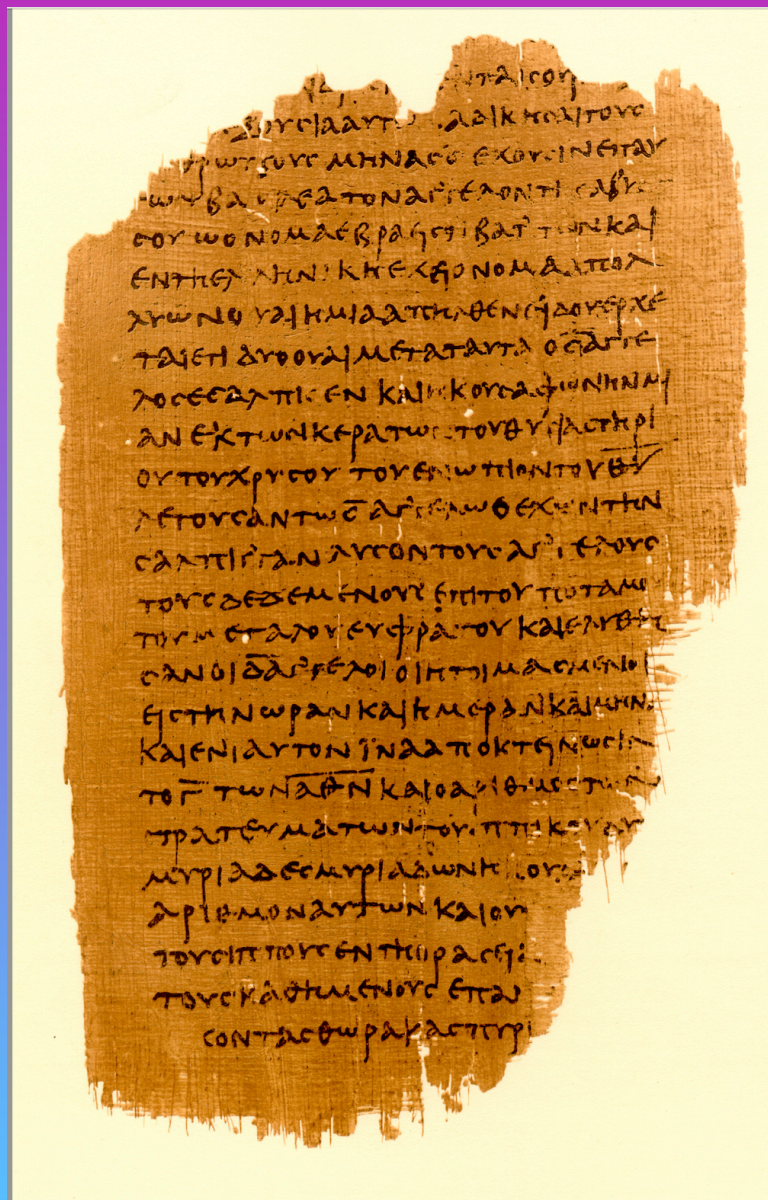


# SSEC newsletter

ISSUE 96 — AUGUST 2022



Chester Beatty III, leaf 1 verso,  
Revelation 9.10-17

## From the President's desk:



Greetings fellow SSEC members and thank you for your interest in the history of early Christianity which is so important, as its ideas and influences, shaped by the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, has had an important impact on Western Civilisation. Our Annual Conference, held at Macquarie University in the new Arts Building, was a great success! As a result we were able to have contributions from three outstanding overseas speakers via zoom which added to its success. Hopefully this will be a feature for future conferences. Thank you all who contributed such wonderful and illuminating papers. Thanks also to our marvellous volunteers who made the conference possible through their practical contributions. We could not hold such a conference without your help. The theme of next year's conference is an exciting one and close to my heart: Scribes, Scholars and Scripts. The papyrus image on the front is of Revelation 9.10-17 and is an exciting foretaste of what is to come for the conference. In the next coming months we have a number of interesting papers and even a play concerning the Emperor Constantine! A big thank you to Lesley Mascall for the enormous work she does in making this newsletter and our zoom meetings possible and to Lyn Kidson and to Gareth Wearne for managing our electronic pages. Lastly a big thank you to our Vice President, Alanna Nobbs and our secretary, Karyn Young for their tireless efforts in all that they do for SSEC to keep the wheels turning. Please continue to make the important work of our Society known and if you are able to contribute to the scholarships, that we make available to eligible scholars, it would be of enormous help and encouragement to those who are pursuing research in the area of early Christianity.

With kind regards,

Don Barker

## SSEC Newsletter

SSEC Newsletter is published twice yearly for the Society for the Study of Early Christianity.

**“The focus of the Society is on history: the study of Early Christianity in its Jewish and Graeco-Roman setting.”**

**August 2022 edition:** Number 96

**Editors:** Alanna Nobbs

Lesley Mascall

**Contributions:** SSEC Members

Next newsletter is planned for  
February 2023 —  
deadline for contributions is  
4 January 2023.

**Opinions expressed in all articles reflect  
the views of the author.**

**The Society takes no stand in such matters.**

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P/w: LydiaSells22%



**Click here** for SSEC  
Facebook link.

## FROM the SECRETARY (Karyn Young)

**2022 Conference** - went ahead at the new venue in The Arts Precinct. As expected, given ongoing Covid restrictions and a general move to online attendance at events, numbers were lower than usual. In the past there have been 80+ in attendance and this year there were 37, including those attending via Zoom, and a further 8 talks were paid for and accessed online. Hopefully, next year there will be an increase in numbers again. The theme was Philippi - Philosophies, People and Paul and the talks given are available to be viewed for \$12 each through Trybooking. This is the link: <https://www.trybooking.com/CBFUO>

Benjamin Schliesser (Curtain Raiser) —The Social Pattern of the Christ Group at Philippi. Fresh Perspectives on an Old Question

Cedric Brélaz (Key Speaker) — From Philip of Macedon to Paul the Martyr: Competing Memories in the Roman Colony of Philippi (1st–6th cent. CE)

Don Barker — An examination of one of the Earliest Surviving Copies of Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Paul Barnett — Philippi and the Romans

Amelia Brown — Roman & Late Roman Philippi between Thessalonica, Byzantium & Samothrace

Chris Forbes — What changed for Paul and the Pauline Mission in Philippi?

Jim Harrison — Citizenship in Roman Philippi: Interpreting Philippians 1:27 and 3:20 in Their First-Century Context

Lyn Kidson — Business women, family networks, and Lydia of Thyatira

Julien Ogereau — Philippi after Paul: What on Earth Happened to Paul's Beloved Church?

**2022 AGM** — will be held on Tuesday 15th November 6:30 pm via Zoom. A reminder will be emailed to members prior to this event.

**2022 Calendar of Events** — on the last page of this newsletter. Please note that the October event, a two person play called "Constantine, The Legacy" will be performed live in the Arts Precinct and we hope you will be able to attend. The event and parking are both free.

**2021/22 Financial Report** - In my capacity as Treasurer, I am currently preparing this and it will be included in the February 2023 newsletter.

**Bouquets** - to our amazing volunteers, as always. Hopefully we will be able to attend 2023 events live. Online access is a wonderful thing, especially for interstate members, but nothing replaces being face to face and able to interact personally at events.

**Thank you** - to our amazing membership for your ongoing support and loyalty through these trying times.

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A reminder that membership is now due.

This is the trybooking link for payment: <https://www.trybooking.com/BTKRU>

Donations can be made via this link: <https://www.trybooking.com/BXGKK>

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Upcoming **SSEC** events in 2022 — for details, see Calendar of Events on the last page.

## **SSEC 2023 ANNUAL DAY CONFERENCE — Saturday, 6th May, 2023**

to be held in the Conference Room at the Arts Precinct at Macquarie University, 25 Wally's Walk, Building C, Room 122.

### **Scribes, Scholars and Scripts.**

Titles and abstracts by members of tertiary institutions and/or post-graduates well advanced in their candidature may be submitted for discussion by the **SSEC** committee by 30th October 2022.

FREE PARKING at the university will be available for the conference. Attendees should provide their car registration to the Secretary more than 72 hours (3 days) prior to the event.

Cost:	<b>SSEC</b> members, in person	\$140	Individual lectures, per lecture	\$25
	<b>SSEC</b> members via Zoom	\$96	<b>SSEC</b> concession rate, per lecture	\$20
	Alumni	\$145	Pensioner (age)	\$95
	Non-members, in person	\$150	Full-time students	\$55

To book online: <https://www.trybooking.com/CBFUO>

### **SSEC** PEOPLE, and other items of interest

For details please consult the [staff list](#).

The Ancient History Discipline head is Professor Ray Laurence.

The head of Department of History and Archaeology is Professor Malcolm Choat.

### **SSEC** AWARDS

#### **PATRICIA GEIDANS PRIZE FOR 2022**

Patricia Geidans OAM received her Australia Day honours in 2009. She was a founding member of the Society, for many years SSEC's Secretary and attended many of the SSEC functions. Pat generously left a bequest to the society which will be put towards offering a future post-doctoral fellowship in the history of early Christianity.

This prize is awarded for the best thesis in the Master of Research programme in the broad area of Early Christian and Jewish Studies. The prize was awarded this year to Eveline Handby.

#### **The ALANNA NOBBS PRIZE**

This prize is awarded for the best thesis by a woman student in the Master of Research programme — presented by Australasian Women in Ancient World Studies.

In 2021 it has been awarded to Peggy Pullen.

### **SSEC** SCHOLARSHIPS

The Macquarie/Tyndale Cambridge Travelling Scholarship is kindly funded by some SSEC members who designate donations for this purpose.

Because of Covid travel restrictions the Tyndale Scholarship may or may not be offered in 2023. To be advised. Details on applying for this and other Ancient History scholarships will be on Ancient history website when possible.

Previous winners of the Tyndale Scholarship are:

2009: Bernard Doherty and Gerald Donker

2010: Murray Smith

2011: Shin Min Seok

2012: Bradley Bitner

2013: Julien Ogereau

2014: Lyn Kidson

2015: James Unwin

2016: Lydia Gore-Jones and Rory Shiner

2017: Benjamin Overcash

2018: Marty Feltham

2019: David Evans

2020: Charles Thorne

2021: Gillian Spalding-Tracey

## SSEC POSTGRADUATE GRANTS.

Each year SSEC offers up to 4 grants to members who are also postgraduates enrolled in higher degree work in Ancient History at Macquarie. These are awarded competitively and are worth up to \$500. Please apply to the secretary outlining your proposed project, how it helps your thesis completion and how the money is to be spent. It may not, by University rules, be spent on air travel but can be used for conference registration or accommodation, for internal travel, etc. All bookings must be made through the Ancient history office by email — do not pay by yourself first. Winners are asked please to provide a short report for the following SSEC newsletter.

This year's awards were given to Eveline Handby, who reported:



The Weston Library, Oxford.  
(photo by Evie)

With the support of the SSEC, I recently travelled to Oxford to participate in a Hebrew manuscript workshop run by the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. The workshop, led by some of the foremost experts in the field of Hebrew palaeography and codicology, was spread out over two weeks. The first week was dedicated to manuscript production, scribal practices and palaeography in the medieval period. The second, which focused on the early modern period, covered a range of topics from early Jewish book printing in Europe to the palaeographical features of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Italian manuscripts (which I found very difficult to read!). To my surprise, we were also given the opportunity to handle some of the rare manuscripts from the Bodleian collection, including the famous Kennicott Bible (MS Kennicott 1). At the workshop, I acquired invaluable knowledge and hands-on experience, and I am very grateful to the SSEC, Rachel Yuen-Collingridge and Malcolm Choat for their support in helping to make this unique opportunity a reality for me. I would encourage anyone with an interest in Hebrew manuscripts and/or Jewish history to apply for this workshop in the future.

And to Charles Thorne, who reported:

'This grant will enable me at a very difficult time to continue my research. Being permitted to finally submit my thesis, I have already been able to investigate parallel scriptural paradigms that have hitherto not been studied during my PhD. I am planning on dedicating my very first journal to these finds.'

## **Ancient History Affiliates:**

### **Macquarie Ancient History Association (MAHA)**

For enquiries 9850 9965, 9850 8833, or

**email:** [ancienthistory@mq.edu.au](mailto:ancienthistory@mq.edu.au)

**or website:** [www.ancienthistory.com.au/news.php](http://www.ancienthistory.com.au/news.php)

### **Australian Centre for Egyptology**

**email:** [egypt@mq.edu.au](mailto:egypt@mq.edu.au)

**website:** [egyptology.mq.edu.au](http://egyptology.mq.edu.au)

**Macquarie Ancient Languages School (MALS)** offers a wide range of courses in Classical & Koine Greek, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Classical Hebrew, Akkadian, Sanskrit and others, including Hieratic and Aramaic. This is currently offered online.

The program, timetable and application form will be available on the Ancient History website

at <http://www.anchist.mq.edu.au/mals.html> To add your name to the MALS mailing list,

email: [mals@mq.edu.au](mailto:mals@mq.edu.au)

### **Continuing Education Programme**

The future of the programme is under discussion.  
We will update you, if there are any developments.

We appreciate your past support.

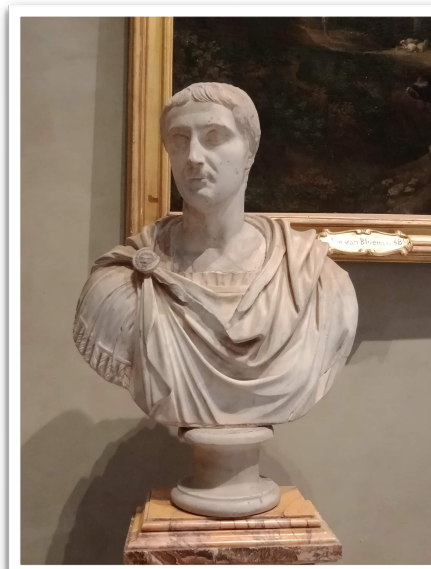
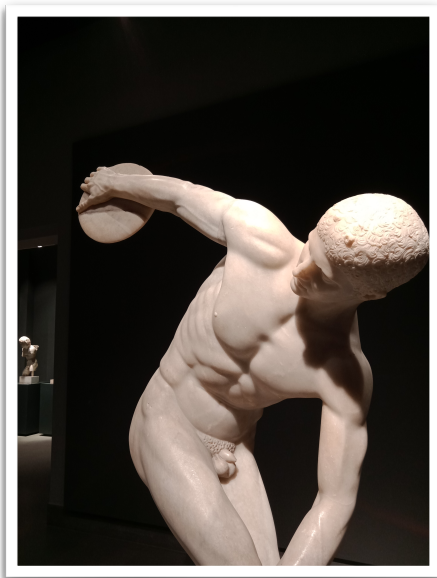
## POSTCARD —

from Lyn Kidson, recipient of Gale Scholarship in Rome.

*Andrew and I have arrived in a very hot Rome to take up my Macquarie-Gale scholarship at the British School at Rome (BSR). We're fortunate that the library is in a very cool part of the building, and as you can see from the photo my desk looks out onto the lush Director's Garden. The title of my project that I'm working on while here is 'Coins of the New Testament world: the intersection between early Christianity, imperial ideology, visual communication and the Roman economy.' I've only been here a week and I'm already finding the library an enormous aid to my research. When it cools down a little, I'm planning a tour of the city photographing of some of the surviving pieces of Roman imperial ideology.*



*Ciao, Lyn*



## ARTICLE by Chris Forbes

The original version of this talk was given at the SSEC End-of-Year Function in November, 2021.

### Stars and Wise Men from the East: Politics and Religion.

Politics and religion are often thought to be no-go zones in polite company, and particularly so around Christmas time. Politics has to do with the public sphere, while religion (or the lack of it) is personal, “a private matter.” Not only so, but both are likely to bring up uncomfortable disagreements. Better avoid both topics! And heaven help the discussion where both come up at once: trouble is inevitable.

In the first century, however, and in the ancient world more generally, politics and religion were inextricably entwined. I hope to show that in the first century world, the story of the first Christmas was told as very much “in the public sphere”, and *extremely political*.

Rather than discussing the historicity of either Matthew’s or Luke’s account of events, or whether their accounts are compatible, I will focus on the question: what would Matthew and Luke have thought they were telling us? What did they claim happened, and what did they think it meant? I will report what some recent research seems to be suggesting may lie behind the Gospel accounts, and what is not clear in that research. This is not a complete survey of opinions, but a selective one, based purely on personal interest.

The Christmas story most of us know is jig-sawed together from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but on closer examination the two accounts seem to discuss different events. The visit of the shepherds (in Luke) and the visit of the *Magoi* (in Matthew) were probably quite separate. In Luke 2:12 the child announced to the shepherds is a newborn (Greek: *brephos*), whereas in Matthew 2:11 the *magoi* find Jesus in a house, not a stable, and he is a child (Greek: *paidion*) rather than a newborn. More broadly, the two accounts are clearly independent: Matthew focusses on Joseph, and Luke’s on Mary. Matthew focusses on the *Magoi*, Luke on the shepherds. The combined story in popular culture has further developments: the *magoi* in Matthew become “three Kings of Orient” (the number seems to be a guess based on the three gifts they bring: Matthew simply doesn’t tell us how many *magoi* there were). As for their being kings, named Caspar (from India), Balthasar (from Arabia) and Melchior (from Persia), this is all a later (Armenian) legend from the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D, and other church traditions from other regions give different names altogether. Matthew’s account suggests the *magoi* came together, rather than from different regions. There is patristic evidence suggesting Arabia as the place of origin for all of them, but the term *magos* itself suggests Parthian Mesopotamia: modern Iraq.

Matthew’s account has two features which call our attention: the “star” and the *magoi* themselves. First, the star. No other ancient source describes anything which can reliably be identified as the same star. Was it literary symbolism on Matthew’s part (i.e., not an actual visible star at all)? Was it (for Matthew) a purely miraculous event, or one that was based on natural phenomena? If so, of what kind? Could it have been a nova? A comet? Or was it something less obvious, like a planetary conjunction or other astrological phenomenon?

Before c. 700 A.D. it was generally taken for granted that the star was a pure miracle without natural explanation (the earliest non-Biblical reference to it is in Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* 19, c. 115 A.D.). Origen of Alexandria (*Against Celsus* [CF1] 1.58-59, c. 250 AD) suggests that it was a comet, but “not like any of the ordinary stars”: he seems to be resisting any natural or astrological interpretation. Many other Patristic writers emphasise the “newness” of the star.

In modern times it has been common to interpret the star as a literary flourish on Matthew’s part, either a reference to Numbers 24:17, the “star-oracle” of Balaam, or perhaps an attempt to outdo stellar omens related to the Roman emperors. Though there are likely allusions to the Balaam story in his Gospel, Matthew normally explicitly flags his references to Old Testament passages with the phrase “as it is written” (or similar: twelve times!). But (a) he does not do so here, and (b) Graeco-Roman star omens are not usually signs of royal births. The “literary flourish” theory might explain why no-one else reported seeing the star (there was nothing to see!), but it doesn’t fit Matthew’s normal practice.

Origen’s theory that the star might have been a comet has been taken up in more modern times. The theory has the advantage that a comet can be understood as pointing in a direction to follow (Matthew 2:9), and if it was pointing “down” it could be understood as “standing over” a location (also Matthew 2:9; both Josephus and Cassius Dio use similar terminology about comets). But in ancient Graeco-Roman astrology, comets were normally signs of disaster, not royal births. Halley’s comet was visible in 12 B.C., but that’s outside the normal “time zone” for the birth of Jesus (c. 8-4 B.C.). No known comet seems to fit, though it remains possible there was a comet whose orbit we do not know. But comets are usually visible from many locations, and as far as we know, no other source mentions this comet. The theory remains possible, but not likely.

Does the early Christian emphasis on the star being a new one suggest that it was actually a nova or supernova, the explosion of a star not previously visible? Some suggest that Chinese astronomical records mention a nova in



the spring of 5 B.C., but others argue that the term used (“broom star”) means an otherwise unknown comet. Lack of further comparative evidence makes it hard to take this theory further.

The theory that the “star” was actually some kind of planetary alignment or conjunction, creating an apparently new, particularly bright star, goes back at least as far as Jewish astrology in the seventh century and Islamic astrology in the ninth century. It became mainstream with Johannes Kepler in 1614. Kepler argued that a “triple conjunction” of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the constellation of Pisces in June, November and December of 7 B.C., and in close association with Mars in October of the same year. According to Kepler, this was the “star” seen by the *magoi*. As a result he argued that Jesus had been born about two years later, in 5 B.C. Thus he overturned the traditional European calendar dating back to the sixth century A.D.

Most recently the Rutgers University astronomer, Michael Molnar, has developed an elaborate theory grounded in the study of Graeco-Roman astronomy/astrology. Publishing first in 1999 and developing his theory in 2015, Molnar has argued as follows: Matthew 2:1-2 says that the *magoi* “from the East” told Herod that they had observed the star *en tē anatolē*, which is usually translated “in the East.” However, if they saw the star in the East, why did they travel westward, to Judea? Molnar (and others, including the new NIV and the NRSV) argues that the phrase should be translated “at its rising,” or specifically “at its *heliacal* rising”, its rising just before sunrise. He argues further that, in 6 B.C., a sequence of astronomical events occurred which (a) would only have been noticed by an astronomer/ astrologer trained in Graeco-Roman astrological ideas, and (b) would have strongly suggested (to such a person) a royal birth in Syria / Judea.

Specifically, he shows that first, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 6 B.C., the moon occluded (passed in front of) Jupiter, the “royal planet”. Within a month, on April 17<sup>th</sup>, Jupiter rose just before sunrise in the constellation of Aries. Aries was, he argues, the constellation Graeco-Romans associated with Syria and Judea. At the same time, all five of the planets known to Graeco-Roman people were also in Aries, powerfully reinforcing the omen. Such an event would only occur once in three thousand years. This, he argues, was what set the *magoi* on their westward journey to Judea: a powerful omen of a royal birth in the region. The idea had been developed previously by several other writers, but without Molnar’s wealth of precise astronomical detail.

Second, he shows that, on August-December, 6 B.C., Jupiter at its rising moved in the sky in a manner which suggests that it “stood over” a point. Ancient astronomers did not work with a static model of the sky, across which the stars moved. They used the apparently unchanging pattern of the constellations (the fixed stars) as a backdrop, and mapped the changing movements of the Moon and planets (*planetai* = wanderers) against that stable backdrop. In August-December, Jupiter at its rising appeared to move forward, then come to a standstill, and eventually went “retrograde” (moved backward) again. Molnar argues that on December 19<sup>th</sup> of 6 B.C., the (royal birth) star “stood still”. If the *magoi* had been West of Bethlehem at this point, they could well have thought the star “stood over” Bethlehem, but the omen would have been quite invisible to those without their training. How long after the birth of Jesus this was probably cannot be precisely known.

Molnar’s ingenious theory is not without critics. Some have pointed out that Matthew consistently calls the sign the *magoi* saw an *aster*, a star (singular), not an *astron* (a constellation or pattern of stars). Likewise the phrase *en tē anatolē* is not the most common technical term for an heliacal rising (though it can be used that way). To what degree should we expect Matthew to make use of precise astrological terminology? Others note that the explicit evidence that Aries was understood as representing Judea comes from one or two generations after Matthew. Further, there is a doubt whether the heliacal risings Molnar discusses would have been visible to normal observation, or only knowable “in theory” (i.e. from stellar charts and calculations). Some still prefer a version of Kepler’s 7 B.C. conjunction (or other theories). However, Molnar’s theory set a new standard for sophisticated astronomical argument, and has been widely discussed, including at an international scholarly conference at the University of Groningen in 2014, subsequently published in a major volume.

Puzzles remain, however. If the theory is correct, *and* if the events (or something similar) really happened, the theory doesn’t explain *how* Matthew knows about the events, or why *only he* knows about them.

The 2014 Groningen conference also discussed what can be known historically about the *Magoi*. That question will be outlined in Part II.

Who were the “wise men from the East” that Matthew reports arrived in Judea late in the reign of King Herod? “*Magoi*” is the term Graeco-Roman authors used for astrologers and other religious scholars from the Mesopotamian and Persian region (broadly, ancient Parthia: modern Iraq and Iran). Originally the term meant Zoroastrian priests, but by the first century it was being used more loosely. Anyone who emphasised their Persian/ Parthian origins as a source of ancient wisdom might be described as a *magos*, with skills in *magike* (the origin of the modern English term “magic”).

As early as Plato, Greeks were reporting ideas about the *magoi*. In his *Alcibiades I*, 121e, Plato claims:

when the boy (the Persian crown prince) reaches fourteen years he is taken over by the royal tutors ... these are four men chosen as the most highly esteemed among the Persians ... The first of these

teaches him the magian lore of Zoroaster, son of Horomazes; and that is the worship of the gods: he teaches him also what pertains to a king.

Commenting on roughly the same period, Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes* 3 says:

A little while after the death of Darius, the new king made an expedition to Pasargadae, that he might receive the royal initiation at the hands of the Persian priests ... Tissaphernes brought to him a certain priest who had conducted Cyrus (the younger) through the customary discipline for boys, had taught him the wisdom of the Magi, and was thought to be more distressed than any one in Persia because his pupil had not been declared king ...

In both these passages, the *magoi* were involved in the selection and training of the kings of Persia. They were, in other words, part of the political as well as the religious elite of the Persian kingdom. The same idea can be found in Graeco-Roman reports to do with the later Parthian kingdom of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. For example, Plutarch's *Life of Sulla* 5 tells us that, in 96 B.C., during the first formal diplomatic contacts between Rome and the Parthian kingdom:

A certain man in the retinue of Orobazus, a Chaldaean, after looking Sulla (the Roman commander) intently in the face, and studying carefully the movements of his mind and body, and investigating his nature according to the principles of his peculiar art, declared that this man (Sulla) must of necessity become the greatest in the world ...

George van Kooten, noting the close connection between the "Chaldaeans" and the *magoi*, comments:

the magi had now become fully integrated within the Parthian ruling class ... travelling magi do not necessarily need to travel all by themselves, but could be part of a broader group of Parthian delegates and magi ... in this episode the magi appear to be interested in foretelling the fortunes of a foreign ruler.

Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* 33 also provides clear evidence that the Parthian elite of this period had been deeply influenced by Greek culture. Although proud of their Iranian heritage, the royal courts functioned in Greek, not Persian, and were thoroughly familiar with Greek literature:

Hyrodes [i.e., Orodes II, the Parthian king] was well acquainted both with the Greek language and literature, and Artavasdes actually composed tragedies, and wrote orations and histories, some of which are preserved...

In such an environment it would be no surprise to find an awareness of Greek astrology. Cicero commanded Roman forces in the wars with the Parthians in the 50s B.C., and in his essay *On Divination* 1.90 he reports:

Among the Persians the augurs and diviners are the magi, who assemble regularly in a sacred place for practice and consultation, just as formerly (the Roman) augurs used to do ... no one can become king of the Persians until he has learned the theory and the practice of the magi.

A similar understanding of the *magoi* can be found among Graeco-Roman intellectuals in the first century A.D. Strabo, *Geography* 11.9.3, says:

the Council of the Parthians, according to Posidonius, consists of two groups, one that of kinsmen [i.e., of the Parthian king], and the other that of wise men and *magoi*, from both of which groups the kings were appointed.

According to Philo of Alexandria, *On the Special Laws* 3.100–101:

"Now the true *magikē*, the scientific vision by which the facts of nature are presented in a clearer light, is felt to be a fit object for reverence and ambition and is carefully studied not only by ordinary persons but by kings and the greatest kings, and particularly those of the Persians, so much so that it is said that no one in that country is promoted to the throne unless he has first been admitted into the caste of the *magoi*." (Philo, *Special Laws* 3.100–101)

Likewise, according to Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 49.7, writing late in the first century:

since they cannot always be ruled by kings who are philosophers, the most powerful nations have publicly appointed philosophers as superintendents and officers for their kings. Thus the Persians, methinks, appointed those whom they call Magi, because they were acquainted with Nature and understood how the gods should be worshipped ...

It is clear, then, that Graeco-Roman people believed that the *magoi* formed an important part of the Persian/Parthian political elite, playing a significant role in embassies and the selection and training of royalty. Religious and political influence, in their case, went hand in hand. This is also likely to be what Matthew's first audience understood, and, if Matthew's story is historically true, what King Herod understood as well.

How credible, then, is Matthew's description of the visit of a group of *Magoi* to Herod's Jerusalem, and their reception by the king?

Roman relationships with the kingdom of Parthia were very unstable during the first century B.C. After Sulla negotiated a settlement in 96 B.C. (mentioned above), relations were reasonably friendly until Pompey's reorganisation of the Roman Near East in 66-65 B.C., when negotiations broke down over the precise delineation of borders. In 55 B.C. the Triumvir Marcus Crassus led a full-scale Roman invasion of Parthia, but was defeated and killed at the Battle of Carrhae. In 51 B.C. a Parthian army invaded Roman Syria. Cicero (mentioned above) took part in the defence of the region. Civil wars between the remaining triumvirs and (after the death of Julius

Caesar) between Mark Antony, Brutus, and Octavius Caesar distracted the Romans until the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. In 41-40 B.C. came another major Parthian invasion, aided by Caesar's old comrade Labienus. Syria, Judea and parts of Asia Minor were captured. Jerusalem opened its gates to the Parthians. Through 39-38 B.C. Antony's general Ventidius drove them from the region, with considerable assistance from Herod (yes: the Herod of Matthew's Gospel, now by decree of the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. King of Judea). A treaty between Antony and Orodes II of Parthia followed. Herod became Rome's man in Judea. Later (despite the treaty) Antony attacked Parthia, but suffered severe losses. The final stages of the Roman civil wars led to the defeat and death of Antony in 31 B.C., and the dominance of Octavius Caesar (soon to take the name Augustus). Then, between 31-25 B.C., Parthia also had civil war, during which Rome attempted to hedge its bets, offering a degree of support to both sides. In 23 B.C. the Senate negotiated a treaty with the victor, Phraates, and in 20 B.C. the Parthians returned the prisoners and legionary standards they had captured from Crassus at Carrhae in 55 B.C. A reasonably stable peace followed until 1 B.C., when a coup in Parthia led to instability once again.

It was during this peaceful period that Matthew set his account of the visit of the *magoi* to Judea. Earlier than 23 B.C. a delegation of *magoi* to the region would have been impossible; Herod died in 4 B.C. If the account is to have any credibility it must fall between those dates.

A new treaty with Parthia was signed in 2 A.D., but instability continued until 10 A.D., when Artabanus became king and remained on the throne throughout the reign of Tiberius. His policy towards Rome was more confrontational, but his rule was unstable. Probably in the final years of his reign (39-40 A.D.), after a failed attempt to invade Syria, signed a treaty with the Emperor Gaius (Caligula). The reign of Nero saw nearly ten years of war between Rome and Parthia over the control of Armenia. This was ended in 63 A.D. by the formal submission of the Armenian King Tiridates (brother of the Parthian Vologeses) to Nero, repeated in Rome itself in 66. Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 30.16-17) specifically notes that Tiridates was himself a *magos*, and that other *magoi* were part of his embassy. Some have argued that this event may have suggested the concept of his story to Matthew, but, among other reasons, the geography makes this unlikely. From a Judean point of view, Armenian *magoi* would be wise men "from the North", not "from the (Parthian) East".

In summary, when is Matthew's story of *magoi* visiting Jerusalem likely to have originated? The period when such a story would make the most sense seems to be the reign of Augustus, after 23 B.C. That is when the idea of a group of *magoi* travelling in the Roman East would be militarily possible, and politically plausible. The later we try to imagine the story originating, the harder it is to fit into the wider picture of Roman-Parthian relations. This point applies whether or not we think there is any truth in Matthew's account: the story makes sense under Augustus, but much less sense in later periods.

Part I of this article began with the comment that "the story of the first Christmas was told as very much 'in the public sphere', and *extremely political*." Matthew's account describes Herod, who came to his throne as a Roman client king resisting a Parthian invasion, receiving what must have looked to him very much like a Parthian embassy. He could not afford to ignore or insult a group of *magoi*: his Roman masters now had a treaty with Parthia. But the *magoi* came with a deeply disturbing question: where could they find the child who would displace Herod as King of the Jews? They wanted to do him homage. Herod could only take it that the *magoi* intended to declare Parthian support for a pretender to his throne. But perhaps by playing along with them he could gain critical intelligence about the source of the threat.

Whether it involved Parthian astrological theories or Judean messianic hopes, it was simply not possible, in the world of the New Testament, to keep religion and politics separate.

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[\[CF1\]](#) "We think that the star which appeared in the east was a new star and not like any of the ordinary ones, neither of the fixed sphere nor of those in the lower spheres, but it is to be classed with the comets which occasionally occur, or meteors, or bearded or jar-shaped stars, or any such name by which the Greeks may like to describe their different forms." Barthel & Van Kooten p. 119.

#### Select Bibliography:

- M. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*. New Brunswick, NJ / London: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- A. Adair, "The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy", *Zygon* 47.1, 2012, pp. 7-29.
- H. Hoehner, "The Chronology of Jesus", in Holmen & Porter, eds., *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Leiden, Brill, 2012), pp. 2315-2359.
- P. Barthel & G. van Kooten, eds., *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi*, Leiden, Brill, 2015: particularly the essays of M. Molnar, A. Adair, D. Hughes, A. de Jong, and G. van Kooten.



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Opinions expressed in all articles reflect the views of the authors. The Society takes no stand in such matters.

## SSEC CALENDAR OF EVENTS AS AT 1<sup>st</sup> AUGUST 2022

DATE AND TIME	EVENT
<b>Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> September</b> <b>7 pm – Zoom</b>	Speaker: Geoff Jenkins Topic: <b>Septuagint</b>
<b>Thurs 20<sup>th</sup> October</b> <b>7 pm</b>  Macquarie Arts Precinct, 25 Wally's Walk, Building C Room 122	<b>Constantine, The Legacy</b> A one-act play by Peter Fleming  A powerful man begins to worry for his legacy, what he will leave the future. He wants to leave the <i>right</i> impression, but can it be the <i>truthful</i> one? When you're the Roman emperor Constantine, the dilemma is that you're the first world leader who has had to blend Christian idealism with realpolitik. That's when you call for help from Sopatros of Apamea, noted philosopher, political adviser, friend - and opponent. You might make him your biographer, unless you have to kill him.  Book launch — by Emeritus Professor Ronald Ridley (University of Melbourne) <b>On This Rock</b> by E.A. Judge, ed. A.D. Macdonald and dedicated to Alanna Nobbs (Cascade books, 2020).
<b>Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> November</b> <b>6:30 pm – Zoom</b>	Members' Annual General Meeting
<b>Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> November</b> <b>7pm – Zoom</b>	<u>Christmas Function</u> Speaker: Michael Theophilos Topic: <b>Ancient Coinage and the First Christmas</b>

Links to the Zoom Room will be provided when you register your interest with the secretary at [ssec@mq.edu.au](mailto:ssec@mq.edu.au)

For further details, please visit the **new** SSEC Website: <https://mq-ssec.org/> or contact us via email at [SSEC@mq.edu.au](mailto:SSEC@mq.edu.au)

**Parking:** Macquarie University no longer charges parking fees after 6pm.

If you would like to make a **donation or bequest** to the Tyndale Scholarship, Pat Geidans Prize or any Ancient History project, please contact Professor Alanna Nobbs via email: [ssec@mq.edu.au](mailto:ssec@mq.edu.au) or [alanna.nobbs@mq.edu.au](mailto:alanna.nobbs@mq.edu.au) or on (02) 9850-8844