion . . .

But there is about Aion a perfectly clear document—which however, has not been adduced by Puech, and by myself only belatedly.<sup>11</sup> This is the Aion mosaic at Antioch, published by Doro Levi in 1944. It gives a nice transition, as we shall see, to our second theme, the differentiation of the Magi.

In front of a personage designated as Aion three others are seated, named the Chronoi—respectively Past, Present and Future—with features easily recognisable: a white beard, a black beard, no beard. I propose<sup>12</sup> to see in this mosaic the model of the differentiation of the Magi into an old man, an adult and a youth in front of God.

This presents no chronological or geographical difficulty, as is the case with a representation from Luristan dating back to the eighth century B.C.—and, moreover, suspect; I adduced it in my 1965 article

<sup>10</sup> A reproduction is given in 'Addenda et corrigenda', plate I.

<sup>11</sup> 'Espace et Temps', pp. 260ff. Here plate 8.2.

<sup>12</sup> As I did in 'Espace et Temps', p. 261.

for no other reason than because the Antioch mosaic was then still unknown to me.<sup>13</sup> On the Luristan plaque, published in 1958 by Ghirshman,<sup>14</sup> there appear before a mythical figure three sets of worshippers: children, adults and old men. This distribution seems particularly suitable to the case of worshippers of a being otherwise characterised as a god of time, for he has wings as well as two faces—symbols of the bisexuality that is normal in a god of origins. An allusion has been recognised here to the god Zurvan, who had in Syriac the epithets *Ašoqar*, *Frašoqar*, *Zaroqar*, terms adapted from the Avestan and clearly designating him as god of youth, manhood and old age.

But to return to the Antioch mosaic. There are in this case, as I said, no further chronological or geographical difficulties. Antioch was the Asiatic metropolis where the word 'Christian' was first heard. And stylistic criteria allow the work to be dated to the middle of the third century, *viz.* about the time when Christianity was officially recognised by Constantine and Christian art came out from the Catacombs.

What may have been the purpose of the patron of this mosaic? Did he want an illustration of a philosophical debate on Time that flies and Eternity that remains? Did he simply want to see represented in picture form a hoary conception of human life, or to introduce a religious connotation (mark the incense-burner) into this conception? The three purposes are not mutually exclusive. And the scene, with its three times facing Eternity, seems very appropriate to account for the representation of the three wise men as a youth, an adult and an old man in the presence of God. For it is perhaps not by a mere chance that in the Christian world the three Magi do not merely present themselves before God but figure as worshippers of a god who manifests himself at the very time of year in which the year—hence time itself—is renewed, namely, on Aion's birthday.

## II

In their most ancient figurations the Magi of Bethlehem were identical to each other and they all wore the Phrygian cap. This, by the way, did not characterise them as priests of Mithra but merely, as Franz Cumont has proved, as Iranians. We see them represented in this manner, for instance, on the fourth century sarcophagus relief in the

<sup>13</sup> My wife Marcelle brought it to my notice.

<sup>14</sup> Ghirshman, 'Le dieu Zurvan sur les bronzes du Luristan', *Artibus Asiae* (1958), pp. 37ff. Reproduced also in my *Antaios* article, plate XII.

Latran Museum, or on the wood relief of the Porta Sabina, about 400. They were distinguished from one another only by their gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—the number of which, undoubtedly, had determined that of the Magi themselves—in contradistinction to the twelve Magi who, according to another version of the legend, were destined to evangelise the East.

The differentiation of the Magi took place along two different lines.

In the recently discovered Catacomb of the Via Latina in Rome, the three Magi are seen, two of whom have a beard, but it is not possible from the black-and-white picture in Mr Ferrua's book to distinguish the colour of their beards. I have had a look at the catacomb myself<sup>15</sup> and have been able to ascertain that one beard is brown, the other blond. No white one, then. This fresco therefore represents only some sort of attempt at varying the appearance of the Magi: it does not—or, to be more precise, does not yet—show the differentiation into the three ages which so often appears later on. When, in fact, is this new differentiation first attested?

We may leave aside the conception found in St Augustine, to whom the Magi represented the three world parts: *primitiae gentium*. Similarly in the Armenian *Gospel of the Infancy* cited above, Caspar comes from India, Balthasar from Persia and Melkoun from Arabia. And it is said in the Nestorian liturgy that the kings of Persia and India, with the one from China, prostrated themselves before the king from the house of David.

The other conception is not attested in writing until the eighth century, namely, in the Venerable Bede, who, however, must have found it elsewhere, for he is not generally suspected of inventing things. According to him, then, the three Magi represented the whole human race in its three ages. And they are described as follows in a text falsely attributed to him and entitled *Collectanea et flores*:

primus fuisse dicitur Melchior, senex et canus,  
 secundus nomine Caspar, iuuenis imberbis, rubicundus,  
 tertius fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthasar nomine.

The *Manual of Painting* on Mount Athos enjoins that they should be so represented; and so do they appear in innumerable paintings and sculptures in the whole of Christendom. In fact, the first preserved images of this representation precede Bede's book by many centuries.

<sup>15</sup> It is not yet open to the general public. Special admission was granted me through the good offices of Professor E. Cerulli.

Since it is difficult to see, from the photograph available to me, whether the Magi on the sarcophagus at Castiliscar, Spain, are of the same age or not, the earliest unequivocal representation of the three Magi in the three ages of man dates from the sixth century; it is to be found at Monza, near Milan, on the famous *ampullae* that were sold to pilgrims in the Holy Land as containers for the oil of the cross and probably reproduced monuments in Bethlehem.

Of approximately the same date is the relief of the San Marco architrave, in Venice,<sup>16</sup> on which it will be noted that the Magi, although clearly of different ages, still all wear the Phrygian cap.

16 West portal of the north façade, here plate 8.3.