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# The sanctification of the polis by performative Epiphany celebrations in contemporary Slovakia (The Magi Cortege and the Caroller's "Walking with the Star")

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**Abstract.** The first part of the study reflects the urban Epiphany phenomenon of Three Kings cortege. The festivity originated in Milano as a response to the city's loss of the Magi relics by their transfer to Cologne. The study afterwards concentrates on the revival of the festivity in Central Europe, evoking its structure: The position of the Kings sitting on horses or camels literally changes the point of viewers. To see the Kings, they must raise their heads. Similarly, the little starbearers, representing the sparkles of the comet leading to Betlehem, attract the gazes of the audience upwards by the long poles on which they carry their stars. This elevation of one's sight above the common optical horizon does something similar to the human soul giving it the opportunity to experience the well-known anew. The second part of the study is devoted to the carollers' "Walking with the Star", and reveals this custom's ancient origin. Given the royal motifs it contains – the carollers speak of the Kings instead of Magi – the author concludes that its present verbal and performative form could have been fixed only once the cult of the Three Kings had been established in Cologne with the coronation of the Magi relics in 1200. The textual analogy of the performance with the Hymn Book from 1430, closes the upper interval of the dating, out of which we conclude that the carolling invariant preserved all around Slovakia stabilized in the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, the Kings maintain the qualities of the Magi as their performers use the sacramentals of frankincense and myrrh, but also the chalk with which they mark the door with the blessing formula for the oncoming solar year as well as the year since the birth of Christ.

**Keywords:** visualization of religious holiday, urban space, Epiphany, Magi, Three Kings, Slovakia.

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## Освящение города посредством перформативных празднований Богоявления в современной Словакии (Шествие волхвов и «Хождение со звездой»)

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена семиотической интерпретации визуальных форм празднования Богоявления в современной Словакии. В первой части исследования автор анализирует городскую традицию празднования Богоявления в форме Шествия Трёх Царей. Праздник возник в Милане как реакция на утрату городом реликвий Волхвов из-за их переноса в Кёльн. Далее исследование концентрируется на возрождении праздника в Центральной Европе, обращая внимание прежде всего на его визуальную структуру. Положение Царей, сидящих на лошадях или верблюдах, буквально меняет точку зрения присутствующих: чтобы увидеть Царей, они должны поднять головы. Кроме того, маленькие носители звёзд, репрезентирующих искры «кометы», ведущей в Вифлеем, увлекают взгляды зрителей вверх с помощью длинных шестов, на которых они несут свои звёзды. Это возвышение взгляда над общим оптическим горизонтом является физическим аналогом движения человеческой души, которое даёт ей возможность заново пережить хорошо известное событие. Вторая часть исследования посвящена «Хождению со звездой» колядующих и раскрывает древнее происхождение этого обычая. Учитывая «царские» мотивы, которые содержит обычай (колядующие сообщают о Царях вместо Волхвов), автор приходит к выводу, что нынешняя вербальная и перформативная форма обряда могла быть зафиксирована только после того, как культ Трёх Царей был установлен в Кёльне путём коронации мощей Волхвов в 1200 году. Текстовая аналогия колядок с Книгой гимнов 1430 года закрывает верхний интервал датировки, из чего мы заключаем, что инвариант колядок, сохранившийся по всей Словакии, стабилизировался в XIII–XIV веках. Тем не менее, Цари сохраняют качества Волхвов, поскольку их исполнители используют сакраментальные вещества ладана и мирры, а также мел, которым они отмечают дверь с формулой благословения наступающего солнечного года и очередного года с момента Рождества Христова.

**Ключевые слова:** визуализация религиозного праздника, городское пространство, Богоявление, волхвы, три царя, перформативные практики, Словакия.

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## I. The Magi Cortege

### 1

In the recently past era, ethnology studies developed almost isolated from the context of other humanistic disciplines; in this, they often ignored Latin as the language of archives in the territory of today's Slovakia (former Hungaria Superioris). Unfortunately, this situation has not yet entirely passed [Frolec 2001, 3], and thus we still encounter residues of methodological limits, especially in the spheres of media and cultural policy. One of these is the emphasis on the contrast of rural and urban culture.

Yet also, equating the folk and the rural constitutes an unacceptable simplification of cultural processes. The fact that the performative phenomena of the Christmas season have been better preserved in the countryside does not mean that they originated there. The phenomenon of folk piety is not bound solely to the rural context; it does not result exclusively from the zealous initiative of the peasant, but also from performative practices initiated by the clergy, which were at some point passed on to laymen [Slivka 2002, 206]<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, only towns and monasteries were endowed with large temples, and hence spaces whose dimensions could support the production of extensive Biblical performances. Thus, transformations within liturgical dramatic forms took place primarily in towns, where such performances formed urban cultural life in accordance with the Church Year, whilst small rural churches could offer no more space than was sufficient for exposing the Christmas crib.

Historical documents confirm the dramatized celebration of the Epiphany in Slovak territory in its specifically urban form. Its earliest records can be found in city accounting books. The play *Ludus in festivitibus Natalis Domini* was staged in Bardejov in January 1498, and in Banská Štiavnica in 1476 and 1480, whereas *The Three Kings Play* was mounted in Kežmarok in 1587 [Pašteka et al. 2018, 20]. Literary heritage, chronicles, and wood engravings<sup>2</sup> testify to a great variability of forms.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, educational institutions opened wide to theatre activities. According to the cartograms of the *Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia*, school plays were staged in almost every town in Slovakia starting in 1620. Public performances of student Epiphany plays were documented, e.g. in Banská Bystrica in 1616, and in Bratislava in 1650 [Staud 1986, 375]. So far as language is concerned, there were alternations between Latin and vernaculars like cultural Trnava dialect of Slovak or hymnbooks language forms. On the feast of the Epiphany, houses were blessed during processions that repre-

<sup>1</sup> Although there are numerous evidences of explicit prohibitions and regulations, the cliché about the clergy expelling works of drama from sacred spaces is a great simplification. The Church often passes these theatre performances to the laity. And the elements that it passes on from the Christmas cycle is *Officium pastorum* and *Officium stellae*. The clergy retains the influence that stems from relics (as to the relics associated with the Christmas narrative, it is the cult of the Bethlehem crib in the Roman temple of Sancta Maria ad Praesepe, and the Cologne cult of relics of the Three Kings). However, the non-transferable star in the well, worshiped by pilgrims in Palestine, can in Western environments be commemorated only by its theatrical representations.

<sup>2</sup> Isolated engravings with the theme of the Three Kings are often remnants of prints of theatrical scripts and programmes of Epiphany plays. As with Florentine panel paintings and frescoes, which were backed by the Magi fraternities and guilds, they are often related to the staging of the Epiphany plays and corteges.

sented the Three Kings with angels as attendants that carried also the explanatory function of this ceremony [Staud 1986, 391]<sup>3</sup>.

Rural and urban culture, however distinct they are, did not stand opposed in the flow of centuries as two impermeable structures. Transfers and incentives went in both directions. In some places, carollers walking with the star would descend from mountain villages to nearby towns to earn a little extra by performing the Three Kings for their more affluent neighbours [Pašteka et al. 2018, 44]<sup>4</sup>. However, cities with all their intellectual potential and institutions did not content themselves with such cultural import. In addition, unemployment and poverty of the educated class existed also in the past, and motivated students to improve their wellbeing by performing in the countryside. In both cases, the effect of having strangers perform would aid the depiction of the biblical wise men coming from far away.

## 2

Even if the statement that the urban population took over the passion cycle, while the village adopted the Christmas plays [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 28]<sup>5</sup> is valid, the Three-King theme is not subject to this division – when exploring the differences between urban and rural culture, these need not be overly contrasted.

Indeed, we see analogies in both environments: for example, in the area of stage and prop design, we can notice efforts to construct a star of Bethlehem as a light source. In the well-known Prešov Eisenberg's play written in 1651, it is a sophisticated flood-light<sup>6</sup> in the hands of the Seraph.

<sup>3</sup> As far as language is concerned, the facts from the history of school drama in the Slovak territory are interesting. *Regula ratio studiorum* (1599) accepted folk language for Christmas and Easter plays: "Permoti etiam multi <...> spectaculo processionis, qua itum est ad Domos benedicendas in Epiphania Domini adornatis tribus Regibus ductu Angelorum procedentibus et vernaculis rythmis rem explicantibus".

<sup>4</sup> Textual motifs also reflect movement between cities and the countryside for carolling. E. g. a record from 1827: "we are coming from the town of Dubnica".

<sup>5</sup> The lyrics of the Romani carol Jaskuline suggest that the Roma people also improved their situation by Christmas carolling in nearby villages. In the mountain villages around Levoča, where the visitation of priests has been preserved as well, they have been doing so until today.

<sup>6</sup> The performance of the play using a specific light effect was dependent on the interior setting as it was the only way in which the light effect could be kept under control. Engravings illustrating the play document the light of candles and of a chandelier, which were apparently applied at a different time than the star effect. At this point, I would like to express my gratitude to Ivan Martinka for his valuable help in my effort to understand how the prop mechanism worked in Eisenberg's play. I quote from his letter: "It looked like a cabinet screen – a block with all its walls; in the front there is a cutout in the shape of a star, perhaps with a forged wire silhouette, as if changing along the 'edges' of the star, possibly to create a 3D effect. In the 'cabinet' I imagine a number of candles on several floors, probably from the opposite side of the front wall (closer to the viewer), and on the rear wall there was a mirror on the inside, or more precisely a polished metal sheet, which may have been bent to concentrate the light and blur the image of the burning candles. The sheet could also have been fixed on the remaining walls to increase luminosity. A problem would have occurred if the candles had melted rapidly from the heat generated. Possibly, there were oil burners instead, which would also be less dangerous. If they had to be lit during the show, it would have been a tough technical proposition, but not without a solution – perhaps using something like a fuse cord that would go through all the burners / candles. Of course, it would be necessary to ensure sufficient air flow, that is, through cranking, so that light would not escape through the joints, and the shadows would not betray everything".

In the play “Walking with the Star” from Hybe, people walk with the star a few days before the Epiphany <...> the Starbearer (hvezdár), has only a shako (čák) and instead of a chisel, he carries a five-pointed wooden star with a burning candle in the centre [Pašteka et al. 201].

In the play “Walking with the Star” from Rybany, one of the boys from Bánovce carried a six-pointed star made of paper, with a tinsel circle attached around and decorated with multi-coloured pieces of paper in its corners; a candle burnt in the circle. [Pašteka et al. 2018, 216]<sup>7</sup>. Such portrayals of the star are not unique, although it was given little attention overall. The light may have been used as illumination for performances on the Eve of Epiphany or on the Epiphany, when the days were still very short. However, its main aspect was symbolic – as is the case still today, passing on the light of Bethlehem.

Besides the flow of mutual influence between rural and urban locals, both environments also would proceed independently when looking for inspiration in the same biblical source – hence the extension of the Christmas narrative to include a story from Genesis. A theme known from folk theatre as “Walking with the Serpent” also appears in Protestant school plays, though significantly modified: instead of an ingeniously stylized prop of a snake in folk performances, we encounter it as personified whereby the Serpent gains an individual (human) voice [Varšo 2014, 102]<sup>8</sup>.

The occurrence in several texts of mythological figures and shepherds from Vergil [Varšo 2014, 95]<sup>9</sup> demonstrates that the interpretation of this subject went beyond the liturgical framework of the church processions – a phenomenon which may not be very surprising in the context of the Protestant milieu, but also proves typical of the Catholic urban milieu of that time. And the penetration of humanistic motifs can also be noticed in the Byzantine-Slavic environment<sup>10</sup>.

The formal diversity of dramatizations of the Three-King theme is quite wide, from indoor plays to corteges and processions. A number of cases document the presence of wind instruments and drums in the Three King's retinue, which suggests a step beyond the liturgical framework where instrumental music was restricted.

### 3

In royal towns (but also in castles and church chapters), important diplomatic visits often took place on the Epiphany. They left behind gifts of rare paintings, and,

<sup>7</sup> The distance from Bánovce to Rybany is 6 km. It can be assumed that the Bánovce residents also visited other villages on the way. In this context, it would be interesting to know more about the route of their walks, which would suggest whether or not the candle was also used as a light source, at least at dusk.

<sup>8</sup> Andreas Sartorius, active in the Evangelical school in Ilava, authored the play *Lusus Scholasticus seu Actus Oratorius Exhibens Homini Creationem, Lapsum et per Nativitatem Christi Salvatoris reparationem*, featuring the characters of Lucifer, Asmodeus, Leviathan, Emperor Augustus, but also Adam, Eve and the Serpent.

<sup>9</sup> E. g. *Jesus Desiderium et Delicium Piorum*, a play from the Prešov Evangelical College, in which the Magi arriving in Bethlehem are revealed in figures of genii who have come from the four cardinal points.

<sup>10</sup> The fact that scholars also brought Renaissance motifs to the Byzantine-Slavic milieu is confirmed by paraliturgical hymns such as *Adam's Lament*, where e. g. whales and dolphins are called upon to participate in the mourning the Christ's death. We can perceive Adam's weeping after the expulsion from paradise in the context of Easter, but also in the thematic intersection with the Christmas play *Walking with the Serpent*, featuring Eve beside Adam. The formal analogy of the play with the lament is that the expulsion from paradise is not interpreted as an exchange of replicas, but as a song.



more importantly, signed political conventions<sup>11</sup>. The plays were commonly staged on the occasion of such visits. It was customary to celebrate this feast with a theatre performance. Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*, freed from the Magi theme, is often associated with the visit of an envoy to the English court. Similarly, the performance *Magnes Amoris Divini* (1650) from Spišská Kapitula, given on Epiphany (1650) provided an opportunity to link a rare visit of Palatine Paul Pálffy to Rome [Varšo 2014, 194].

Based on the phenomenon of "Zipser Jerusalem", we believe that during the Epiphany performance in Spišská Kapitula, the bishop's residence could have served as a representation of Herod's Palace, which would be analogous to its documented function in the Passion plays staged in exterior. We have as of yet not found any written evidence for this; however, the preserved programme of the aforementioned play, developing the then contemporary theory of magnetism and the magnetic force of divine attraction affecting the iron heart of man, indicates to us the dimensions of the performance, which required 148 performers to work specifically with the stage space, and thus it gives us some idea of its presentation. Indeed, if each of the Kings had a 15-member retinue, and Herod had, in addition to his 18 commanders, also 8 figures of their genii, 5 astrologers, 6 chief priests, and 17 figures representing his rage, this would make the placement of the performance in the exterior of the courtyard of Spišská Kapitula a practical necessity – even though the characters changed quickly (which was important for their warmth in the winter season).

## 4

In case of Prague, we also have toponymy-related arguments to consider when discussing the programme of the Three Kings Cortege. The name of the House at the Three Kings next to Týn Presbytery<sup>12</sup>, as well as the House at the Golden Star in Lesser Town, sometimes called the House at the Three Kings<sup>13</sup>, undoubtedly reflect stations of the ancient Three Kings Cortege, which wound its way to Prague Castle by the Royal Route, otherwise used when the rulers of Bohemia were coronated. The Royal Route undoubtedly co-created the sacred topography of the city<sup>14</sup>.

The Soběslav and Old Town rights of 1439 show what the *adventus regis* (royal entry) has in common with the festive processions. According to their regulations, the procession must always be led by an incarnation of sanctum (*res religiosae*) – be it a mon-

<sup>11</sup> After all, this symbolism has been preserved until late modern period: in Central European political context we can also notice it in the Three Kings Declaration of January 6, 1918, which demanded the right of nations to self-determination.

<sup>12</sup> It is a house in close proximity to the Old Town Square built in 1365 as Celetná No. 3/602). Celetná was formerly called Caletná or U Caltněřů. The word *caltněř* or *caletník* is derived from *calta* that used to denote a plaited bun and was documented as early as in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> A house on Nerudova Street No. 48. The former names of the street confirmed it was passable during all seasons: 1) Ostruhová, in German: *Sporrengasse*, a corruption of the word *Sparrengasse*, which means Rafter Street, derived from the roof trusses, used to reinforce the road in past; 2) previously, from the 14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century, the street was called Na Dlážděni, i. e. On the Paved Street.

<sup>14</sup> The formation of the royal route can be related to the creation of *Ordo ad coronandum regem bohemorum* (Coronation Order of Bohemian Kings), initiated by Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor, drawing inspiration from the French environment.

arch, saintly relics, or an impersonation or painting thereof: this is followed by mayors, counsellors, fraternities, students, and guild masters; the ranking of guilds under their flags takes into account their military and political merits for a particular city [Schranil 1916, 89–91]<sup>15</sup>.

Prašná Brána (Powder Tower), placed on Prague's Royal Route, represented a monumental backdrop for the solemn moment of the arrival of the sovereign (*adventus regis*) to be coronated. From there, the procession continued through Celetná and Karlova Streets across Karlův Most (Charles Bridge), Mostecká Street and Malostranské Square to Nerudova Street. After that, it proceeded via Úvoz<sup>16</sup> to Pohořelec. In front of the gates of the Strahov Monastery, the cortege turned and set off along Loretánská Street, passing Hradčany Town Hall on the way<sup>17</sup>. After that, it went through Hradčanské Square to arrive in Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral therein.

The Three-King toponyms on the Royal Route in Prague testify to the fact that at least the Celetná – Nerudova section also included names associated with the Three-King Cortege. The Three-King Cortege did not necessarily follow the coronation route – despite the similarities, they had different purpose.

As to the naming of Prague houses, this practice is usually described as playing a role in orientation, similar to that of numbering houses today. From the point of view of such purpose the multiple appellations associated with the Three-King theme look impractical and confusing. Yet, they suggest another phenomenon – the stations of the Three-King corteges. This duplicity of names simply reflects the performative phenomenon.

Four other buildings also carried the appellation U Tří Králů (At the Three Kings): two in Old Town and two in Lesser Town. In the Lesser Town Quarter, this name was given to a house at the site of the present Conservatory<sup>18</sup>, and also to one of the houses at the site of the Palace at the Moors<sup>19</sup>, located directly on the Royal Route. In the Old Town, the Three-King toponym used to refer to the original Renaissance House at the Golden Pretzel<sup>20</sup> and also to the House U Finků<sup>21</sup> – an alternative cortege route leading from the corner of Havelská and Betlémská Streets may have connected them.

<sup>15</sup> The specific status of the butchers' guild at a particular moment in Prague's history explains why the order and hence the hierarchy of guilds differed from other cities. Here, it was butchers, goldsmiths, metalworkers, furriers, tailors, shoemakers, maltsters, bakers, coopers, barbers, drapers and mercers; in comparison, e. g., the prominent Florentine guilds were: *Arte di Calimala*, *Arte della Lana* and *Arte della Seta* (the Cloth-merchants Guild, the Wool Guild and the Silk Guild).

<sup>16</sup> Via Úvoz, that is along Strahovská (or also Hluboká) Street.

<sup>17</sup> The building was constructed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century at Řeznický (Butchers'), or sometimes Masokrámský (Meat Market) Hill.

<sup>18</sup> Pálffy Palace is on Valdštejnská Street No. 14, and if the cortege had taken the Royal Route, going past it would have represented a detour.

<sup>19</sup> Morzin Palace at Nerudova Street No. 5 is identifiable by the motif of the Moors incorporated within its facade.

<sup>20</sup> Karoliny Světlé Street No. 22/284: the former name of the street was Poštovská, and before that (from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards) Svatoštěpánská (because of St. Stephen's Gate in the fortifications). The street represented the route from Vyšehrad to the Vltava ford.

<sup>21</sup> A house at Havelská Street No. 7/509, the second facade of which leads to Michalská Street.

In the past, the Bethlehem Chapel was associated with the cult of the Holy Innocents [Horníčková 2009, 176]<sup>22</sup>, which is closely related to the Three Kings in the Gospel. Youngsters representing the Innocent children slaughtered in Bethlehem had special rights on feast days: the *homo festivans* of the past centuries created an opportunity in which the Bethlehem infants were supposed to enjoy their short lives. A record from Cologne offers evidence of the fact that children sometimes overdid it on the Holy Innocents Day (December 28) when numerous processions of little carollers set off and their mischief raised a number of complaints [Borovský 2014, 395].

Similar phenomena were recorded in the rural areas of Slovakia, revealing the parallelism with largely spread Easter purifying folk custom of *šibačka*: The Holy Innocents Day is celebrated by *šibačka* (symbolic whipping), and that cannot do without children. All boys including the smallest ones walk around the village with sticks, whip the girls they meet, and even have the courage to beat young women, if they encounter them in the street. At another time, girls would challenge the little ruffians, but today all of them bear it, whether the little or big – it is pointless to resist: it is the day of *mladzenky* [Pašteka et al. 2018, 213].

But let us go back to Prague for a while. The repeated occurrence of toponyms related to the Three Kings could have resulted from historical modifications of the cortege's route, or simply by detours of the route. In addition, there were perhaps attempts to ascribe an interesting mark to other buildings that served as a station – as it used to be in mansion-type theatre, where the audience moved from scene to scene, the individual motifs were “collected along the route” and the overall picture consisted of scenes where characters and themes could be repeated. The simultaneous course of the mansion scenes provided the opportunity to be seen by a greater number of moving viewers. In the case of the names of some houses, and when taking into account their location on the route of the cortege, such an assumption is quite justified – for example, regarding the Old Town houses: At Three Angels, At Adam and Eve, At the Golden Hay;<sup>23</sup> and also Lesser Town houses: At the Three (Golden) Rings (or: At the Melchior's)<sup>24</sup> and At the Ass in the Crib<sup>25</sup>, whose names fit perfectly into the dramaturgy of the Three-King cortege. Of course, mansion aesthetics, which left behind its toponymous trace, could only be applied to the old history of the existence of the Three-King cortege.

Certainly, many houses were also named independently of the Three-King procession, since in the course of history certain special aesthetics of Prague's nomenclature and house signs emerged. And today, e.g. the three royal crowns of the Swedish national coat of arms are also optically integrated within it, although the location of the Swedish embassy is a matter of modern history.

<sup>22</sup> “In the inventory record of 1529 and in the records of Jan Mystopol of 1550 the body of an Innocent in green silk under a black blanket in a wooden chest and a black chasuble of Jan Hus was listed among the relics. <...> Even Prague Bethlehem Chapel, the centre of Hus' cult and Hussite teaching, kept its relic of an Innocent throughout both Utraquist and even Brethren (!) administration in the sixteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Relics were also kept in the altars”.

<sup>23</sup> Karlova Street No. 21, 23 and 24.

<sup>24</sup> Mostecká Street No. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Nerudova Street No. 25.



## 5

The Three Kings are not commemorated in the toponyms of the historical centre of Bratislava as they are in Prague, where, thanks to its stable natural relief nesting the historical centre within, the houses called At Three Kings have been preserved in several places. After the Battle of Mohács (in 1526, i.e. the year when Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor, was elected King of Hungary in the Franciscan Church in Bratislava), the royal city of Bratislava (formerly Pressburg) became a coronation city; it remained so till 1830. After having gained this privilege, it naturally also developed an urban culture around the Feast of the Epiphany – as had happened in other coronation cities such as Cologne, Paris and Prague<sup>26</sup>.

Written sources on this issue are still only partially explored, but representations of the Three Kings were surely staged with elements of then contemporary court ceremonies, and could also have served as rehearsals for ceremonial court behaviour. Thus the presence of mulattos, as well as 6 camels at the Prague coronation of Maximilian II<sup>27</sup> (followed by his Bratislava coronation as King of Hungary a year afterwards), points to the influence of the Three-King corteges on the royal entry and subsequent coronation ceremony. More than an exotic fashion wave, the above-mentioned elements of the coronation ceremony can be understood as an image of universalism (signified by the symbolic inclusion of the descendants of biblical Ham) and the abundance of God's blessing (in the multitude of camels): "The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord" (Iz 60:6, KJV).

Let us not forget what the presence of tamed camels during the monarch's triumph must have meant for most of those present, who only knew these animals from hearing of the traumatic battles with the Turks at Varna and Mohács, where camels were used to frighten horses. [Dvořák 2004, 209]<sup>28</sup>.

We could continue, however it should by now be clear that almost all aspects of contemporary Three Kings Cortege can be identified in various earlier forms of the Epiphany celebration, as they have been occurring in Central European countries throughout their history.

## 6

At the end of the 2010s, the Three-King cortege reappeared in Bratislava. It had already emerged in Central Europe generally at the end of the 1990s – undoubtedly as an expression of joy of freedom after the fall of the communist regime. First in Prague, where it was begun on the initiative of its small international community and drew from the existence of Three-King *cabalgatas* in the Hispanic world, well known to the local

<sup>26</sup> Many monarchs crowned in Pressburg (Bratislava) cumulated their monarchic titles (Emperor, plus Czech King, plus...), and their coronation in Pressburg can be studied in relation to other such ceremonies of individual monarchs, as well as from direct historical documentation.

<sup>27</sup> Maximilian II was crowned King of Bohemia in 1562, King of Hungary in Pressburg in 1563, and Holy Roman Emperor in 1564.

<sup>28</sup> In a broader context, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Mohács (more precisely at Nagyharsány, 1687) is of interest: there, Charles V, Duke of Lorraine, won and his army seized, among other spoils, 1,500 camels.

Spanish residents. Today, the founders of the cortege do not participate in it, but the phenomenon has taken root in Prague and has merged with an annual Three Kings Collection for charity.

The spark of Prague inspiration found an extremely favourable environment in Poland. Visitors to the Warsaw Cortege (Orzsak) number tens of thousands of visitors, and the event has become an integral part of public life in recent years. Based in the capital, its management initiates corteges in many other Polish cities, and even within the Polish cultural diaspora.



Fig. 1. Magi Cortege starting at the Bratislava castle. Photo: Igor Sivák

The third capital of Central Europe<sup>29</sup> wherein the cortege has been introduced was Bratislava (Fig. 1). Bratislava is unique in that a team of professional theatre makers led by director Pavol Hudák have shaped the Three Kings Cortege. The cooperation of the development projects-specialised organization Dobrá novina, that established charitable carolling 25 years ago, was essential in creating the breeding ground for the cortege. The first Three Kings Cortege<sup>30</sup> in Bratislava took place in 2019. In 2020, the cortege was organised again – with a modified route. So far as its form is concerned, it combines inspiration from the Florentine Cavalcade with the traditional bagpipe music and elements of folk plays. Its dialogues maintain a rhythmic verse structure, but its content is based on the needs of novel dramatic situations.

Perhaps the best example of a creative modification can be seen in the scene of the visit at Herod's Palace. Folk plays are short and focus separately on each feast day of the Christmas cycle. The dialogue between *Smrtka* (Death, represented as female) and

<sup>29</sup> Considering the interest that the Bratislava Three Kings Procession gained on the Hungarian public television, we can expect the idea to be adopted in Budapest as well. URL: <https://nava.hu/id/3600016/>.

<sup>30</sup> For image materials, see URL: <https://www.trajakrali.sk> and URL: <https://viaregum.sk>. For the entire cortege, see URL: <https://www.tvlux.sk/archiv/play/22423>.

Herod is shaped as shrewd horse-trading to keep him alive, but she is adamant, and at the end of the scene, she scythes his head off [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 186–187].

*A PLAY ABOUT HEROD*, Rel'ov; characters: Herod, Soldier, Jew, Death, Devil:

*Soldier*: Can we perform a piece about Herod for you here?

*Locals*: Yes, you can.

*Jew* (enters with a book under his armpit): You know what, King Herod? I'm bringing you sad news. In a small town of Bethlehem, a new Jewish king is to be born. And it is about to happen any day.

*Herod*: So will I no longer be king?

*Jew*: I don't know. But so it is written in the prophecies. (Reads:) "And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel".

*Herod*: Go, soldier, to Bethlehem, and kill all the children under two years of age!

*Soldier*: As you order, master! (the following period of time is filled by a song sang by the Jew to entertain Herod)

*Death*: Um, um, where is Herod?

So here you are. I've been looking for you for seven years,

And I haven't been able to find you until now.

But you are mine today!

*Herod* (begging, as he kneels): Dear Death, give me another seven years!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: Let me live another year!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: Let me live another month!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: Let me live another week!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: ...One more day!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: ...One more hour!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: ...One more minute!

*Death*: Nope.

*Herod*: ... one more second!

*Death*: Nope. (She scythes his head off and Herod falls to the ground.)

However, the cortege of the Three Kings passing by Herod's Palace cannot conclude the dialogue of the Kings in the same way. After all, meeting Herod is just a stopover on their way to Bethlehem. Therefore, the allusion to the conflict with *Smrtka* is resolved such that the storyline of the play remains within a single timeline and this individual situation does not precede the overall course of events.

The structure of the cortege play is formed in relation to the historical centre of Bratislava. It is written "site-specific", taking into account the city itself, and incorporating particular historic buildings within its plot, which are occupied by performers acting in individual scenes. Visitors to the festivity follow the actors at its front, and the entire cortege proceeds in accord with the structure of the streets and squares of the old town. In the two variants already performed (setting off from Rybné and Hradné Squares), the festival reunites the insensitively interrupted historical connection of Bratislava Castle and the Old Town into a single urban whole (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Black king in Bratislava. Photo: Barbora Jančárová (left)



Fig. 3. Star-bearers in Bratislava. Photo: Barbora Jančárová (right)



Fig. 4. Arrival to the crib at the Main square in Bratislava. Photo: Barbora Jančárová

### Conclusion 1

Unlike the carollers walking with a star, the Kings ride in the cortege on horseback, which returns horses to the ancient environment, a sight that was once common there. Even the camels are not the first of its kind to walk the streets of Bratislava. The position of the Kings on animals literally changes the point of view even for those who await their arrival in the corridor forming along the streets. To see the Kings, they must raise their heads. This brings their sightline to the roofs, sculptures and stuccoes of old buildings, displayed banners and posters, gables and decorative balcony mountings. Even the little Starbearers at the front of the cortege, representing the sparkles of the comet rather than a Bethlehem star, attract the gazes of the audience upwards by the long poles on which they carry their stars (Fig. 3).

This elevation of one's sight above the normal optical horizon does something similar to the human inner self. It gives the opportunity to experience the well-known historic centre of Bratislava anew, differently, festively (Fig. 4).



## Appendix: Dialogues of the Three-King Cortege

### 1. The CORTEGE MEETS The THREE KINGS

*(The Kings and their entourage stop at once. Drums fall silent. Two bagpipers step forward.)*

First bagpiper: Take a look at those three!

Two on horseback, before thee  
And the third one, further back,  
Having his chin on us stuck  
What beast has he saddled up?

Second bagpiper *(to the crowd, mockingly about the first bagpiper):*

He is pale with fear and fright!  
Oh, you nitwit, can't you see?  
That's a camel, from oversea!

First bagpiper: Why, stop fussing, be so kind.

Heigh, gentlemen, I say hello! *(loudly, to the Three Kings on horseback)*  
Would you tell us where you go,  
We are curious, won't you mind?

Balthazar: Three Kings, that is who we are  
Coming hither from afar

We gave our homes a good-bye  
To follow a star *(points with his hand forward and upward, turns to the other two).*

Caspar: Three Kings, that is who we are  
*(first in the performer's native language, then in Slovak)*

Coming hither from afar  
To bring precious things  
To the King of Kings.

Balthazar: I am called King Balthazar.

Melchior: And I am King Melchior.

Caspar: Caspar is the name I bear.

Balthazar: Now you know what brought us here

And what joins us in our course  
Let's go on now, as one force.  
You players, don't let us wait,  
Walk us to the city gate! *(he moves forward)*

Caspar: Halt, now! And which way?

Where to turn my horse?

Balthazar: The same we took before...

The star will set our course!

*(He points to a child with a star who is already bouncing in front of the crowd. The bagpipes are heard. The castle gate opens. The Starbearers run out of the crowd, circumscribe a circle before the Kings, and run towards the exit from the courtyard. The twelfth Starbearer joins them. The sound of drums begins, accompanying the bagpipes. The Three Kings set out immediately after the Starbearers, and take up posts at the front of the cortege that is being formed in the gate of the courtyard.)*

### 2. MEETING AT The CITY GATE *(barbican, the bridge at the Red Crayfish)*

*(City guards block the way of the cortege. The Kings and the procession stop. The Mayor of the town speaks, standing at the balcony of the tower.)*

Mayor: Greetings, dear lords down there.

I am this town's Lord Mayor.

Long I've been guarding its peace.



If I am to let you in,  
Tell me, what brought you here, please.

Balthazar: Three Kings, that is who we are  
Coming to you from afar  
We gave our homes a good-bye  
To follow a star.

Melchior: Three Kings, that is who we are,  
Coming hither from afar  
To bring precious things  
To the King of Kings.

Balthazar: I am called King Balthazar.  
Melchior: And I am King Melchior.  
Caspar: Caspar is the name I bear.  
Mayor: Words so pleasant and so rare!  
Exactly so told us Michael,  
Our town's patron – guardian angel  
*(gestures towards the statue at the top of the tower).*  
Word by word, Michael then told us:  
A King of Kings will be born  
And voyagers will come to town  
From countries far away...  
Gladly, I'll open your way  
Oh! For such a noble purpose.  
Come, councillor, grant these men  
The key from our main gate! *(a councillor hands the key to Caspar)*  
If someone in our city great  
Should keep you from your journey grave  
Tell him that I, of my own,  
Will be as your ally sworn. *(the guardsmen make way for them.)*

Melchior: Thank you, indeed, honoured lord  
For your hearty welcome word.

Balthazar: Let's go, brothers, through the gates,  
To the King of Kings: He waits.  
*(Bagpipes, drums, and singing are heard. The procession moves.)*

Mayor: Gather round, you fellow men!  
Push forward, don't cause a jam!  
Welcome to the city of Jerusalem! *(the procession passes through Michalská Gate)*  
Welcome to the city of Jerusalem!  
*(The procession continues down Michalská Street to Zichy Palace representing Herod's Palace.)*

### 3. HEROD'S PALACE

*(Herod's soldiers block the way of the cortege. Bagpipes, drums and singing cease. Herod stands on the balcony, behind him is a counsellor holding a book.)*

Herod: Pilgrims! Marching through my town!  
Halt! Halt! *(The Kings stop.)* Don't you see my crown?  
And my ring! Just make a link.  
Where are you heading? What do you bring?

Balthazar: We are seeking the King of Kings,  
Bringing him some precious things.  
I am called King Balthazar.

Melchior: And I am King Melchior.  
 Caspar: Caspar is the name I bear.  
 Balthazar: Now you know for what we care...  
 Herod: Three Kings, you say. And bringing presents for me?  
 You have arrived rightly. Can't you see it, you three?  
 The King of Kings, ay? Good address to your merit!  
 I am the one you seek! Welcome – to King Herod!  
 My sword protects the city and this country fair.  
 Thank you for your presents; gentlemen, farewell!  
*(is about to depart)*  
 Balthazar: We are sorry, Herod.  
 A disappointing instant...  
 The King we are seeking  
 Is a – little infant.  
 Herod: Little baby, you say? Zachiel, come near!  
 Open the book for us! The prophet – let's hear!  
*(The counselor whispers with Herod, Herod snatches the book of the prophet Micah, reads aloud)*  
 Herod *(reading)*:  
 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda:  
 for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel...  
*(To the Three Kings)*  
 You have heard that... Bethlehem,  
 That's where you must go swiftly.  
 Find the child you're seeking,  
 Bring the message to me.  
 I will bow with modesty  
 To the one succeeding me.

#### 4. SCENE WITH DEATH

*(There is heard screaming from the street corner, then Death with a scythe appears.)*

Death: Herod, Heroooooo! Are you Herod?  
 Herod: It depends on who is asking.  
 Death: *(towards Balthazar)* Is this the one called Herod?  
*(to Herod)* Is that how you welcome a lady?  
 Balthazar: *(mimics Herod)* Herod, you say? Good address to your merit... *(laughs in his sleeve)*  
 Death: It is written clear here, indeed: *(reading)* The yellow house in the Old Town,  
 Herod's Palace, Venturian Street number nine.  
 Herod: Guards, take that damned creature away!  
 Death: Easy, boys, easy, your turn will come too!  
*(the guardsmen run away, the last one is frozen with fear)*  
 What? *(mocking the last one)* Brave soldier... a strange smell comes from you!  
*(swings her scythe, laughs)*  
 They are the best in the world, the bravest of the brave!  
 And they would poop their pants! Of a woman so scared!  
*(Herod tries to escape to the palace discreetly, Death stops him)*  
 Herod, honey! Behave yourself! Wait still there for me!  
 And you three? *(sideways, to the children)* Have you frozen?  
 Hey! Now your way is free!

*(Herod throws his book from the balcony into the street – after Death – and runs inside. Bagpipes and drums sound. Death rushes through the flying leaves into the palace. The procession moves forward, following the star.)*



Fig. 5. Adoration of the Magi in Bratislava Main square. Photo: Barbora Jančárová

##### 5. GIVING The GIFTS – BETHLEHEM (Fig. 5)

*(The procession arrives at the Christmas crib on the Main Square. In the background, singers are standing, facing the town hall. The Starbearers are the first to hop onto the stage and make a stellar “aureole” around the Holy Family. The Three Kings dismount. They take their gifts. Bagpipes, drums and singing cease. The Kings come one by one, introduce themselves, worship the Baby Jesus, and offer Him gifts.)*

**Balthazar:** Greetings, King of Kings, be well.

My name is King Balthazar  
I come with tribute from afar  
Please, accept this gift of incense.  
An airy cloud that elevates  
To heaven human soul and sense.  
For you – a reminder of your home,  
For us – where later we will go.

**Melchior:** Greetings, King of Kings, be well.

My name is King Melchior.  
I also have a tribute – gold.  
The wealth of earth and glory’s glitter  
Are hidden in this piece of metal,  
But a wise man won’t be blinded  
With what children are delighted...  
Take this gold piece, little thing,  
That a king gives to the King.

**Caspar:** My name is Caspar, beloved lord.

*(The performer says this verse first in his native language, then in Slovak)*  
I bring myrrh and my humble word —  
Of all who suffer myrrh calms pain.  
Though you harken from the heavens,  
You will know pain, my precious King.  
Please accept myrrh – the gift I bring...  
*(When the last gift is given, bells ring. A comet glows on the town hall tower.)*

## II. The Caroller's "Walking with the Star"

### 1

In spite of the recently re-instituted Corteges of the Three Kings in Slovakia, the continuous carolling walks of Three Kings is still a dominant folkway of celebrating the Epiphany. This phenomenon's study is enhanced by the fact that linguistically, it has been taken up in Slovak and Rusyn dialects, and as such there is no obstacle in understanding the dramatic texts. The documentation of these plays benefited from periods of growing national awareness, and also from the promotion of folk culture studies in late decades of socialism. From this time, when religiosity was bounded within the church building, testimonies of the obstacles made to Three King carollers<sup>31</sup> walking with the star have been preserved, for example in the form of a humorous, but not frivolous rhyme [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 122]<sup>32</sup>.

Marxist thought does tend to align with Neo-pagan abstractions. But while the Soviets successfully replaced Christmas celebrations with those of the New Year, which fits into the progressive aesthetics of the bright tomorrow, television broadcasting in socialist Czechoslovakia was characterized by an accent on pre-Christian cultural substratum (customs accompanying Christmas) related to the winter solstice, while the Christian strata of the folk Christmas culture was ignored.

In living phenomena, however, the separation of the pre-Christian and Christian failed. In the performative structures of carolling, there are variants of the personalized struggle of the old and the new, as are found in every culture<sup>33</sup>; however, the character of a Jew [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 35]<sup>34</sup> serves as a variant, archetypical character of the Old only in a Christianized context.

<sup>31</sup> The world caroller appears to derive from the Three Kings walking with the star: the personal name Carol being used for the function of the King from the times of Charlemagne.

<sup>32</sup> This is also confirmed by a rhyme from the socialist era "we are the Three Kings, well wishing to you all; two've been busted by the police, that's why I've come alone", but also the well-wishing of fulfilling the quota necessary for a Rusyn peasant of Velky Lipník for his survival in the 1950s: "Žeby sja vam korovy dobre dojili, / žeby ste kontingent moloka splnili". This translates roughly as: "Let the milk flow from your cow / to fill the quota of the gov".

<sup>33</sup> The personalized struggle of the old and the new is performed in the Niger Delta by a wild dance on the roof and the subsequent shooting of the Opobo dancer. In Japan, something similar is represented by *Okina* – a special New Year play of the Noh drama, based on an ancient Shinto ritual.

<sup>34</sup> In this context, the imagined character of the Jew is imported from the Polish environment; we encounter it in morality plays about Herod that are newer than the Slovak Three-King plays. These works of drama are largely folklorised, but their authors tend to be editors of folk plays; considering the permeability of culture, it is not surprising to find them generally dominated by Baroque aesthetics. At the heart of the work of drama from Lesnica is the dialogue of a Jewish rabbi with Herod, who tries to find out where Christ was born. By clever evasions, the Jew postpones answering, and thus actually protects the Christ Child. In the play from Jezersko – Rešov we notice an inversion of the biblical situation: it is not Herod who asks the rabbis where the Messiah was born, but one comes to him with a question. This represents a means by which the Easter narrative structure is transferred into that of Christmas. The subsequent Jewish dance serves as an interlude, performed to entertain Herod after he has ordered the Massacre of the Innocents; but in the end, the Jew helps the Devil carry Herod to hell – thus taking up a variety of auxiliary tasks in this work of drama. In the puppet play from Lechnica (whose one-hundred-year-old puppet Christmas crib by Jan Kanta Kuco is deposited in

Both the Soviet era and the pastoral character of the mountainous settlements of Slovakia are now a matter of the past, and it is thus inevitable that the folk plays, bound to the pastoral environment and containing references incomprehensible to contemporary audiences, are also gradually dying. However, this does not apply to the principle of carolling itself. And, above all, it does not apply to the more universally conceived dramatizations of the Three Kings, referred to as “Three Kings” or “Walking with the Star”, which this text explores.

## 2

As we consider the two basic parallel narratives of Christian culture to be 1) Christmas vs. Easter and 2) the Nativity of Christ vs. the Creation of the world, there is no reason to believe that these would not be intellectually accessible to a rural man of past centuries, merely because he had less chance of obtaining school education. To perceive these parallels, it was enough for him to practise his Christian faith, during which he would meet both homiletics as well as theological content interpreted through art. His imagination was nurtured by what he knew from the church, where Christmas crib was often situated exactly where the Holy Sepulchre was placed for Easter. Parallelism was also one of the favourite iconographic practices of church decoration – for example, the depictions of the Throne of God in Eden and the throne of Madonna with the Child to which the Kings arrive.

Since we think in both words and images, the ability to develop biblical parallels in folk plays is evidenced by props that establish certain interconnections. It is no coincidence that the dramatic work documented in Nižné Ružbachy under the name “The Play of the Creation of the World” (*Hra stvorení sveta*)<sup>35</sup> was performed with the same model of a hut as “Walking with the Crib” (*Chodenie s betlehemom*). Both props differ only by a Christmas cookie cutter placed on its roof, which also brings to the semantic system the theme of bread (Fig. 6).

The performers of the Bethlehem play would walk around with a crib or a model of a church<sup>36</sup> – the house of God. The crib or little church was placed on the table in the house they visited – where bread was normally laid. Their acting opened an association between the table and the altar. When the family allowed the carollers to enter,

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the Museum Červený Kláštor today), the Jew appears in the minor role of a door-to-door salesman, while in the Lechnica-derived Lendak play, the character of the Jew disappeared completely. As for the play *The Jew and the Peasant*, it comes from the Polish Poronino, and was brought to Slovakia by the founders of the villages of Matiašovský Potok and Spišské Hanušovce. However, a detail found therein, that the Three Kings bought frankincense and myrrh in a Jew's cellar, also offers a parallel to the Ointment Sellers in the Easter mysteries. Easter *šibačka*, on the other hand, evokes the genre of *sofie*, as does the aforementioned whipping of the innocents (*mladenky*). There are no elements of racial hatred in Slovak and Rusyn folk plays. Let us add that, according to the Genesis, Jews are descendants of Shem, one of three sons of Noah, each of whom founded new generations after the Flood – and this fact was projected into the symbolic interpretation of the Magi, coming to worship Christ. According to this interpretation, Shem has his place among the Magi too – however, this conception was not developed in performative structures.

<sup>35</sup> It is a folklorised play by a local priest Eduard Korponay de Kamionka (1814–1891).

<sup>36</sup> In Poland, a specific tradition has evolved, probably of Baroque origin: Polish *szopky*, i. e. a portable crib, was usually made with a tall temple built above it. According to Martin Slivka, the Slovak tradition is older and there is no reason to question his conclusion. Finally, it crystallized into a polemic with German researchers, who interpreted the Slovak folk theatre as a derivative of the colonization of this territory by an ethnically



the interior of the room gained a new meaning. The visit was perceived as a sanctification of the space, which the family wanted to keep for as long as possible. Beside the door, the table carried a symbolic value all year round, as would everything that was placed upon it. In Eastern Slovakia, the custom of laying a child on the table after returning home from baptism is still preserved, and by this ritual the infant enters the traditional semantic system<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Walking with the Star in Nižné Ružbachy. Photo: Martin Slivka, 1965 (left)

Fig. 7. A traditional house in Stará Ľubovňa open-air museum. Photo: Anna Hlaváčová (right)

According to Christian doctrine, baptism frees the newborn of the hereditary guilt of Adam and Eve's surrender to temptation in the Garden of Eden. Folk drama interprets the story of temptation in the play "Walking with the Snake" [Pašteka et al. 2018, 543]<sup>38</sup> (Fig. 8). Unlike visual arts, which usually depict Adam and Eve young, this performative structure shows them with white wigs made of loose tow, indicating that they are the personae of biblical grandparents. Drawing the motif of the temptation of Adam and Eve into the subject of Christ's coming into the world develops the exege-

German group. Slivka found a counterargument in general history – especially in the fact that the monasteries at the territory of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary that were developing these liturgical plays were affiliates of French monasteries. He gives details of the structure of the plays, which testify to French inspiration. From a linguistic point of view, we can find Latin, Church-Slavic and occasionally Hungarian expressions in some lines of Slovak folk drama. In Hungarian plays, however, the Slovak and Rusyn influence is much more pronounced – as evidenced by the structure of the plays and the names of its characters.

<sup>37</sup> The custom can be considered a Christian variant of symbolic filiation, which proceeds as follows in traditional African communities: the father accepts the child as his own by lifting him up to the sky. Mother represents in this situation the symbolic connection of the child to the earth, the father to heaven.

<sup>38</sup> Adam stretches a folding wooden snake before the audience. If extended at full length, the snake is two meters long. Since its head, shooting forth, it is topped with a sharp nail in the serpent's mouth, the viewers dodge in fear of a possible prick. Adam pulls the snake down; then, still holding it, removes an apple from his pocket and spikes it upon the nail sticking out of the snake's mouth. Then he stretches the snake out to be in front of Eve's face. At first, she pushes it away but then she takes it. Consequently, she hands it to Adam. He puts it in his pocket. After the action with the snake prop, they sing the lines preparing their departure: "After they tasted the fruit, they had to leave Eden, disgraced".

sis of Christ as the new Adam who reopens Eden to the descendants of those expelled from it. A playful interpretation of the temptation scene, using a fold-up snake, complements the mainly joyful motif of Christ's arrival, which nullifies the consequences of the grandparents' disobedience.



Fig. 8. Walking with the Serpent in Hriňová. Photo: Jozef Grussmann, 1974 (left)

Fig. 9. The Three kings with a source of light in Liptovské Sliače. Photo: Jozef Grussmann, 1969 (right)

### 3

Thematic parallelism in the presentation of the closing and opening of Paradise is not only reflected in the textual structure, but also in its related iconography. Two of the dramatic situations make use of placement of a light source in the middle of a prop – once within the serpent's mouth, once inside the star. The prop makes use of the meaning of the snake as Lucifer (Lightbearer).

On Christmas Eve, young boys around ten years of age walk around households with a serpent. The head of the snake has an elongated skull made of thin plates, covered with the transparent (greased) red paper. Inside, there is a short candle that they light up when they walk around the households. At the end that symbolises the serpent's mouth, a long-curved wire protrudes with an apple stuck on it. A tail is attached to the head, also consisting of thin plates and made in such a way that when they squeeze it at the handles, the snake's head flies off, or the entire snake lengthens. Upon entering a house with this serpent and giving a Christian greeting: 'Praised be our Lord, Jesus Christ!', a boy would begin to sing the following song, stressing its meter by pulling and stretching the snake [Pašteka et al. 2018, 179]. The song goes as follows:

God, our Father, went to Eden,  
After making Eve and Adam.  
Of every tree you eat freely,  
Except for one, blooming sweetly.

Avoid the one of this Garden  
With white blossom and rare fragrance

Išiel pán Boh, šiel do raja,  
stvoril Evu i Adama.  
Zo všetch stromov požívajte,  
krome jeden – vynehajte,

ktorý stojí vprostred raji  
bielym kvítkom prokvitajú.

Yet both of them guilty became,  
God then sent them in a vineyard.

God then sent them in a vineyard,  
Gave them two hoes for their work hard.  
Plow the soil, dig the soil  
Make your bread in sweat and toil.

Before they gained bread  
Tears made their eyes red.  
Keep away eternal flame  
Be our shield, oh Christ. **Amen**  
[Pašteka et al. 2018, 179]

Obidvaja prehrešili,  
dal ich Pán Boh do vinice.

Dal ich Pán Boh do vinice,  
dal im on tam dve motyce.  
Tu orajte, tu kopajte,  
tu si chleba vyrábajte.

Kým si chleba vyrobili,  
do vôle sa vyplakali.  
Až nás nežrie večný plameň,  
uchovaj nás Kriste. **Amen.**

Even the final rhymed ending links the walking with the serpent and the walking with the star, in which carollers wish the visited households both earthly abundance and achievement of heavenly paradise. The author of the quoted record states that the walk with the snake could take place anytime between 'Three Kings' Day and Candlemas – which means that the motif of expulsion from Eden is a sort of an undertone behind the whole New Testament narrative, thus interconnecting the Christmas and Easter cycles.

#### 4

Another prop with a light source can be noticed in "Walking with the Star": The Bethlehem star with a light source inside is considered a symbol of the sun, of light, and its twisting symbolises and magically summons the movement of the sun in the sky towards a new year (Fig. 9). In addition to many such interconnecting points, the material proof of this motivation in our ethnography is the star made of 365 pieces – as many as there are days of the year [Slivka 2002, 232].

In the Byzantine-Slavic environment<sup>39</sup>, the Magi (*magoi*, *volsvi*) never fully turned into Kings. In Slovakia, both Latin and Byzantine rites are present, but the carolling tradition nationwide adopted the external attributes of the Kings, their crowns and titles. The folk theatre also borrowed the names of the Kings from the Western tradition<sup>40</sup>. But while within the visual arts, the names of the Kings have stabilized<sup>41</sup> to call the third

<sup>39</sup> Even the term *mnohá letá* (many years) in the couplet of the well-wishing (We have come to you from far away, wishing you many years beyond today) indicates the influence of the Eastern rite, although it is a record from western Slovakia region (Senica).

<sup>40</sup> In the Russian tradition, the name Atal was on some rare occasions recorded instead of Caspar. In Slovakia, there are many variants of the well-known names; for example, in some Slovak village, King Marhel' appears as a corruption of the name Melchior. As for the exotic names, a remarkable example of the painter's interpretative effort is evidenced by the names Sator, Arepo, and Tenet, assigned to shepherds in the Nativity of Christ scene, painted on the rock wall of the Cappadocian Eskigumus Monastery.

<sup>41</sup> A well-known example is Gozzoli's fresco in the Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence. There is no doubt as to the names of the Magi, the experts only raise questions regarding the cryptoportraits of historical figures in the main characters.

and youngest Caspar<sup>42</sup>, in Slovak folk theatre this character was always given the name Balthazar. How could we explain it?

The key could be the formula of blessing *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, as it is written on the front door to remain a reminder of the Three Kings all the year round: C+M+B. The abbreviated formula is identical to the three Kings' initials. When the Kings walk with the star, they enter the household in the order of the initial letters of the blessing formula. This is identical to the order of the names of the Magi in the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (Fig.10)<sup>43</sup>, in which the Wise Men proceed towards the Madonna with the Child – and in a broader sense, given the location of the mosaic on the north wall, towards the altar.



Fig. 10. Ravenna. Adoration of the Magi in Basilica di Sant' Apollinare Nuovo

The sequence of the Kings is the same also in the Slovak Three-King plays, where Starbearer<sup>44</sup> follows after the white-skinned Caspar, red-skinned Melchior and black-skinned Balthazar. Here, the presentation of the middle King as one of the yellow pigment was not originally widespread: its introduction did not happen until later (if it did at all) – as a systematic projection of the concept, which sees the Three Kings as repre-

<sup>42</sup> The puppet of Kašpárek, Kasper, or Kasperle of Czech and German countries is in our view the rudiment of the youngest, smallest King; his Baroqueisation, preserving the presentation of opposition with a secular king (in whom, again, we see the rudiment of Herod). But this is a newer developmental line. However, in this context it is worth mentioning that from the whole repertoire of Slovak folk theatre only the puppet plays with their Baroque aesthetics allow a complex, though concise story composition of the Christmas narrative consisting of the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Magi, Herod's scene, the Arrival of Death, and the Arrival of Devil.

<sup>43</sup> We read the inscriptions with the names above the three characters one word after another, from the back. The Ravenna mosaics date to 6<sup>th</sup> century, but the names of the Magi were added to it later.

<sup>44</sup> The Starbearer may also become the summarising well-wisher and collector of the gifts instead of the third King, or this role may be taken up by the domineering Herod or Old Man.



sentative of three different races. In folk theatre, however, this concept<sup>45</sup> is not primary; after all, even the blackness of Balthazar's face is not perceived here as incarnate or pigmentation, but as a result of having been sunburnt – which is further accentuated by the use of soot[Slivka 2002, 69]. The theme of the black face<sup>46</sup> appears in the direct speech of the third King or in the form of a dialogue. The first type of distribution of lines consists of the character introducing himself and of the subsequent presentation of the gift he brings:

I am a King of Arab lands.  
The sun has burnt my hands and face,  
My land knows not a winter cold;  
The sun broils there, hot and bold.  
Having trusted the new star,  
To offer myrrh I hence arrive  
[Pašteka et al. 2018, 180]<sup>47</sup>.

In the second type of performance, the third King does not draw attention to the gift, but to his own face and the sun:

I am a King of Arab lands.  
The sun has burnt my hands and face,  
Dear gentlemen, look upon me,  
How the sun can broil,  
Burnt me black like soil  
[Slivka 2002, 487]<sup>48</sup>.

Balthazar accompanies his speech with movement: with two gestures of his right hand, he points to the sun, and then touches his right and left shoulders to draw attention to his face without touching it. Let's mention an expressive textual variant to these gestures:

The sun shines from above,  
It is burning my bones  
[Slivka, Slivková 1994, 178]<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> The Three Kings are sometimes portrayed as men of three generations, and sometimes as men of three races – the latter is based on the Saint Hieronymus. Both approaches reflect a universalist concept that could be characterized as anthropological. In light of this comparison, we could perhaps characterize the solar accents of the Three-King folk plays as a presentation of a cosmic character.

<sup>46</sup> In a similar context, let us keep in mind that, until recently, distant phenomena were familiar to the rural man from the description only: this can be well illustrated by the carvings by Rudolf Siváň, whose camel looks as a horse with two humps on its back. The stylistic retardation of the depiction of exotic creatures in the manner typical of Giotto's contemporaries was the result of the unimaginable optical isolation of this 20<sup>th</sup>-century master of Naïve art. After all, even for Antonio Averulino, known as Filarete, the sight of the real camel was something worthy of being rendered on the door to St. Peter's Basilica in 15<sup>th</sup> century Rome.

<sup>47</sup> Gá sem od Arabie král, mám od slunce spálenau tvár, u nás nikdy zima nebýwá, tam prehorce slunce páljwá, gá sem dal onné hwězdě wjru a gdu obětowat tuto myrrhu.

<sup>48</sup> Ja som z mesta (J)arabí kráľ, mám od slnka spálenú tvár. Hľadte, hľadte milí páni, jak to slnko tuho páli, až ma na čierno spálilo.

<sup>49</sup> Sveti slnko z vysokosti, opaľuje moje kosti (variant from Vyšné Ružbachy).



In Slovak folk plays, the Kings' gifts are represented as those well-known from biblical reference: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But not always. While gold is invariant, in some cases it is followed by silver, while frankincense goes third [Urbancová 2018, 235]<sup>50</sup>. Not only is it more acoustically (rhythmically) impressive, but the verbal introduction of frankincense also prepares the ground for its actual use. However, the exchange of myrrh for silver is not a prerequisite for this procedure – in terms of dramatic function, it is essential to put frankincense in the third position<sup>51</sup>. Sometimes, the gifts (frankincense and myrrh) accumulate in Balthazar's hands for ceremonial purposes, as evidenced by "Walking with the Star" from Spiš, which includes permeating the household with a nice smell. The one who carries the frankincense with myrrh is thus the black man, the grubby one, sunburnt...

*Caspar and Melchior:*  
 You, the black one, in the back,  
 Why is your chin at us stuck?  
*Balthazar replies, singing:*  
 I am sticking out my chin  
 To wish you all a good New Year!  
*Caspar and Melchior:*  
 If you had not walked out,  
 You would not be burnt by sun  
*All:*  
 The sun is a heavy stone  
 For ever and ever. **Amen**  
 [Pašteka et al. 2018, 182]<sup>52</sup>.

If it were a unique case, the seemingly meaningless ending of the play could be a response to the need of completing a rhyme. Yet, we have a proof of the medieval origin of the same rhyme (kamen-Amen) in the fragment, that is preserved in the Munich calendar from 1432 [Pašteka et al. 2018, 20]. A rough character of the fragment certainly found its place in some performative structure. At the same time, the parodic nature of the fragment testifies to its derivation from a serious Three-King play [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 171]<sup>53</sup>.

The same rhymed ending (that could possibly lead us towards a seriously tuned performative structure) appears in a song documented together with its tune in *Jistebnice Hymn Book* (circa 1430) under the incipit "*Wew ržečenem myestie Bethlemye*" (In the City of Bethlehem)<sup>54</sup>. Its last stanza goes as follows:

<sup>50</sup> A ja zlato – A ja striebro – A ja, Baltazár, kadidlo.

<sup>51</sup> This need is evident even in the Christmas puppet plays inspired by those from Poland. While in Lechnica, the Kings bring gifts in the biblical order, in Lendak, to which the play came through Lechnica, there is already a variant with frankincense at the end – even though the puppets themselves cannot perform the tasks of burning incense in the dwelling.

<sup>52</sup> A ty, čarny co tam vžadu, / vysterkujes na nás bradu? / Na vas bradu vysterkujem / Panom novy rok vynčujem! / Kebyš nebul po slonku hodzil, / nebul by ši tvar osmudzil. / Slonečko je čašky **kameň** / Až na veky vekof. **Amen**.

<sup>53</sup> The same fragment is a part of a parodic dialogue of shepherds Fedor and Kubo in the village of Jurské.

<sup>54</sup> The continuity of the song's life is documented through the later hymn books, e. g. *Cantus Catholici*, witnessing for its popularity among the Christians belonging to different confessions.

Jesus is the precious **stone**,  
 Putting out the eternal **flame**.  
 Hallelujah. Oh, save us, Christ. **Amen**  
 [Ruščin 2017, 55–58]<sup>55</sup>.

This song develops the motif of fleeing from Herod, but omits details of the names and appearances of the Kings and their gifts. Although we expect a systematic development of the story in contact with the written heritage, the quoted stanza of the song does not follow from the previous one [Urbancová 2017, 235]<sup>56</sup>. The comparison with folk theatre shows that the song is concluded in the same way as the carolling plays “Walking with the Star” and “Walking with the Snake” – though in the song the sun is replaced by the name of Jesus.

This means that the hymn book from the first third of the 15<sup>th</sup> century retains the ceremonial rhymed formula of the Three-King plays, *kameň – plameň – amen* (stone – flame – amen), which is undoubtedly older than the song in question. By dating musical compositions related to the Three-King plays, musicological research helps to bridge the chronologically disparate data of the phenomena examined by ethnologists and art historians [Urbancová 2017, 222]<sup>57</sup>.

## 6

Slivka states matter-of-factly: The plays from archival sources come from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and our oldest records of folk plays come from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Folklore can, indeed, keep persistently various archaisms, but it is difficult to attribute them to any specific era [Slivka 2002, 242]. At the same time, he boldly states: Although we have no written evidence of the history and development of Christmas plays, they have their age encoded in their aesthetic structure [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 31].

And indeed, upon close examination of the structure of the song (recorded circa 1430), it turns out that the last stanza quoted above is taken from an older structure that already contained suggestively rhymed verses, similar to the quoted song ending. We have to do with the vibrant semantic fields around the words flame – stone – amen.

The flame in “Walking with the Snake” acts as the opposition of Christ, while in the Three-King “Walking with the Star”, by contrast, as characteristic of Him. The motif of the stone associated with the heat and light of the sun or flame is archaic. The solstice is important in all the cultures that experience the changes of the seasons. In Christian imagery, the sun also represents a Christological motif, in both Roman

<sup>55</sup> Ježiš jest ten drahý kameň, / Pred ním hasne večný plameň. / Alleluja. Ó spasiž nás Kriste. **Amen**.

<sup>56</sup> The record from Modra, dated 1924: “Slnce je tomu príčina, / že je má tvár opálená. / Slnce je drahé kamení pre Kristovo narodení” (translating as: Sun is the cause, the sun / That my face is tanned. / The sun is the precious stone / For Christ, God’s son, is born) not only better introduces the motif, but also complements it by Marian development: “Ta Maria zlatá perla, / ta Ježiška porodila / a od smrti ochránila” (Mary, that golden pearl, / Birth to child Jesus gave / Protected him from grave).

<sup>57</sup> Another level of the contribution of musicology is the identification of archaic melodic structures in connection with the Three-King theme. In our opinion, the archaic melodic descending character of the Three-King song may intentionally reflect the theme of the genuflection and humility of the Kings, of their laying gifts, but also of Christ’s coming from heaven – a theme symbolically associated with the motif of the Star of Bethlehem. For Urbancová, an example of this is the sound record from Piešťany.

and Byzantine traditions [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 38]<sup>58</sup>. The lack of sunshine can be magically or symbolically restored by the black King from a country that enjoys it in abundance – the black King, as were, brought the solstice. The verse structure rhyming stone with flame is an objective correlate here that may be interpreted as reference to the comet of Bethlehem<sup>59</sup>.



Fig. 11. Rogier van der Weyden. *The Vision of the Magi*, 1445 (left)

Fig. 12. Starbearer from Vernár. Photo: Martin Slivka, 1958 (right)

Finally, even in visual culture, the divine child entering the world can be placed literally within the star as in the painting *The Vision of the Magi* by Rogier van der Weyden (Fig. 11), which evokes the formulation of the quoted hymn-book. This demonstrates a high literal expressivity when implemented within visual form.

However, the single-word metaphor from the material world is inherently incomplete and also limited in pointing to a transcendental reality – which is why images taken from nature are often verbally expanded, for example by adjectives<sup>60</sup>. Compared to the stability of nouns, the two-syllabic adjectives assigned to the stone in the four-line stanza under evaluation vary considerably – the reason being that adjectives are generally more difficult to remember. Since it is obvious that it is no ordinary stone that is referenced in the verse, we consider the adjective from the phrase – a precious stone –

<sup>58</sup> The Nativity drama from Velký Lipník is a folklorised play: its template was created by A. Bohušskij who published it in a Užhorod collection of Rusyn carols in 1925. The play, however, engages the ancient liturgical formulation: “Your Nativity, O Christ our God, / Has shone to the world the Light of wisdom! / For by it, those who worshipped the stars, / Were taught by a Star to adore You, / The Sun of Righteousness, / And to know You, the Orient from on High. / O Lord, glory to You!”

<sup>59</sup> Let us call to mind the Palestinian pilgrimage site of the well into which the star of Bethlehem is believed to have fallen.

<sup>60</sup> In a Christianized context, Mary is also often metaphorically called “the star”. In the Akathist Hymn, the Wise Men see “the star leading to God” and Mary is the mother of an “unsetting star” (*zvezdy nezachodimoj mati*).

be the primary one, given the context and also its most frequent occurrence [Urbancová 2018, 227]<sup>61</sup>. Specifying the nature of the precious stone as a gemstone makes it possible to move on to the key finding: the rhyming of flame – stone – amen is bound not only to the Slovak or Slavic linguistic environment! It works also in Latin: *flamma – gemma – amen*<sup>62</sup>.

From this fact, it can reasonably be inferred that the verbal images that conclude the folk traditions of the Three Kings Walkings with Star<sup>63</sup>, stemmed directly from Latin liturgical songs.

## Conclusion 2

Although the explanation that the biblical drama cycle splits up into separate plays in the folk environment that correspond to the staging possibilities of what were then small village settlements [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 29], as well as a rational consideration of the dramaturgical need to fill several Christmas evenings appears consistent, the fact that the plot of the rural Christmas plays seems to be fragmented into individual sections, may also have another cause. Indeed, ritual and ceremonial activities are characterized by one-way movement, and not by alternation of rhythm.

In the case of the Three-King ethnographic material there is no argument supporting fragmentation, but evidence of the existence of liturgical tropes<sup>64</sup> can be found in the codices. Since the liturgical tropes are short, such that they could fit into the church ceremonies of a particular feast day, “Walking with the Star” could have evolved directly from such a liturgical structure. And if there is an ancient structure of the *ludus liturgicus* in the “Walking with the Star”, the utterances of the King personae represent its development in the Slovak cultural and geographically seasonal context.

It turns out that the Three-King theme in folk plays can be fruitfully studied in isolation from the Christmas cycle; thematic narrowing can lead to important clarification

<sup>61</sup> As to adjectives, let us add the variant “such a stone” that appears in the play from Spišská Belá, and “precious stone” in plays from Reľov, Lendak, and Haligovce. This too is recorded by musicological research – for example, in a song that comes from a Three-King play: “Slnko je tomu príčina, / že je má tvár opálená. / Slnko je drahé kameň / pre Kristovo narodení” (Sun is the cause, the sun / That my face is tanned. / The sun is the precious stone/ For Christ, God’s son, is born). The quoted record is from Strelenky, Púchov District, 1960.

<sup>62</sup> As derivatives of Latin, both terms have been preserved in all major languages! *Flamma* (French: *flamme*, Old English: *flawme*, German: *flamme*) – *gemma* (Old French: *gemme*, English: *gem*).

<sup>63</sup> The wording is followed by a very variable, collectively sang piece, which can be a well-wishing carol, a hymn composition or even a recruit’s song.

<sup>64</sup> While the Easter *Quem quaeritis* (Whom do you seek) gave birth to its Christmas modification, *Quem quaeritis, pastores* (Whom do you seek, shepherds), a separate tropus, which we might call *Quem quaeritis, reges* (Whom do you seek, Kings) is not mentioned, though from a purely dramaturgical point of view, it could easily have been uttered by Herod. Perhaps that was the actual problem when the tropus was being formed, since both the widely known *Quem quaeritis* are uttered by an angel who already knows the answer, or there was no suitable address for the foreigners making a journey led by the star, since they did not have royal titles in the Bible. The process of appropriation (Slivka’s ‘nationalization’) of the liturgical Divine Office by the folk theatre was in the case of the Three-King “Walking with the Star” based on *Ordo (Officium) stellae*. This included a chant composed on the words of David’s Psalm *Reges tarsis* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, acting as a commentary of a procession. The Office’s next piece, *Vidimus stellam*, is written in the first person plural – the Kings do not introduce themselves, nor do they answer any questions; instead, they actively declare why they are arriving. It is technique similar to that of folk theatre: “My tri krále ideme k vám” (We three Kings are coming to you).



tions [Slivka 2002, 251]<sup>65</sup>. Regarding the dating of the Three-King “Walking with the Star” form, as it is currently passed down in Slovakia, it can be concluded that it is undoubtedly ancient, but cannot be older than the development of sung forms of the Latin liturgy and the creation of the blessing inscription formula *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*. Given the royal motifs, it would also be correct to date its lower interval to no earlier than the cult of the Three Kings established in Cologne with the coronation of their relics in 1200. The upper interval is determined by the dating of *Jistebnice Hymn Book*, i.e. 1430. Our conclusion is that the invariant of “Walking with the Star” preserved in the folk theatre all around Slovakia [Slivka, Slivková 1994, 37] stabilized in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But the Three-King representations of folk theatre do not deserve attention for their antiquity alone; they are rare by their content too. Their performers do not satisfy themselves with the embodiment of the Three Kings bringing gifts to the Child in Bethlehem: they maintain the qualities of the Magi throughout their ceremonial act. Thus, the essence of their performance is the purification and the blessing of the dwelling (via incense and sacred spell) by which the carolling children [Bogatyrev 1971, 77]<sup>66</sup> share with the visited household the precious gifts brought to Christ in the biblical narration. For that, they use the sacramentals of frankincense and myrrh, but also the chalk with which they mark the door for the oncoming solar year as well as the year since the birth of Christ with a formula of blessing – this year bearing the signal: 20 G+M+B 25 (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. A chalk inscription G+M+B in Uloža. Photo: Erik Groch

<sup>65</sup> Thus, if previous researchers date elements of folk theatre into the period of Great Moravia, this applies to other parts of this broad thematic collection rather to Slovak shepherds' play than to the Three-King plays.

<sup>66</sup> Handing over the Three-King repertoire to groups of a younger age is a general trend in the development of folklore. As Bogatyrev pointed out: “The archaic elements are better preserved in the culture of children”. However, the lowering of the age of the actors playing the Three Kings is limited by the performative tasks that they must master (e. g., preparing the incense).



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