

WERE THE MAGI ASTROLOGERS?

The following was posted in the History of Astronomy Discussion Group by Lorenzo Smerillo on 1 March 2011. It's the best, concise discussion of the topic I know.

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-----Original Message-----

From: History of Astronomy Discussion Group [mailto:HASTRO-L@listserv.wvu.edu] On Behalf Of lorenzo smerillo
Sent: 01 March 2011 11:27
To: HASTRO-L@listserv.wvu.edu
Subject: Re: "We know for sure"

The term magoi is open to some discussion as to what it meant in the first century and to various writers. Magoi were brought to the attention of the Greek-speaking world by Herodotus in his History as one of the six tribes of the Medes (1.101), he also describes how they must pronounce holy words at every sacrifice (1.132) and in 7.37 they interpret an eclipse as favourable to the Persians since 'the sun was the prophet of the Greeks and their own was the moon: when Xerxes heard that, he was very pleased and marched on.' However they are also noted by Strabo as practicing the cult of fire. Heraclitus of Ephesus (500 BCE, fr. 14) gives them as practioners of mysteries similar to those of Apollo, hence they are part of a proper religion. Greek philosophers were influenced by their philosophical concepts (see Democritus of Abdera, fl. 420 BCE, whose works were edited by Thrasyllus in the first century CE, where a lot of Babylonian material is listed, but does not survive, of Democritus). Even Pythagoras is said to have studied with them during the expedition of Xerxes (fr. 2) but this may reflect more a general trend of cultural contact and context than specific historical content.

We find more about them in the pseudo-Platonic work "Alcibiades I, 122 (4thcent BCE) where they are considered great educators. Another pseudo-Platonic work, the "Axiochos" 37, 1a records a saying by a certain GobruEs, a magos man (anEr magos). Aristotle himself records in Meta 13,4 109b 10, 'we also consider the Magoi as the best of parents.' These are the religious and philosophical aspects of one conception of the magoi.

There is a religious and philosophical aspect to the teaching of the magoi and the Greeks recognized both together, especially in the teaching about the two first principles (see Aristotle fr. 8). From this it was easy to develop a non-ethnic sense of the word to describe a school of thought.

A second sense to the term magoi is thus a person who holds and practices a knowledge or a power over the supernatural. They can save the soul of the dead from going down to Hades, according to the poet Phython (Fr. 1,5ff, Tragicorum Graecorum Pragmenta, ed. A. Nauck, 1889). According to Aristotle, they can predict the future: the eay in which Socrates will die (Arist. Fr. 27)--this particular magos comes from Syria (which may just be a generic term for Middle East).

And Josephus (Ant. 10.195 and 216) says that the magos is the interpreter of dreams.

A third typology is that of the magos as an incantation singer. Photius (Constantinopolis 858-866 CE) in his important 'Lexicon' says that magos is 'magganeuontas', 'those who practice incantations'. Philo of Alexandria (c.20 BCE- 50CE) says that the magos is superior to the goEs (magician) (spec.leg. 3,100); but magos is equivalent to the goEs in the Acts of Thomas 152.

The term thus quickly declines to a negative connotation of someone who uses incantation and demonic action to get his result by force. This is the sense in which Simon Magos is described in Acts. Hence a magos is a trickster, a charlatan, who can perform authentic as well as false 'prophecy'. A sense the word has even as early as Plato (respub. 9.572e) and Sophocles (Oed. Tyr. 387).

In Judaism, for Philo of Alexandria the activity of the magos is inferior to the religious sphere. A magos is often a 'sophistEs'—wise guys (vita Moses 1.92) or associated with a 'pharmakeutEs' (herb witch) (spec leg. 3.93). The violence of the technique of the magos contrasts with that of the prophetic spirit ('pneuma prophEtikon, vita Moses 1.277). Their mageia is respectable only when intended as a study of nature: "They search the works of nature to know the truth" (omn. Prob. Lib. 74), and Philo recognizes that Persian magoi have skills in this (omn. Prob. Lib. 5).

In rabbinic literature the sense given to the word magos is essentially that of a charlatan, but can also mean a blasphemer (shab.b.75a), but the sense of the priest of the religion of the Persians is still alive, they are followers of the religion of Ormuzda Ahriman (sahn b. 39a). However it is forbidden knowledge that of the magoi: "Anyone who learns anything from a magos merits the death penalty (shab.b. 75a)."

More important to a consideration of the Matthean nativity narrative are the following occurrences of the word magos.

In the Septuagint (LXX) the word appears only in Daniel 2.2 and 12. Molnar (and a lot of others) seems to take the term 'magoi' as meaning astrologers, whereas the usual terms for this species is 'Chaldaioi' or 'astronomoi' or 'astrologoi' or 'mathematikoi' cf. Dan 2.12:

Eis enechthEnai tous eraoidous kai tous magous kai tous pharmakous twn chaldaewn (he called together the harioles and the magoi and the herbal wiccass of the Chaldaeans) with a textual variant reading kai tous chaldaious (and the Chaldaeans)—which distinguishes between chaldaioi (astrologers) and magoi.

In the same verse is 'pantes tous sophous babulwnos' (all the wise men of Babylonia) which rather echoes down in Mt 2:4 'pantas tous archiereis kai grammateis tou laou' (all the leaders and scribes of the people). In Josepheus (Antiq. II ix #205) concerning the encounter of the Pharaoh and the infant Moses, which is the model for the story of Herod and the infant Jesus in many details, the Pharaoh consults his 'hierogrammeteis', which in

Mt is divided into the chief priests (archiereis) and scribes (grammateis). Pharaoh is alarmed, the Egyptians are filled with dread (Josephus Antiq. II ix 2,3 # 206 and 215) at the birth of the Hebrew savior (see Matt: Herod 'was startled and so was all Jerusalem with him'). Pharaoh sets out to kill all the Hebrew children—the parallel with Herod is obvious.

Matthew is constructing a theological narrative with exquisitely Hebraic, Mosaic, typology: Jesus is the new Moses.

More to the point on the distinction between magoi and astrologoi, see Aulus Gellius NA I, 9 [^1], where he uses the terms 'astrologoi, Chaldaioi' for 'astrologers' and says that these are more correct than the current popular usage of 'mathematici'—'uulgus autem, quos gentilitio uocabulo 'Chalaeos dicere oportet, 'mathematicos dicit'. The term 'mathematikos' used to designate 'astrologers' came into current popular usage in the mid-first century CE. It occurs in Petronius (died 66CE) Satyricon, where fat, bald, ignorant new-rich Campanian Trimalchio in the famous dinner scene gives his explanation (beginning with Aries) of the zodiac dish served, his guests praise his 'urbanitatem mathematici (astrologer's wittiness'); he prattles on, they say he is wise (sophos) and more illustrious than Hipparchus and Aratus. Petronius is one of our best sources for lower-class Roman speech in the 1st Century CE.

The point being, however, that Mt uses magoi, which has a rich tradition in Jewish thought as being applied not only to Moses but also to Balaam (whose prophecy in Num 24:17 is the basis of the 'astEp' in Mt 2).

The conflation is thus a bit more clear. Further the question is then, why does Mt use magoi and not Chaldaioi? If Chaldaioi is the normative term for 'astrologoi' could it be he is conflating two traditions, the first being the Biblical tradition about the astEp (star) of David/Jesse/Israel and the second about the magoi as applied to Moses and Balaam?

In which case the 'astrological' content falls out of the narrative, and Molnar's subsequent reading of some terms in the text as astrological termini technici is weakened considerably. Further I would ask why is Mt not using the more common, or vulgar according to Gellius, term 'mathematikoi', Mt being ostensibly a writer for a popular (Antiochean?) audience?

Further we find the word magos used again in Acts 13:6, where it designates a Jew involved in pseudo-prophecy. Indeed, except for this passage in Mt 2:1, magos is always used pejoratively in the NT. It has been suggested that Mt is carrying on an anti-astrological polemic here, but that view can be discounted as the text does not give any sign of denigration of the magoi who came to the court of Herod.

One of the closing arguments might be that Philo of Alexandria describes the polytheistic seer Balaam, who prophesied the 'star of Jesse' (Numb. 24:17) as a 'magos' (Vita Moses 1.50 #276-77). [^2] Hence we have the story lines of the magoi and the star linked. The Balaam 'star' is the root text from which the story of the star in Mt develops. And this literary linkage to the OT is the reason that the author of Mt 2 has used the term magoi and

not the more correct, and contemporary, chaldaioi.

The New English Bible translates magoi in Mt as 'astrologers': this is wrong. The RSV gives 'wise men' which is inoffensive, but perhaps conveys the sense of magoi more correctly.

[notes]

>>>[1] Aulus Gellius also used Chaldaei to describe 'astrologoi' in NA 3.1.9 (quoting Varro); 14.1.1, 2, 8, 11, and 14; note 14.1.35: "a genethliacis istis et quibusdam aliis id genus" - one can *hear* him snarling-- "by those genethliatic astrologers and the rest of that lot." NA 14.1 is the famous speech of Favorinus against astrology. A circumlocution in 14.1.36, "istiusmodo hominibus res futures praesagientibus"; Chaldaei again in 15.20.2-3, on the astrologers who told Euripedes' father he would win in contests, so the boy was promptly put into athletic training! On the various traditions concerning Eur. biography see the comments of Meridier's ed. eiusdem, ii-iii, Bude`, Paris.

>>>[2] Philo apparently changed his lexicon, shying away from the use of the term magoi, and changing his use of the term Chaldaioi as well, as is set out in the paper by C.K. Wong, "Philo's use of Chaldaioi" in 1990. Magoi became increasingly used in a negative sense; Chaldaioi he originally used to designate also the Hebrew Language or people, but dropped this after his mission to Rome in 39/40.