In view of questions about the date of the Zoroastrian materials, the differences between Jewish and Persian concepts, and the probability of independent developments, not a few scholars have concluded that the earlier claims for the decisive influence of Persian beliefs upon Judaism have been overvalued.429


13

The Magi

The Original Magi

According to Herodotus (1.101), the magi (Greek magos, plural magoi) were originally one of the tribes of the Medes who functioned as priests and diviners under the Achaemenian Persians (sixth–fourth centuries B.C.).1 Herodotus (1.132) wrote that “no sacrifice can be offered without a Magian.” The magi also interpreted dreams (Herodotus 1.107, 120, 128). Other classical writers knew that the magi served before fire altars (Strabo 15.3.15; Xenophon, Cyropedia 4.5.14; 7.5.57) and offered libations (Strabo 15.3.14).2

Herodotus reports that a magos named Bardiya/Smerdis seized power...

1. According to M. Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism II [hereafter History II] (Leiden: Brill, 1982), p. 19: “The original meaning of the term, it has been suggested, was perhaps ‘member of the tribe’ (as in Av. moghu), given a special sense among the Medes as ‘member of the priestly tribe.’ ” Herodotus’s view that the magi were originally a Median tribe is supported by E. Benveniste, Les mages dans l’ancien Iran (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1938), p. 11, but is questioned by G. Messina, Der Ursprung der Magier und die Zarathustrische Religion (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1930), p. 77.

2. See E. Benveniste, The Persian Religion According to the Chief Greek Texts (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1929). For a list of studies on the Greek word magos, see E. D. Francis, “Greeks and
for seven months, posing as the brother of Cambyses, before Darius gained power in the fall of 522 B.C. The Old Persian version of Darius's Behistun inscription calls this imposter, also known as Gaumata, a magus. The corresponding Elamite version calls him a ma­ku-­iš, but the Akkadian version uses the term LU KUR ma-­da­-[a-a], that is, “Median man” (see chapter 4).

The Persians continued to use derivations from the word magus as a word for “priest” down to the end of the Sasanian era around A.D. 650. An ordinary priest was called mog, and the chief priest magupat, “master of the magi,” or even magupat magupatan, “chief priest of chief priests.”

The relationship of the magi to Zoroaster and his teachings is a complex and controversial issue. The magi are strikingly absent from the Avesta with one possible exception. The Zoroastrians and magi were probably in conflict for two reasons: the magi appear to have been polytheistic (Xenophon, Cyropedia 3.3.22, 8.3.11–12), whereas Zoroaster’s own teachings about Ahuramazda were either monotheistic or dualistic, and Zoroaster was from the northeast and the magi were established in northwestern Iran. According to Mary Boyce: “It is reasonable, however, to suppose that the existence of this hereditary priesthood [i.e. the magi], with its own traditions and forms of worship, was a major factor in western Iranian resistance to Zoroastrian proselytizing.”

The religion of the magi under the Achaemenian kings is another area of controversy. Arthur Darby Nock’s judgment on this matter is cautiously stated:

The balance of probability seems to me to indicate that Zoroaster’s Gathas had been accepted by some of the Magi as inspired and that their phraseology and ideas had exercised some influence on them and through them on the language of Xerxes at least.

A recent reconstruction of the history of the magi by Papatheophanes, which is admittedly inferential in nature, suggests that the Median magi defected to Cyrus, who presumably worshiped Mithras. When the Median magi supported the revolt of Gaumata the magos, Darius punished them and replaced them with Persian magi who accepted Zoroastrianism. Some magi are mentioned in association with the cult of Ahuramazda in the Elamite tablets from Darius’s reign. Papatheophanes speculates that some of the Median magi may have fled to Ephesus, where they were observed by Heraclitus. The earliest preserved occurrence of the Greek word magos is found in a passage of Heraclitus.

With the conquest of Asia Minor by the Persian army under Cyrus in 546 B.C. came the settlement of many Medes and Persians accompanied by their magi. A famous relief from the satrapal capital of Dascylion in northwest Asia Minor depicts a pair of magi with the barsom twigs and sacrificial animals. Their mouths and noses are covered to keep them from contaminating the sacred fire.

In any case the classical writers Plato, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch maintained that Zoroaster himself was a magos and that the magi were his followers. For example, Plutarch (Moralia 5.369 E–F) relates: “The Magian Zoroaster . . . called the one [god] Oromazes and the other

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8. See F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, Geschichte Mittelasiens im Altertum (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1970), p. 54. This makes untenable G. Messina’s thesis that the magi were priests of purely Zoroastrian origin.
Areimanius.” When Apuleius was on trial for magic, he argued that magus meant “priest” in Persia and cited Plato to indicate that the Persian princes studied the “mageia of Zoroaster, son of Oromazos.”

The Magi and Magic

Although the Medo-Persian magi were rarely associated with spells [except at Herodotus 7.191], by the fifth century B.C. the word in some cases seems to have become synonymous with the Greek word goês (“wizard, sorcerer”).19 In Sophocles’ play, Oedipus the King, Oedipus berates the blind seer Teiresias:

The trusty Creon, my familiar friend,  
Hath lain in wait to oust me and suborned  
This mountebank [magon], this juggling charlatan,  
This tricksy beggar-priest, for gain alone.20

By the Roman era (for example, Tacitus, Annals 2.27; 12.22, 59) the magi and their arts were associated with sorcery. We derive our word magic from the Latin magicus, which in turn is a loan from the Greek magikos.21 Because of the association of the magi with Zoroaster, Pliny the Elder (30.2) asserted: “Without doubt magic arose in Persia with Zoroaster.”

It is in the sense of magos as “magician” that we read of the activities of Simon from Samaria, who “practiced sorcery” ([mageuôn [Acts 8:9]) and amazed the people with his “magic” ([mageiais [Acts 8:11].22 The Apocryphal Acts of Peter describes how Simon astounded the crowds at Rome by his “magical” flights until Peter prayed that he might crash to the ground.23 While the Book of Acts describes Simon simply as a magician, the early church fathers came to regard Simon as the fountainhead of all the Gnostic heresies.24

22. C. S. Mann, “Epiphany—Wise Men or Charlatans?” Theology 61 (1958): 459–500. Mann makes the improbable suggestion that even the Christmas Magi belonged to this class of charlatans.
Elsewhere in Acts (13:6, 8) we read of a Jewish sorcerer, a magos named Elymas Bar-Jesus, who was influential at the court of Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus. From Josephus [Antiquities 20.142] we learn of another Jewish magos from Cyprus named Atomus, through whose arts Felix, the governor of Judea, gained the hand of Drusilla [compare Acts 24:24–25].

By the New Testament era most of the occurrences of the word magos were in the pejorative sense of “magic.” According to John Hull: “The apostolic fathers always used the word mágos in a bad sense. The apologists used mágos and its cognates about sixteen times and always in the bad sense.”

Harold Remus likewise concludes, “in the second century use of mágos, mageía, and derivative or related words is almost uniformly negative in the extant Christian sources.”

The Magi and Astrology

Among the functions of the Persian magi was their work as diviners. In the Hellenistic age magi in the West continued to have a reputation for foretelling the future. Cicero [De divinatione 1.47; followed by Plutarch, Alexander 3.2] records that when Alexander was born the magi interpreted a spontaneous fire in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus as a sign that a great calamity for Asia had been born.

From the fourth century B.C. on the magi were increasingly associated with the Chaldeans as astrologers. The name Chaldean assumed different meanings at different periods. In the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods it meant an inhabitant of lower Mesopotamia. In

From the time of Nabonassar (747–734 B.C.), the Chaldeans accurately recorded the times of the motion of the stars. The polymaths among the Greeks learned from the Chaldeans that—as Alexander [Polyhistor] and Berossus, men versed in Chaldean antiquities, say—Nabonassar gathered together [the accounts of] the deeds of the kings before him and did away with them so that the reckoning of the Chaldean kings would begin with him.

Although there were considerable contacts between the Aegean and the Near East before Alexander as we have noted [chapter 11], it was after his capture of the area that a flood of Greeks visited, and in some cases settled in, Mesopotamia. There some of them acquired a knowledge of Chaldean astrology. According to Wilhelm Eilers:

It is not for nothing that astrologers were called “Chaldeans,” for their true home was in Aramaean southern Babylon, in Uruk which, especially in the Seleucid-Parthian period, was the center of ancient astronomy and interpretation of the stars. The latest dated cuneiform texts include clay tablets from this place containing astronomical observations; these texts come from the first century A.D.

In the Hellenistic age Chaldeans also traveled west, where they practiced their divinatory arts. The most famous example of a Chaldean priest who left Babylon to teach astrology to the Greeks on the island of Cos some time after 281 B.C. was Berossus. His famous
Babyloniaca, written in Greek, contains invaluable traditions on astrological matters. A factor that may have contributed to the identification of the magi with the Chaldeans and astrologers is their association with Zoroaster. The Greek spelling of Zoroaster's name, Zoroaêstes, was first recorded by Xanthos of Lydia. The Greeks saw in this name the word astér ("star"). Hermodorus, a pupil of Plato, explained Zoroaster's name as astrothutes ("star worshiper"). Because of these associations a mass of astrological matter circulated under the name of Zoroaster.

Zodiacal Astrology

The development of astrology as we know it today was made possible by the discovery of the Zodiac, that is, the realization that the sun in passing through its path, the ecliptic, goes through twelve constellations, each "ruling" a thirty-degree section of the circle. This made possible the casting of horoscopes based on the position of the planets and stars at the moment of one's birth. Otto Neugebauer points out the differences between the earlier astral omens and the later astrology:

The (Assyrian) predictions concern the king and the country as a whole and are based on observed astronomical appearances, not on computation and not on the moment of birth. . . . Hellenistic horoscopes, however, concern a specific person and depend upon the computed position of the seven celestial bodies and of the zodiacal signs in their relation to the given horizon, for a given moment, the moment of birth.

The Zodiacal constellations are first mentioned about 700 B.C. according to Bartel Van der Waerden, but not until around 400 B.C. according to Neugebauer. In any case the earliest known cuneiform horoscope comes from the latter date. Four examples are known from the third century B.C.

The Diffusion of Astrology to the West

The first depiction of the Zodiac in Egypt comes from a temple at Esna from the third or second century B.C. The famous circular Zodiac from the Dendera temple dates from 30 B.C. Its Mesopotamian origin is betrayed by the design of each sign. While acknowledging key contributions of the Babylonians, such as their sexagesimal reckoning and carefully recorded ephemerides, Neugebauer stresses the independent Hellenistic (Ptolemaic) contributions:

The roots of astrology are undoubtedly to be found in Mesopotamia, emerging from the general omen literature. Yet, we know much less about the history of Babylonian astrology than is generally assumed. Only that much seems clear that it was a far less developed doctrine than we find in Greek astrological literature. The real center of ancient astrology, from which it spread over the whole world, is undoubtedly Hellenistic Alexandria.

With their victories over the Greeks in the second century B.C., the Romans were inundated with Greek influence in many fields, including
philosophy and astrology. Astrology was given great prestige among the Romans by its support by Stoic philosophers. In the last century of the Roman Republic astrology was widely accepted by the elite as the scientific method of divination with the exception of a few sceptics like Cicero. Cicero's two learned friends, Nigidius Figulus and Terentius Varro, were believers in astrology.

But the growing influence of astrologers was considered dangerous to the state. In 139 B.C. Cornelius Scipio Hispalus expelled astrologers from Rome. In the early Roman Empire such expulsions were ordered repeatedly:

Accordingly, first in 33 B.C. by action of the aedile Agrippa, later by senatorial decree, and after 52 by imperial edict, the city or all Italy was repeatedly cleared of mathematici, Chaldaei, astrologi, magi, goétés, or however they were called, perhaps ten times over the period 33 B.C. to A.D. 93, and possibly once more under Marcus Aurelius.

Although a satirist like Juvenal might poke fun at astrologers (Satire 6.585–86), historians like Suetonius and Dio Cassius were persuaded by the efficacy of astrology. Almost all the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors of the first century believed in the potency of astrology. Samuel Dill observes:

It is not hard to see why the emperors at once believed in these black arts and profoundly distrusted their professors. They wished to keep a monopoly of that awful lore, lest it might excite dangerous hopes in possible pretenders. To consult a Chaldaean seer on the fate of the prince, or to possess his horoscope, was always suspicious, and might often be fatal.

On the day of Augustus's birth, Nigidius Figulus allegedly prophesied a notable destiny for the future ruler from a knowledge of the hour of his birth (Suetonius, Augustus 94.5; Dio Cassius 45.1.3–5). At Apollo the astrologer Theogenes cast a horoscope for Augustus (Suetonius, Augustus 94.12): “From that time on Augustus had such faith in his destiny, that he made his horoscope public and issued a silver coin stamped with the sign of the constellation Capricornus, under which he was born.” Manilius, a poet who lived during Augustus's reign, wrote an extant work on the stars, which is cited in the great Mathesis of Firmicus Maternus [fourth century A.D.]. In A.D. 11 Augustus passed a law making it a crime to consult astrologers about the fate of the emperor.

Suetonius's life of Tiberius [A.D. 14–37] is filled with references to astrologers. Because he feared their potential for his enemies, “he banished the astrologers as well, but pardoned such as begged for indulgence and promised to give up their art” [Tiberius 36]. Juvenal made fun of the emperor's “herd of Chaldean astrologers” surrounding him in his retirement at Capri [Satire 10.94].

Claudius [A.D. 41–54] tried to revive the ancient order of augurs, but banished astrologers [Tacitus, Annals 12.52]. His wife, Agrippina the Younger, and her son Nero were devotees of astrology. Nero [A.D. 54–68] delayed his coronation on the advice of his Chaldeans. To avert the dangers portended by a comet, Nero determined to put to death some distinguished men [Suetonius, Nero 36].

Although Vespasian [A.D. 69–79] banished astrologers, he retained the most skillful for his own guidance [Dio Cassius 66.10.9]. Titus [A.D. 79–81], according to Suetonius [Titus 9], inquired into horoscopes. Domitian [A.D. 81–96] put Mettius Pompianus to death because he had an imperial horoscope [Suetonius, Domitian 10]. Just before his assassination Domitian put to death the astrologer Asclepiades, who correctly predicted that dogs would attack his own corpse after his death [Domitian 15].

### Astrology among the Jews

While Jewish interest in astrology during the Middle Ages has never been doubted, as evidenced in the Kabbalah, there has been some question as to how wide and early this interest was. Both in the Sasanian and Parthian eras rabbis in Mesopotamia did not question the
validity of astrology but only whether it applied to Israel. There are numerous references to astrology in the Talmud (for example, b. Sabb. 156a–b), reporting the teaching of R. Hanina Bar Hama (early third century A.D.), who thought that the constellation at the hour of one’s birth determined one’s character. Many rabbis held that “Israel is not subject to planetary influences” (literally “Israel has no star”), but R. Hanina disagreed.

The recently published Jewish magical text, the Sepher ha-Razim, holds that Noah learned “to master the investigation of the strata of the heavens, to go about in all that is in their seven abodes, to observe all the astrological signs, to examine the course of the sun, to explain the observations of the moon, and to know the paths of the Great Bear, Orion, and the Pleiades...” This work dates from after the third century A.D.

Jewish knowledge of the Zodiac is attested during the first century A.D., for example, by Josephus (War 5.217–18) when he makes the following comparison of the sacred elements in the temple: “The seven lamps... represented the planets; the loaves on the table, twelve in number, the circle of the Zodiac and the year.” Furthermore, a clay tablet with zodiacal signs was found in a Hellenistic stratum at Gezer.

Indisputable early evidence of Jewish interest in astrology has now been provided by the publication of important documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran. The first of these documents (4Q Crypt-...)


The text reflects the idea that the body and spirit are determined by the zodiacal sign at birth; the ratio of the man’s spirit in light or darkness depends on the relative length of the days.

Another Aramaic text from cave 4, originally published by Jean Starcky in 1964, seems to be the horoscope of a new Solomon, whose hair would be red. During his youth he would be like a lion. Both of these texts have provoked considerable discussion.

Also from cave 4 are fragments from an unpublished brontologion, which gives the signs of the Zodiac and then makes predictions on the basis of thunder: If it thunders in the sign of the Twins, terror and distress caused by foreigners. The closest parallel is a brontologion ascribed to Zoroaster in the Geoponica I.1.

Attitudes toward astrology are not uniformly represented in the...
Pseudepigrapha (200 B.C.-A.D. 200). Astrology is condemned in a number of works, as James Charlesworth notes:

According to the author of 1 Enoch 8.3 [probably early second century B.C.], astrology is an evil and demonic idea since it was taught to men by one of the fallen angels, Baraqiyal. The third book of the Sibylline Oracles [second century B.C.] in lines 220–36 praises righteous men who neither search the mystical meaning of the movements of the heavenly bodies nor are deceived by the predictions of Chaldean astrology.

In a similar fashion, Jubilees (12:17) has Abraham coming to himself after observing the stars at night: "And a word came into his heart, saying: 'All of the signs of the stars, and the signs of the sun and the moon are all in the hand of the Lord. Why am I seeking?' "72

On the other hand, parts of 1 Enoch such as 72:1–37 incorporate numerous zodiacal ideas. First Enoch (80:2–8) attributes the disorders of the planets to the sons of men. Second Enoch, which dates to the late first century A.D., has Enoch declaring: "And I saw the eighth heaven, which is called in the Hebrew language Muzaloth, the changer of zodiacs."74

Charlesworth has recently published a Syriac manuscript called the Treatise of Shem, which is the only Jewish pseudepigraphon that contains Enoch. According to the author of the Treatise of Shem, coupled with the indisputable fact of a 'most unusual celestial display' near the time of Jesus' birth, by no means prove that Matthew ii preserves reliable historical information; but it is now more difficult to claim that Matthew's star was created purely out of a myth.76

75. Ibid., pp. 473–80.
79. This late work asserts that "some magi came to Jerusalem according to the prediction of Zoroaster." 80. Bar Hebraeus declared: "In those days [of Cyrus] came Zardosht, chief of the Magian sect. It is reported that he was one of Elijah's disciples, and he informed the Persians of the sign of the birth of Christ and that they should bring him gifts." 81. Compare J. R. Hinnells, "Zoroastrian Saviour Imagery and Its Influence on the New Testament," Numen 16 (1969): 161–85.
82. David Hughes, The Star of Bethlehem (New York: Walker, 1979), p. 193. Hughes tries to maintain that the Magi were both Zoroastrian priests and astrologers, but this is untenable. D. Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," Isis 54 (1963): 240–41, points out: "In fact, virtually nothing is known of the astronomy and astrology of pre-Sasanian Iran. There was indeed a Greek astrological text of the second century B.C. ascribed to Zoroaster of which fragments are preserved by Proclus and the Geoponica, the material with which it deals is overwhelmingly Babylonian. However, trustworthy knowledge of Iranian astronomy and astrology is non-existent before the reign of Shāpūr I (226–270)."
83. E. Bishop, "Some Reflections on Justin Martyr and the Nativity Narratives," EQ 39 (1967): 33. Bishop observes: "Origen, who knew the Palestine of his day, and Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem, considered favourably the claims of Babylonian astrologers, as did St. Augustine of Hippo, and it must be admitted that the consensus of three such scholars is formidable."
The Christmas Star

There are over five hundred books, articles, and reviews on the subject of the "star," offering a variety of explanations of the celestial light that guided the Magi. Some have suggested the idea of a nova—a star that suddenly increases in brightness. Chinese records indicate that a nova was visible near the star Alpha Aquilae for seventy days in 5 B.C. Others have suggested the possibility of a comet. Some have focused on Halley's Comet, which appeared in 12 B.C. On the basis of Chinese records, Jack Finegan suggested that the comets (or novae) of 5 or 4 B.C. could have started the Magi on their journey, and that the comet of April 4 B.C. could have been shining when they reached Judea. Comets, however, were usually—though not always—believed to be unfavorable portents.

Johannes Kepler, the great astronomer of the seventeenth century, calculated that the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which took place before the supernova of 1604, must have also taken place in 7 B.C. in the constellation Pisces. David Hughes argued this triple conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter was the Christmas star. Some have interpreted Pisces as the constellation of the Jews, Saturn as associated with Saturday (the Sabbath), and Jupiter as the planet of royalty (called in Hebrew Tsedeq). But this interpretation of Pisces seems to be based on late interpretations such as Abarbanel's commentary on Daniel (fourteenth century). Ptolemy (second century A.D.), the astrologer, associated Aries with the Jews.

Contrary to the view of many interpreters, Kepler did not interpret the conjunction of planets as analogous to the Christmas star, but rather the nova that appeared at the time as the triple conjunction. Jupiter and Saturn passed each other at a distance equal to twice the moon's diameter so they could not have been mistaken as a single object. The Greek word aster is used for an individual star or planet. The difficulty of explaining the guidance of the Magi to the place where the Christ child lay has persuaded others that the passage

89. Cramer, Astrology in Roman Law and Politics, p. 78: "The traditional interpretation of the significance of comets was overwhelmingly unfavorable." Augustus, however, persuaded the people that the comet of 44 B.C. represented the deification of Julius Caesar in the heavens. For a critique of the nova and comet hypotheses, see Hughes, Star, pp. 145–57. 90. Johannes Kepler, De Stella Nova in Pede Serpentina (Prague: Pauli Sessi, 1606).
91. Hughes, Star, p. xii.
in Matthew was intended to describe a supernatural and not a natural phenomenon. 103

Our current system of dating was devised by a monk, Dionysus Exiguus, in the sixth century A.D. He miscalculated the date of Augustus—an error that was discovered only in the seventeenth century. Those scholars who would identify the Christmas star with Halley's Comet, which appeared in 12 B.C., date Jesus' birth accordingly. 104 At the other extreme, Martin has suggested a lowering of the date of Herod's death to 1 B.C. and consequently of Jesus' birth to 2 B.C. 105 Hughes follows Timothy Barnes in dating Herod's death to 5 B.C., and because he identifies the star with the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, he arrives at the date of 7 B.C. 106 Most scholars have dated Herod's death in the spring of 4 B.C., because an eclipse that is mentioned by Josephus is believed to have occurred at that time. This would place the birth of Jesus in 5 or possibly 6 B.C. 107

The Magi in the Church Fathers

The Magi's gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense recall Psalm 72:10: "The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts." This association helped to facilitate the metamorphosis of the Magi into kings. According to Tertullian (Adversus Marcion 3.13): "The East considers the Magi almost as kings."


Myrrh and frankincense were precious aromatic spices obtained from the exudation of short trees that grew only in two parts of the world, Somaliland in east Africa and Yemen in southwest Arabia (biblical Sheba). 108 Knowledge that these substances came from Arabia may have influenced Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with Trypho [78] to assert that the Magi came from Arabia. 109 He was followed in this view by Tertullian and Epiphanius. The vast majority of church fathers, however, believed that the Magi came from Persia (for example, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Origen, Epiphramy Syrus). 110

The notion that God apparently used astrology to guide the Magi troubled the church fathers. Tertullian [On Idolatry 9] declared: "What then? Shall therefore the religion of those Magi act as patron now also to astrologers? ... But, however, that science has been allowed until the Gospel, in order that after Christ's birth no one should thenceforward interpret any one's nativity by the heavens."

Ignatius (Ephesians 19.3) declared that when the star shone, "thence was destroyed all magic, and every bond vanished." 111 Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with Trypho [78] declared: "For the Magi, who were held in bondage for the commission of all evil deeds through the power of that demon, by coming to worship Christ, show that they have revolted from the dominion which held them captive." Other church fathers maintained that the Magi were not mere astrologers like the Chaldeans but were learned followers of Zoroaster. Origen [Contra Celsum 1.58-60] took Celsus to task for failing to distinguish between the Chaldeans and the Magi. He believed the Magi knew the prophecy of Balaam, and were inspired on their quest when they found their magic declining in power.

108 Gus W. Van Beek, "Frankincense and Myrrh," BA 23 (1960): 70-95; Nigel Groom, Frankincense and Myrrh (London: Longman, 1981); G. Ryckmans, "De l'or!, de l'encens et de la myrhe," RB 58 (1951): 372-76. Ryckmans makes the unlikely suggestion that the Gospel writer misunderstood the Semitic word for gold, which was really a third type of aromatic substance.


111 W. R. Schoedel, Ignatius of Antioch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 88. Schoedel comments: "It is presumable the heavenly bodies that are here said to lose their grip on humankind."
The Magi in the Apocryphal Gospels

The episode of the Magi was expanded in the infancy gospels from the second century on. In the earliest of these, *The Protevangelium of James* (circa A.D. 150), we read:

And the wise men said: “We saw a very great star shining among those stars and dimming them so that the stars appeared not: and thereby knew we that a king was born unto Israel, and we came to worship him.” . . . And lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them until they entered the cave: and it stood over the head of the cave.

The sixth-century Syriac Cave of Treasures gives the names of the Magi as Hormizdah, king of Persia; Yazdegerd, king of Saba; and Perozadh, king of Sheba (compare Ps. 72:10). The first references to the traditional names of the Magi—Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar—occur in the Excerpta Latina Barbari, a Latin translation of a sixth-century Greek chronicle. *The Armenian Infancy Gospel*, which was based on an early Syriac composition, specifies that Melqon (Melchior) came from Persia, Balthasar from Arabia, and Gaspar from India.

The Magi in Art

The adoration of the Magi was one of the most popular motifs in early Christian art, appearing already in the catacomb of Santa Pris-
The Magi appear in the famous sixth-century mosaic from the church of St. Apollinaris Nuovo in Ravenna. Above their figures are inscribed the names: SCS. (= Sanctus "Saint") Balthassar, SCS. Melchior, and SCS. Gaspar. The purple mantle of the empress Theodora on the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna is embroidered with the figures of the Magi.

The Magi were customarily portrayed in Persian dress with belted tunics, full sleeves, trousers, and peaked hats. Franz Cumont suggests that Christian artists adopted the Roman representation of Persians presenting tributes to the emperors. When the Persian army under Chosroes invaded Palestine in 614, his soldiers destroyed the churches of Jerusalem but spared the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem when they saw that a mosaic of the church depicted Magi in Persian dress.

This mosaic of the Magi may have been reproduced in some of the eulogiae, souvenirs brought back from the Holy Land by pilgrims. These were of two types. The first were ampullae, small bottles of lead in which the pilgrims brought back from the Holy Land water or holy oil from the lamps that burned at the shrines. Among the famous Monza ampullae given by Pope Gregory the Great to the Lombard queen (circa 600) are examples that depict the Virgin in a frontal pose, flanked by Magi on one side and shepherds on the other.

The other rare type of souvenirs were tortae, tokens made of clay or earth stamped with images of the shrines. As these were intended to be ground into powder, then dissolved in water and drunk for their curative powers, very few have survived. Recently two sixth-century examples, now in Istanbul, were published. These depict three bearded Magi wearing peaked hats and bearing gifts as they advance toward the Christ child held by the seated Virgin. A later example is owned by the Detroit Institute of Art.

From the sixth century on, the Magi were often depicted as being of different ages: a youth, an adult, and an older man. Leonardo Olschki suggested this trimorphism was inspired by the threefold manifesta-

121. In the illustrated epitaph of Severa (dated to 330), a star looms above the Magi and the Madonna. The figure behind her pointing to the star has been interpreted as Balaam or as a personification of the Holy Spirit. See J. P. O'Neill et al., eds., The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), p. 221, no. 136.
122. Morey, Early Christian Art, p. 167; Grabar, Christian Iconography, fig. 252.
tion of the god Zurvan.127 In a series of studies Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin suggested this differentiation stemmed from the Hellenistic cult of Aion.128

Artists began depicting the “wise men” from the east as kings first during the twelfth century. Between the years 1360 and 1420 one of the three kings was first represented as a black.129

The Relics of the Magi

When Marco Polo traveled in Persia in the late thirteenth century, he was shown the tombs of the Magi fifty miles southwest of Tehran:

In Persia is the city called Saveh, from which the three Magi set out when they came to worship Jesus Christ. Here, too, they lie buried in three sepulchres of great size and beauty. . . . Their bodies are still whole, and they have hair and beards. One was named Beltsar, the second Gaspar, and the third Melchior. . . . The inhabitants declare that in days gone by three kings of this country went to worship a new-born prophet and took with them three offerings—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—so as to discover whether this prophet was a god, or an earthly king or a healer.130

In competition with the Persian claim that the relics of the Magi were preserved in their homeland, the West came to believe the relics of the Magi were recovered from Hadramaut in South Arabia by the Emperor Zeno in 490. From Constantinople they were then taken to Milan.

When Frederick Barbarossa, the German Holy Roman emperor, vanquished the city of Milan, Reinald von Dassel, the emperor’s chancellor, obtained the precious relics for his native city of Cologne. The relics were received with great jubilation in 1164 and became the prized treasure of the great Gothic cathedral built at Cologne.131