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**HORAPOLLO'S *HIEROGLYPHICA* AND ITS POSSIBLE INFLUENCE
ON DEPICTIONS OF THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI
IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE¹**

Over the course of the last century iconological studies have successfully demonstrated that Renaissance art was not only guided by the principle of *imitatio*, but was filled with symbolic allusions. Inevitably, in comparison with the medieval period, the nature of the allegorical language changed, as did the sources chosen by artists and by those compiling visual programmes.

An important factor in this change in the nature of the symbolism was the spread of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Its establishment in Florence is usually linked with those humanists whose activities largely unfolded in the second half of the century, with Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Cristoforo Landino. But Florentine interest in Plato and his later followers first emerged at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1397, several decades before Ficino's birth, a department of the Greek language was set up at Florence University in 1397 through the efforts of Niccolò de' Niccoli and Palla Strozzi, with the renowned Manuel Chrysoloras – who had been sent to Italy on a diplomatic mission by the Byzantine emperor – at its head. It became possible not only to study Greek as a language but to look at Greek literature and philosophy. Manuscript copies of Plato's writings available in Florence could now be read and analysed. Cosimo de' Medici, Niccolò de' Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini made every effort to bring more and more Ancient manuscripts and medieval copies of the writings of the great authors of Antiquity to Florence. The Council of Florence in 1439 marked yet another milestone in furthering knowledge of Neo-Platonic teachings. Educated Florentines – among them Cosimo de' Medici, then *gonfaloniere* of justice – conversed with Archbishop Bessarion and with Georgius Gemistus (Plethon), celebrated specialist in Plato. It is thought that it was Cosimo's personal interest in Neo-Platonic teachings that later turned Marsilio Ficino to the translation of and commentary on the writings of Plato and the Late Antique Neo-Platonists. Although the humanists

¹ The text is translated by Catherine Phillips.

understood that the religious and philosophical teachings of Antiquity did not cover the full range of Christian tenets, they saw them as presaging Christian beliefs and felt that they contained the key to long forgotten secrets about the universe. *Pax philosophica*, the reconciliation of Christian teachings and Ancient philosophy, was a widespread concept that continued to develop throughout the Renaissance era. We know that Pico della Mirandola repeatedly turned to Plato's writings while he was working on his commentary on the Book of Genesis, *Heptaplus...* (1489).¹ And even as Neo-Platonism was emerging in Italy there was an active interest in Ancient Egyptian culture, which many humanists thought to be the source of the wisdom of both Greeks and Romans.²

Into this atmosphere of heightened interest in Neo-Platonic ideas and Egyptian culture in Florence came a manuscript containing three Ancient texts. One was the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollon, an Egyptian priest whose work had been translated into Greek by one Philippus.³ Acquired on the island of Andros by the Florentine merchant Cristoforo Buondelmonti in 1419, the manuscript arrived in Florence around 1422–1423, immediately becoming the object of considerable attention.⁴ Several copies were almost immediately made of Horapollon's treatise: there is documentary evidence that one was made for Niccolò de' Niccoli, a childhood friend of Cosimo de' Medici and a man who enjoyed a high reputation as a scholar of Antiquity. The original manuscript later found its way into the Medici library.

Attempts were made to use Horapollon's text, a description and interpretation of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (although without any illustrations), to read the inscriptions on obelisks.⁵ We know that Francesco Filelfo used

¹ André Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique. Études sur la Renaissance et l'Humanisme platonicien*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959: 85.

² Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "Egypt and Egyptian Antiquities in the Renaissance", *Studies in the Renaissance* VI, 1959: 7–27.

³ This Greek manuscript is in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, MS Plut. 69 cod. 27. In addition to Horapollon's text it includes Proclus' *Elements of Physics* and *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus of Lemnos.

⁴ Karl Giehlow, *Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance*, Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1915; Eng. edn *The Humanist Interpretation of Hieroglyphs in the Allegorical Studies of the Renaissance*, tr. with an introduction and notes by Robin Raybould, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2015 (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History): 38–47. Erik Iversen, "Hieroglyphic Studies of the Renaissance", *The Burlington Magazine* C/658, January 1958: 16; Rudolf Wittkower, "Hieroglyphics in the Early Renaissance", in: Rudolf Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, New York – London: Thames and Hudson, 1987: 116 (first published in B. S. Levy, ed., *Developments in the Early Renaissance. Papers of the Second Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. Binghamton, NY, 4–5 May 1968, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972).

⁵ Such attempts were made by Niccolò de' Niccoli, who had already tried to read and interpret Egyptian hieroglyphs on the basis of the writings of Ammianus Marcellinus. In 1424 de' Niccoli accompanied Cosimo de' Medici on a trip to Rome, where he sought to apply his newly-acquired knowledge to the inscriptions on Roman obelisks.

the *Hieroglyphica* as a serious historical source, notably in seeking to establish whether it was the Jews or the Egyptians who invented the hourglass. That there was unceasing interest in Horapollo's text is demonstrated by a note in the records of the Medici library for 20 April 1486, telling us that a copy of the codex bearing Filelfo's initials had been returned by one Demetrius Kalkodilas of Athens, the Florentines having asked him to explain several parts of the text they could not understand.¹ Karl Giehlow felt that this inability to fully comprehend the meaning contained within this mysterious work served as a deterrent to publication of the *Hieroglyphica* in the fifteenth century.

Quattrocento humanists made use of a wide range of Ancient texts in their study of Ancient Egyptian cults, from the *Preparations for the Gospel* of Eusebius of Caesarea, the first five books of Diodorus' *Library of History* and Herodotus to the writings of Iamblich, Plotinus (studied by Marsilio Ficino) and Plutarch. In comparison with all those Ancient sources, however, Horapollo's treatise was more specific, meaning that it could potentially be used as a textbook in "symbolic grammar". From the writings of Ancient authors (Herodotus, Plotinus, Plutarch, Diodorus, Apuleius, Macrobius, Porphyry, Proclus, Tacitus etc.), scholars had concluded that every element of Egyptian writing was a pictogram imbued with philosophical semantics. The *Hieroglyphica* allowed for further understanding of their meanings. This was something that resonated closely with the general mood among Neo-Platonist humanists, who thought that "by contemplating a visible thing we can gain insight into the invisible world."²

From the *Hieroglyphica*, for instance, it followed that the kite signified the female essence, the mother, since – the Ancient Egyptians thought – there were no male kites; the elephant stood for a ruler, endowed with the gift of foresight; the baboon was the moon, the universe, letters, a priest, anger or sailing; the snake swallowing its own tail was the sky and eternity; the number 1095 was dumbness (since a child usually starts to speak within three years – 1095 days); the ibis was the heart and Hermes; peoples obedient to the ruler were represented by bees. To fifteenth-century Florentines, Horapollo's treatise was a priceless collection that decoded all Ancient knowledge about the Universe and its mysteries.

In the Renaissance it was thought that the *Hieroglyphica*, like the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, had been written in Antiquity. Later scholars were to demonstrate that it dated from around the late fourth or fifth century CE, being in effect a by-product of attempts by the priestly caste to formulate their own exclusive knowledge.³ It is important to note that this secondary source had almost nothing in common with true Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics,

¹ Giehlow, *Op. cit.*: 51.

² Pico della Mirandola, summarised in: Ernst H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae. The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XI, 1948: 168.

³ Francesco Sbordone, "Introduzione", *Hori Apollinis hieroglyphica*, Naples: Loffredo, 1940: XVIII–XIX.

with the result that all attempts to use it to decode inscriptions on the walls of Ancient tombs and on papyrus – right up to those of Champollion in the early nineteenth century – ended in failure.¹ Nonetheless, the contemporary tendency to seek new visual symbols inevitably meant that the *Hieroglyphica* became a source of inspiration, an alternative to medieval bestiaries.² In the minds of fifteenth-century thinkers the hieroglyph became a magical symbol, miraculously encapsulating the wisdom of the Ancient world. Echoes of this keen interest in hieroglyphs were even found in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti and Antonio Filarete.³

First published in Greek by Aldus Manutius in 1505, by the end of the sixteenth century Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* had been repeatedly translated, going through at least fifteen editions, many of them illustrated by Renaissance artists. One of the first Latin translations was a manuscript by Willibald Pirckheimer, produced at the start of the Cinquecento, although it was not complete and contained some errors. Discovered in Vienna by the German art historian Karl Giehlow, the manuscript includes illustrations based on drawings by Albrecht Dürer.⁴ Giehlow studied Dürer's oeuvre,⁵ including the giant woodcut depicting a triumphal arch for Maximilian I (composed of 36 sheets and measuring 357 × 295 cm) created 1512–1517 under the celebrated German artist's direction. The programme behind the "structure" – only ever intended to be shown in print and not to be built – was the work of the humanist Johannes Stabius, astronomer, poet and historiographer to the emperor. The manuscript in Vienna also contains a Latin translation of Stabius' commentary on an image of the emperor which was to crown the triumphal arch. Giehlow looked in parallel at several original drawings by Dürer that recalled the images in the manuscript translation and which bear inscriptions in Pirckheimer's hand on the back. Analysing all the sources at his disposal, Giehlow became convinced that Horapollon's treatise lay behind the programme for the top part



Albrecht Dürer,
Hieroglyphic Image
of Emperor
Maximilian. 1515.
Woodcut

¹ Ibid.: X.

² The *Physiologus*, the main source for medieval bestiaries, would also seem to have been written in Alexandria in the second to third centuries CE.

³ Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books of Architecture*, I/VIII.4; Filarete (Antonio di Pietro Averlino), *Treatise on Architecture*, XII.

⁴ Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, MS Cod. 3255. Giehlow, *Op.cit.*: 20–21. Giehlow writes that only two drawings (which he does not name) in the manuscript may be the work of Dürer, the others presumably being by a pupil.

⁵ Karl Giehlow came to the study of art history in 1895, at the relatively late age of 32, but in just a few years he became a leading specialist on Albrecht Dürer, an artist much admired by Aby Warburg. Robin Raybould, "Introduction", in: Giehlow, *Op. cit.*: 15.



Albrecht Dürer,
Sheet with Drawings
to Willibald
Pirckheimer's
translation
of the *Hieroglyphica*.
Coll. Adalbert E.V.
Lanna

of Maximilian's arch. This also provided an explanation for Stabius's declaration that the decoration of the arch had links to the Egyptian cult of Osiris.¹

Works of this kind, created for the glorification of a ruler, were always marked by hyperbole and rhetoric. But in the printed image of Maximilian I these qualities seem to have been utterly transformed, turning it into a ludicrous phantasmagoria. So far is this image from contemporary perceptions of majesty that to a viewer in the twenty-first century it might seem to present a fairytale figure such as the Forest King: surely this cannot be a great ruler holding the fate of all Europe in his hands? This print developed images from Horapollo's treatise, albeit at times considerably "corrected" or adjusted to give just the right meaning:² the globe in the emperor's left hand with an eagle seated upon it indicates a glorious victor; the sceptre wound round with a snake in the right hand symbolises one who rules most of the world; the rays falling upon the emperor are in fact dew, indicating his gifts; the papyrus indicates the ancient roots of his house; the dog with a table is an image of the most excellent of princes; the crane symbolises vigilance; the lion protome symbolises strength; the bare feet touching the waters, set somewhat apart, represent the impossible (in this instance indicating that the emperor had foiled the intrigues of his main enemy, the French king). Dürer's print

can be seen as the first documented example of the use of images from the *Hieroglyphica* in art.

But there can be no doubt that so famous a source as Horapollo's treatise could not have lain unnoticed by Renaissance artists for nearly a hundred years before being taken up in German art at the start of the sixteenth century. A large number of scholars who have looked at the treatise for different reasons have even insisted that active use was made of the *Hieroglyphica* in Quattrocento art. In an article on Dürer's work for Maximilian, Erwin Panofsky wrote: "... long before Andrea Alciati and the host of his followers had published their emblem books, and even before the original text of the *Hieroglyphica* had been printed in 1505, Horus Apollo's concoction had left its mark on Italian medals and funeral monuments, on the woodcuts in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili*, and on the paintings and drawings by Mantegna, Pinturicchio, Giovanni Bellini and Leonardo da

¹ It is noteworthy that these words were already being mocked at the end of the sixteenth century by the German poet Johann Fischart, who felt that the decoration on the arch meant nothing and was pure fantasy.

² Erwin Panofsky stated that all the symbols used, save the imperial eagles and Gallic cockerel, had been borrowed from the *Hieroglyphica*: Erwin Panofsky, "Dürer's Activity for Maximilian I; the "Decorative Style", 1512/13–1518/19", in: Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, 3rd edn, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948: 177.

Vinci.”¹ In a recent monograph on the new symbolism attached to the animal world in the Renaissance, Simona Cohen noted: “Although first printed by Aldus in 1505, the *Hieroglyphica* was already exploited as a new source of symbolic imagery in Florence, Venice and Germany from the mid fifteenth century.”² Unfortunately the author does not cite a single example.

When we look to the subject of the Adoration of the Magi, however, we recognise here a suitable intellectual field in which the symbols from Horapollo’s treatise could be used. Not only was the theme itself closely bound up with ideas about and images of ancient wise men, but the *Hieroglyphica* provided a whole arsenal of new interpretations of representatives of both the animal and feathered worlds so often seen in the train of the magi.

To investigate our hypothesis regarding the influence of the *Hieroglyphica* on the iconography of the Adoration of the Magi in Quattrocento Florence, we shall look at three famous works: an altarpiece by Gentile da Fabriano (1423; Uffizi, Florence), a tondo by Domenico Veneziano (c. 1440; Staatliche Museen, Berlin) and Benozzo Gozzoli’s fresco cycle in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici (1459–1460).³ For none of them is there any documentary evidence

¹ Panofsky, *Op. cit.*: 173. Although Panofsky did not cite any particular source, all the examples he gave were borrowed from Giehlow. There can be no doubt that the placing of the Ouroboros in the reserves of medals was due to the *Hieroglyphica*: Marsilio Ficino also cites the treatise when explaining the sign. As regards the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili*, however, it has recently been suggested that Colonna was totally unacquainted with – or purposely ignored – Horapollo’s system of symbols: Mino Gabriele, in: *Andrea Alciato. Il Libro degli Emblemi*, introduction, ed. and commentary by Mino Gabriele, Milan: Adelphi, 2009, p. LXI. Bernardino Pinturicchio probably looked to Annio da Viterbo’s fabricated “Ancient Egyptian” writings; Wittkower, *Op. cit.*: 121–122. As for Leonardo, he created his own bestiary, most likely based on two specific medieval sources, the fourteenth-century *Fiore di Virtù* and the *Acerba* by Cecco d’Ascoli (1269–1327).

² Simona Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008: 68.

³ I should here explain the nature of the source texts of the *Hieroglyphica* used for this study. There are several recognised modern translations. The key source for all specialists is the critical edition compiled by Francesco Sbordone, *Hori Apollinis hieroglyphica*, Naples: Loffredo, 1940. Ten years later an English translation was published as *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo*, tr. George Boas, New York: Pantheon Books, 1950. Boas was translating from Latin expositions of the Greek source early eighteenth centuries. Since we are dealing in this article with Quattrocento artists, we have felt it more productive to concentrate on the Greek version of the text known to fifteenth-century humanists, who often experienced problems in translating specific terms or phrases. We have thus also used a French translation from the Greek text which is that recognised by scholars of Antiquity: “Traduction des Hieroglyphica d’Horapollon”, tr. B. van de Walle and J. Vergote, *Chronique d’Égypte* 18, 1943: 39–89, 199–239; agenda *ibid.* 22, 1947: 251–59; available online: <http://asklepious.chez.com/horapollo/horapollon.htm> (accessed 24 July 2018). There is also a Russian translation by Armen G. Aleksanyan, available online: <http://www.egyptology.ru/antiq/Horapollo1.pdf>.

We shall cite the French translation by van de Walle and Vergote and the the recent re-issue of the English translation by Boas: *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo*, tr. and ed. George Boas, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

for the use of symbols from the *Hieroglyphica*. But then, we have no written evidence for any aspect of how their programmes were shaped. There are just a few letters touching on the last two. Our analysis can thus be based only on oblique indications and the factual context.

From the very start we would like to accentuate two key points. Firstly, the use of interpretations from the *Hieroglyphica* might help us explain some of the more unusual aspects of the works in question. Secondly, Emperor Maximilian I would hardly have permitted the use of so extravagant a literary source for his triumphal arch if there had been no precedent.¹

In the fifteenth century, or so it seems to us, Horapollo's treatise was applied in a manner very different to that seen later at the court of Emperor Maximilian I, where the purpose was to inform Europe of the ruler's enlightenment. Moreover, as Erwin Panofsky noted, the "literary" approach was in keeping with the wider "propagandistic spirit" of German culture: "It bears witness, further, to the peculiar predicament of a humanistic movement which could neither rely on the resources of cosmopolitan centers like Rome and Venice, nor on the protection of an aristocracy which produced an unlimited supply of erudite and art-loving princes and cardinals".² A lack of direct evidence for the use of the *Hieroglyphica* in fifteenth-century Italian art may have several explanations. On the one hand, open use of the source might have led to demands to explain the whole text to an educated Florentine public, which, as we have seen, was a somewhat difficult matter. On the other, the clients who commissioned a work may well have enjoyed the "secret" nature of the treatise, seeing it as some mysterious symbolic language known only to a select circle, in the way it had been perceived by the Ancient Egyptian priests themselves. It is no coincidence that the epigraph by the prelate Gentile de' Becchi with regard to the concept behind the Chapel of the Magi in the Palazzo Medici, dealt with here, ends with an exclamation and a warning: "O profane crowd, do not dare set foot in here."³

Painted depictions of the Adoration of the Magi in Florence are thought to have been directly influenced by the ceremonies held on the Feast of the Epiphany. The Brotherhood of the Magi, which played such an important role in life in fifteenth-century Florence, had probably been formed in the

¹ The imperial triumph remained purely on paper in the form of 36 woodcut sheets; the procession appeared in a number of watercolours and prints published by Archduke Ferdinand, brother of Emperor Charles V, in 1526. Even in this form, however, it was a source of considerable of pride. The programme of the triumph was not perceived in Europe as extravagant excess. On the contrary, the French humanists tended to look to the complex programmes drawn up to glorify German emperors that followed on from that of Emperor Maximilian.

² Panofsky, *Op. cit.*: 175.

³ Cristina Acidini Luchinat, "The Chapel of the Magi", in: Cristina Acidini Luchinat, ed., *The Chapel of the Magi. Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes in the Palazzo Medici-Ricardi Florence*, London-New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994: 12-13. The verse part of Gentile de' Becchi's text reads "The gifts of kings, the prayers of celestial spirits, the mind of the Virgin, these are the holy things of the altar. O profane crowd, do not dare set foot in here."

previous century, and certainly the first recorded description of the Feast of the Adoration of the Magi dates from 1390. Rab Hatfield, author of a study of all the documents relating to the Compagnia de' Magi, pointed out its ambiguous nature.¹ On the one hand, under the patronage of the Medici for some sixty years it became an instrument in creating the political image of the family that effectively ruled Florence. On the other hand, the organisation's activities were strongly mystical, as is reflected in the excerpts from sermons by members of the Brotherhood that Hatfield cited,² and in the description of objects in the sacristy of the Chapel of the Magi in the Palazzo Medici, which included jasper balls linked by Darrell Davisson with the cult of Asclepius.³ Kufic letters have been identified on the magi's attire in Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece and Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes.⁴ The magic of stones and the magic of words played a major role in fifteenth-century Florentine society's outlook, an outlook later formulated by Marsilio Ficino. The leader of the Florentine Neo-Platonists, he declared himself to be a "natural magician" like the ancient magi. He wrote: "Why then are you so dreadfully afraid of the name of Magus, a name pleasing to the Gospel, which signifies not an enchanter and a sorcerer, but a wise priest? For what does that Magus, the first adorer of Christ, profess? If you wish to hear: on the analogy of a farmer, he is a cultivator of the world. Nor does he on that account worship the world, just as a farmer does not worship the earth; but just as a farmer for the sake of human sustenance tempers his field to the air, so that wise man, that priest, for the sake of human welfare tempers the lower parts of the world to the upper parts; and just like hen's eggs, so he fittingly subjects earthly things to heaven that they may be fostered. God himself always brings this about and by doing, teaches and urges us to do it in order that the lowest things may be produced, moved, and ruled by the higher."⁵ Although those words were written only in 1489, they can be seen as a summary of the long-standing Neo-Platonic tradition in Florence.

The client responsible for commissioning *The Adoration of the Magi* altarpiece for the Church of Santa Trinità was the celebrated humanist Palla Strozzi. A friend of Niccolò de' Niccoli, the philosopher and writer who read Latin and Greek and founded the first public library in Florence, Strozzi was undoubtedly familiar with Horapollo's treatise in Florence. In commissioning an altarpiece for the family chapel from one of the leading artists of the day, Gentile da Fabriano, Palla Strozzi surely could not have ignored

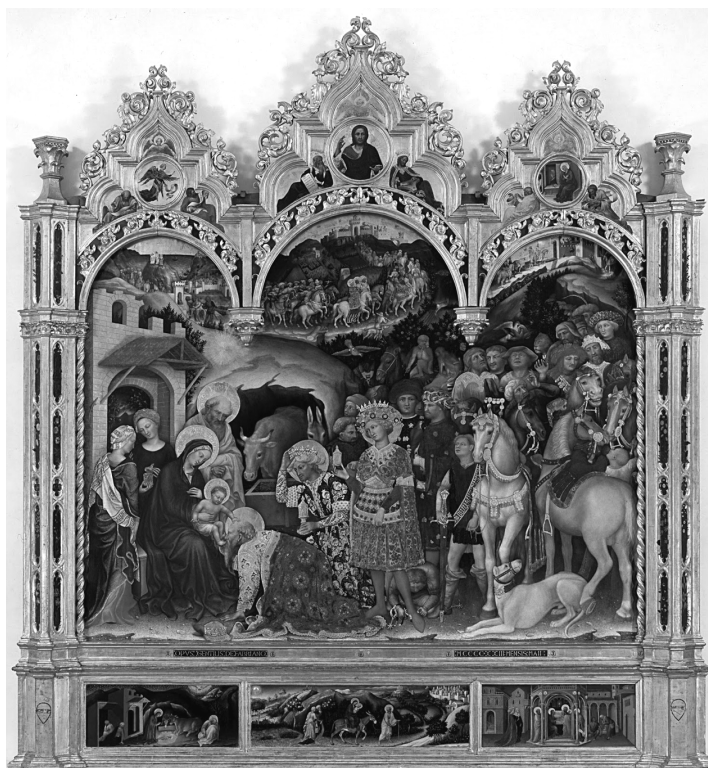
¹ Rab Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi", *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33, 1970: 107–161.

² Ibid.: 128–135.

³ Darrell Davisson, "Magian *Ars Medica*, Liturgical Devices and Eastern Influences in the Medici Palace Chapel", *Studies in Iconography* 22, 2001: 135–146.

⁴ Ibid.: 122–123.

⁵ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation* with introduction and notes by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989, *Book Three: On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*: 396–99.

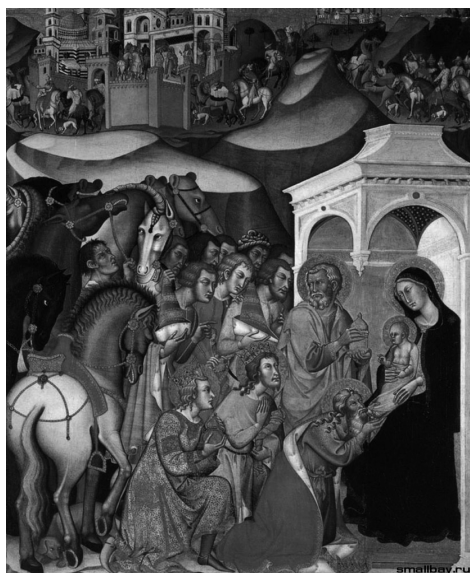


Gentile da Fabriano,
The Adoration
of the Magi. 1423
Uffizi, Florence

the chance to introduce greater iconographical complexity with the aid of the *Hieroglyphica*? Gentile's composition is thought to have been influenced by the work of Bartolo di Fredi, which he could have seen during his time in Siena.¹ That same long cavalcade accompanying the oriental wise men moves towards the stable with the Holy Child, looping round the hills and passing through the fortified city. Most of those in the procession are mounted on horses, but there are dromedaries bearing luggage with monkeys on top and dogs running alongside.

Animals often accompanied the magi's procession in altarpieces and frescoes. There even came to be an established repertoire of beasts traditionally included in such scenes: horses, dromedaries and dogs, monkeys and leopards. Some were simply necessary for the journey, others indicated the oriental origins of the magi. We know that the Florentine festivities of the Procession of the Magi also included all kinds of animals, including exotic beasts. But we should not see their depiction in art simply as a reflection of the variety of the surrounding world. Simona Cohen warns us against treating the animals and birds in Renaissance art merely as part of the naturalistic tradition: "... there appears to be a tacit assumption among most scholars that Renaissance artists

¹ Charles Sterling, "Fighting Animals in the Adoration of the Magi", *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 61/10, December 1974: 350–359.



related to animal depictions as part of the new naturalistic perception of nature and rejected the symbolic and didactic function assigned to them for over a millennium by Christian tradition.”¹

Charles Sterling found symbolic meaning in the frequent depiction of fighting or aggressive animals in depictions of the Adoration of the Magi. These, he suggested, were there to contrast with mankind, which has arrived at peace and harmony in order to adore the True King. According to a popular tradition, the magi themselves were at war with each other

until they were united by the light of the star that led to the Saviour.² Yet such symbolic content may have had different facets in different times and contexts.

Gentile da Fabriano’s altarpiece differs from that of Bartolo di Fredi in a number of ways that I would particularly like to emphasise. Firstly, it includes a number of birds at which some members of the cavalcade look, as if upon some mysterious sign. A falcon (hawk) is depicted in the air right along the central axis, and to right is a falcon fighting and killing another bird. Bestiaries repeated Isidore of Seville’s description of the hawk as “a bird armed with a spirit more than the hoof” and they compared the bird with an old man, using the wind to loosen old feathers and make them drop out.³ But a genuine panegyric to the bird is found in Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica*. The first living being described in the treatise, it is presented as the absolute ruler of the earth and the sky: “When they wanted to denote god or height or lows, or excellence or blood or victory... they painted a falcon.”⁴ In Gentile da Fabriano’s work a single bird of prey occupies central place and the close attention paid to another, allowing us to suggest that the depiction is symbolic and indeed connected to the coming of Christ.

A second important difference affects the depiction of the dog. While a dog features in the altarpiece of Bartolo di Fredi, it becomes far more prominent

Bartolo di Fredi,
The Adoration
of the Magi. 1385–1388.
Pinacoteca Nazionale,
Siena

¹ Cohen, “Introduction”, in: Op. cit.: XXXIII.

² Sterling, Op. cit.: 356.

³ *The Medieval Bestiary / Средневековый Бестиарий*, essay and commentaries by Xenia Muratova, tr. Inna Kitrosskaya (parallel Russian and English text), Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984: 148–149.

⁴ Van de Walle, Vergote, Op. cit., I, no. 6; Sbordon, Op. cit., I, no. 6: 12–14; Boas, Op. cit., I, no. 6: 45–46 – “When they wish to symbolize a god, or something sublime, or something lowly, or superiority [...] they draw a hawk.”



Gentile da Fabriano.
The Adoration
of the Magi. Detail

in that of Gentile da Fabriano. Now the dog occupies almost the whole of the lower right corner of the composition, its pose echoing in surprising fashion that of the kneeling oldest magus. Between these two figures the space is filled with an everyday little scene of a servant removing the spurs of the youngest magus, which also serves to draw our attention towards the lower part of the composition. According to the bestiary, dogs were symbols of fidelity and vigilance, and we should not forget that the Dominican Order took its name from *Domini canes* – the Hounds of God. But the symbolism in the bestiary was moralising in tone, each animal being interpreted metaphorically from the viewpoint of Christian dogma. As we have already said, the new humanist approach looked to wider horizons, to “objective” evidence of the kind offered by the *Hieroglyphica*. In this treatise we find several

interpretations of the depiction of dogs, one of them being as priestly interpreter (Boas: “sacred scribe”; van de Walle, Vergote: “hiérogrammate”) and prophet, which is very much in keeping with the image of the magus as an ancient wise man, holder of secret knowledge.¹ From that small, naturalistic detail in the painting by Bartolo di Fredi – a dog curled up by the horse’s hooves, looking up at the scene of adoration – the dog had been transformed into a highly visible character taking an active part in the scene, a naturalistic symbol which could echo the magi’s role. We see Gentile da Fabriano’s picture as packed with symbolism, a reading very much in keeping with Neo-Platonic teachings on how Divine Wisdom permeates the material world. Giehlow summarised Marsilio Ficino’s understanding of the way in which the Ancients expressed their thoughts (set out in his introduction to his translation of Plotinus), which Ficino’s contemporaries wished to imitate: “In this way, according to Marsilio, the Egyptian priests had come to formulate their most profound ideas, not with letters, but with representations of plants, trees and animals. In so doing, they would have wanted to create something that corresponded to divine thought, because the gods know that reality is not a changing

¹ Van de Walle, Vergote, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 39; Sbordon, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 39: 89–90; Boas, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 39: 63. In Boas’ text, based on later humanist translations, our attention is drawn by II, no. 22: “A wolf or dog turning back means escape.” In Gentile da Fabriano’s picture we see just such a dog turning to look backwards, but if we allow that those responsible for compiling the picture’s programme had this part of the *Hieroglyphica* in mind we still cannot be sure of how they interpreted the Greek term ἀποστροφή (aversion; means of salvation; flight). In the Russian translation by Aleksanyan, *Op. cit.*, it is translated as “turn”. Sbordon points out that Horapollon probably had too straightforward an understanding of a concept that was more abstract in the Egyptian view of the world; Sbordon, *Op. cit.*: 149.

image, but a Form, essential and immutable, the essence of things themselves.”¹

The second work looked at here is the tondo by Domenico Veneziano, thought to have been produced as a modello in the hope of winning a large commission from Cosimo de' Medici.² The colourful succession of the magi's procession cuts across the middle of Veneziano's work like a gem-studded girdle. Beyond this string of figures we no longer see a stylised band of space but a true “window on the world”: a boundless sky, mountains, a broad valley with animals grazing, ploughed fields on the lower slopes of the hills, and in the distance a gulf and a fortress by the waters. This landscape is universal in nature. In contrast, the lower, smaller space is but a piece of meadow, its separation from the zone where the “sublime event” unfolds emphasised by the narrow path along which the magi and their suite are arranged. As in Gentile da Fabriano's picture, the eldest magus has almost prostrated himself to kiss the foot of the Holy Child. As in Gentile da Fabriano's picture, we find a dog on the same plane as the main characters. This placing of the animals seems like a repetition or echo of the pose of the leading magus. We might therefore suggest that their depiction was prompted by the dog's symbolic meaning set out in the *Hieroglyphica*, as priestly interpreter and prophet. And again, as in the scene by Gentile da Fabriano, the tondo by Domenico Veneziano shows a bird of prey, which appears four times. The quotation from the *Hieroglyphica* cited above stressed that the falcon indicated not only “god” and “excellence” but was also associated with the categories “high” and “low”. The treatise explains these associations through the falcon's skill in flight, its ability to ascend almost vertically and drop down as directly. In Veneziano's composition it is this ability to soar up and sink down that is emphasised, and we might read his falcons as unifying the heavenly and earthly spheres. They probably also symbolise Christ, assuming the burden of physical form in order to open up the path to the Heavenly Kingdom for mankind. At the same time a link between the earthly and heavenly worlds is made by the magi, prophesying the workings of Providence through the interpretation of a natural phenomenon.

Further, the *Hieroglyphica* tells us, the falcon can indicate the human soul.³ A hunting falcon with a red cap sits on the arm of one servant in the procession – the fourth depiction of the bird in the scene – perhaps to symbolise the human soul before its eyes have been fully opened. Almost above this



Domenico Veneziano,
The Adoration
of the Magi. c. 1440.
Staatliche Museen,
Berlin

¹ Giehlow, *Op. cit.*: 50. Citing: Marsilio Ficino, *Opera*, Basileae, 1576: 1768.

² André Chastel, *Chronique de la peinture italienne à la Renaissance 1280–1580*, Fribourg: Office du livre, 1983: 74.

³ Van de Walle, Vergote, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 7; Sbordone, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 7: 14–17; Boas, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 7: 46–47.

fourth falcon is a telling depiction of a magpie flying towards the cypress, a tree traditionally seen as a symbol of the Virgin Mary and Christ and of the Church.¹ Magpies were thought to be able to cure blindness and they were treated in medieval bestiaries as an image of the Saviour, bringing true light to mankind, blinded by the devil.² This altarpiece for the Medici family thus seamlessly interweaves traditional symbols and new knowledge. And if our supposition is correct, it was the depiction of the falcon that turned the subject into a reflection of Neo-Platonic philosophy, according to which the human soul occupies a middle place between the spiritual sphere and the material world.

Domenico Veneziano's composition dates from the year following the Council of Florence, but the idea behind it probably arose slightly earlier. Cosimo liked to identify himself with the magi, men endowed with higher knowledge, who brought Christ gifts. In Veneziano's composition the costume of the servant hold the oldest magus' crown has a very interesting detail, first noted by André Chastel: running along the black border around the lower edge of his red jacket is a pattern of repeated gold tendrils and seven gold *palle* – the spheres that adorn the Medici arms.³ Events in 1439 provide further justification for us to identify Florence's rulers with the magi. The Medici wanted to give allegorical form to the role the family played in bringing together the two branches of Christianity. An allusion to this is found, for instance, in Fra Angelico's fresco in cell 39 in the Monastery of San Marco, used by Cosimo and his wife for private prayer.⁴ That version of the Adoration has no animals, which may simply be the result of the monastery's strict rules,

Benozzo Gozzoli,
The Adoration
of the Magi.
1459–1460. Procession
of the Young Magus.
East wall, Chapel
of the Magi, Palazzo
Medici–Riccardi



¹ Lucia Impelluso, *La natura e i suoi simboli*, Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2003: 69.

² Ibid.: 321.

³ Chastel, *Chronique de la peinture...*, Op. cit.: 74.

⁴ Cyril Gebron, "Fra Angelico, les Medici, les Mages et le concile de Florence. Une histoire de temps entrecroisée", *Artibus et Historiae* 33/66, 2012: 35–41.



stating that the images should instruct and not entertain. In the magi's suite, however, among the representatives of a wide variety of nationalities,¹ we find a character holding an armillary sphere. Situated at the very centre of the composition, he is thought to bear Cosimo's likeness. The astronomical instrument in his hands might indicate both the nature of Cosimo's activities as astronomer and forecaster, and the astrological omen which foretold that he – or rather the city of Florence – was fated to bring the Churches together as one.²

But probably the most famous monument glorifying the Medici family as “the new magi” is the ensemble of wall paintings by Benozzo Gozzoli in the Palazzo Medici. In 1960 Ernst Gombrich spoke out against the dominant theory that linked the iconographical programme with the twentieth anniversary of the Florentine Union,³ but thirty years later Roger J. Crum put forward powerful counter-arguments to convincingly assert that the Florence agreement was still a strong political tool in the arsenal of the Medici family in 1459 and that it largely shaped the imagery used in their palace chapel.⁴

Benozzo Gozzoli
The Adoration
of the Magi
1459–1460. Procession
of the Old Magus.
West wall, Chapel
of the Magi, Palazzo
Medici–Riccardi

¹ We know that Cosimo invited representatives of the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian and Indies churches to take part in the Council.

² Gebron, *Op. cit.*: 41.

³ Ernst Gombrich, “The Early Medici as Patrons of Art”, E. F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance Studies. A Tribute to the Late Cecilia M. Ady*, London: Faber & Faber, 1960: 300–301.

⁴ Roger J. Crum, “Roberto Martelli, The Council of Florence and the Medici Palace Chapel”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 59/43, 1996: 403–417.

So complex was the chapel programme, working on so many levels, that even the paving of the floor is thought to contain Neo-Platonic allusions and references to Holy Writ.¹

As with the previous examples, we can pick out symbolism borrowed from the *Hieroglyphica* in Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco, though we shall not undertake here to explain the significance of each and every animal depicted with reference to the treatise.

It is important to recall that the frescoes were created between July 1459 and January 1460, at the very time when the Italian princes, at the behest of Pope Pius II, were planning a crusade against the Turks. A congress to settle the details of the crusade was held in Mantua in June 1459, after which the pope and Francesco Sforza (one of the crusade's most ardent supporters) visited Florence and were received in the Palazzo Medici, where work was already well under way on the scenes devoted to the magi. Fully aware of the potential of such a crusade, the Medici surely had in mind domestic politics when creating this important cycle of frescoes, seeking to stress their own importance and their loyalty both to pan-Italian and to Christian interests.²

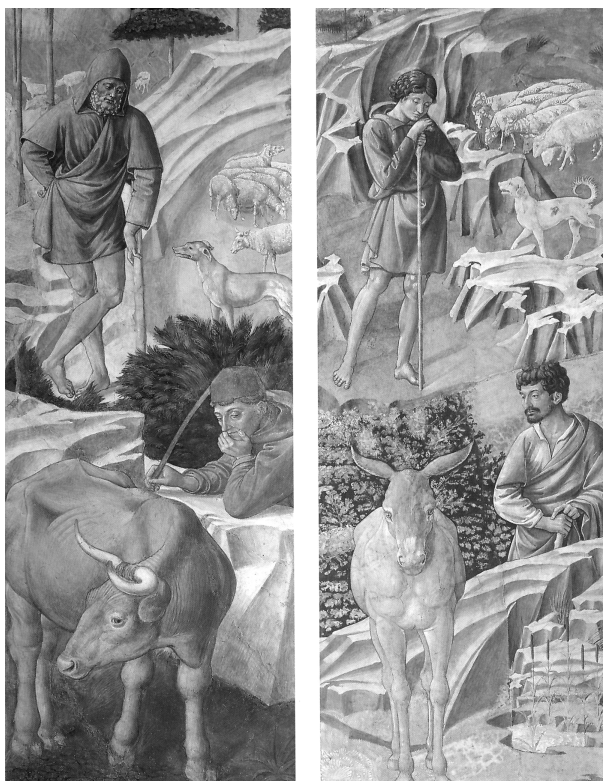
Allusions to the proposed crusade are contained within the hunting theme – here so colourfully expressed, in contrast to other works on the subject – which was traditionally used as a prototype for war in contemporary painting.³ In the procession of the young magus, immediately above the figure of Caspar himself – thought to be an allegorical depiction of Lorenzo de' Medici – is a hunting scene: a rider, spear in hand, chases a beast variously described as a deer, a gazelle or a stag. But stags, deer and gazelles were far more elegantly and gracefully depicted by Late Gothic and Quattrocento artists. Benozzo Gozzoli's cloven-hoofed beast is stocky, with large ears and a tail that makes it more like an antelope. In the *Hieroglyphica* the antelope (oryx) was seen as an unclean beast with "some sort of contention with the goddess" (Boas),⁴ as being "base and hateful" (Boas; van de Walle, Vergote: "vicious and

¹ Maria Teresa Bartoli, "A Neoplatonic Pavement", in: Acidini Luchinat, ed., *Op. cit.*: 26–27. This theory as to the inclusion of Neo-Platonic allusions is too complicated to summarise here. With regard to the Bible, scholars have drawn attention to the repetition of the number fourteen in patterned scrolls framing a large square, which has been read as referring to the Gospel according to Matthew, where the magi's journey is described. The Gospel opens with the genealogy of Christ, in which the generations before the Incarnation are divided into three groups of fourteen each (from Abraham to David – fourteen generations; from David to the removal to Babylon – fourteen generations; from the move to Babylon to the birth of Christ – fourteen generations).

² Andreas Grote, "A Hitherto Unpublished Letter on Benozzo Gozzoli's Frescoes in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27, 1964: 321–322.

³ Anne-Marie Lecoq, "L'iconographie de la Salle de Bal à Fontainebleau: une hypothèse de lecture", in: Hervé Oursel, Julia Fritsch, eds, *Henri II et les arts. Actes du colloque international. Ecole du Louvre et Musée national de la Renaissance-Ecouen, 25, 26 et 27 septembre 1997*, Paris: Ecole du Louvre, 2003: 387.

⁴ The goddess of the moon.



malicious”).¹ In this case, therefore, the depiction of the hunting scene above the head of the young magus may indicate the battle against hostile theomachist forces, i.e. the Muslim threat to Europe.

On the west wall of the chapel, showing the oldest magus and his suite, we find a very specific range of beasts:² leopards, a monkey atop a mule, an eagle attacking a hare and waterbirds. The inclusion of leopards and monkeys in the scene of the Adoration of the Magi was more or less traditional, but why do they appear only in this fresco? If medieval bestiaries characterise the leopard (panther) as meek and handsome, a beast whose breath is fragrant, the animals depicted by Benozzo Gozzoli are somewhat aggressive and out of keeping with such a description. Interestingly, the number of leopards – four – accords with the number of fingers raised by one member of the suite. If the depiction of exotic beasts of prey was intended solely to indicate the oriental origins of the wise men, or had some relation to the hunting theme, surely the artist would have shown them on all three walls? But he chose not to.

Benozzo Gozzoli
Shepherds. 1459–1460
 Right north wall
 section, Chapel
 of the Magi, Palazzo
 Medici–Riccardi

¹ Van de Walle, Vergote, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 49; Sbordone, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 49: 102–107; Boas, *Op. cit.*, I, no. 49: 65–66.

² The fresco on the south wall showing the middle magus, Balthasar, is very damaged and many details of the painting – particularly those relating to the animal world – date from much later. Acidini Luchinat, “The Procession of the Magi”, in: Acidini Luchinat, ed., *Op. cit.*: 119.

In utter contradiction to traditional interpretations, the *Hieroglyphica* tells us that the leopard stands for one who hides his own faults, as it hides its own scent during the hunt.¹ No less of a warning symbol is the bird of prey seated on the ground with a dead hare in its claws. Cristina Acidini Luchinat interpreted this as a falcon, linking it with the heraldic symbol of Piero Medici (a falcon clasping a ring).² Here, however, the winged creature seems more like a mighty eagle, and in the *Hieroglyphica* this bird signifies "A king living in retirement and giving no pity to those in fault" (Boas).³ This symbol may relate to the oldest magus, who is indeed shown somewhat separately from the rest of the suite (Melchior is cut off from the main body of figures by a small stream).

Although outwardly not at all like Patriarch Joseph II of Constantinople, this figure of Melchior is usually seen as intended to represent him. In which case, the eagle might also be seen as alluding to his qualities. Joseph had died in Florence just eight days after he signed his approval of the Filoque at a closed sitting of the Byzantine delegation. When he died a letter was found in his rooms, supposedly in his own hand, in which he stated that the truth of Catholic dogma and the supremacy of the pope had been revealed to him. This document was later recognised to be false but not everyone accepted that fact. So the Catholic representatives had no quibble with the patriarch himself, seeing him rather as a righteous man surrounded by cunning advisers, who were perhaps those alluded to in the fresco by the leopards. Moreover, four was the number of metropolitans in the Byzantine delegation who refused to sign the Union.⁴

Too specific a reading of such meanings may seem out of place with regard to so impressive and indeed festive a cycle, one that is also intended to convey mystical meaning. But the frescoes must surely have been meant to be read on several levels. After the fall of Constantinople, it was possible to formulate criticism of the Byzantine delegation in this veiled manner. It is no secret that many in Italy saw the fall of Byzantium as retribution for its rejection of the Union. Moreover, we should note that the frescoes were executed under the control of Roberto di Niccolo Martelli, the very adviser to Cosimo de' Medici who had initiated the transfer of the Council of Ferrara to Florence. He was fully aware of all the nuances of the events of 1439 and it is thought that he too appears in the frescoes, as the man leading Cosimo the Elder's horse in the scene with the young magus.⁵

¹ Van de Walle, Vergote, Op. cit., II, no. 90; Sbordon, Op. cit., II, no. 90: 196–197; Boas, Op. cit., II, no. 90: 91.

² Acidini Luchinat, "The Procession of the Magi", Op. cit.: 179.

³ Van de Walle, Vergote, Op. cit., II, no. 56; Sbordon, Op. cit., II, no. 56: 170; Boas, Op. cit., II, no. 56: 82.

⁴ We would here draw attention to the fact that no satisfactory explanation has yet been found for the figure to right in the fresco holding up four fingers.

⁵ Roger J. Crum, Op. cit.: 417.



By no means all the representatives of the avian and animal worlds had symbolic meaning, of course.¹ We are left with the impression that the significance of the falcon in the chapel frescoes is secondary, of lesser importance than in earlier depictions of the subject.² On the other hand, a different bird, the duck, is given more prominence: in the fresco with the eldest magus and in the altar chapel in the scene of *Angels adoring the Christ Child*.

In the fresco with Melchior the duck appears in the stream, set against the reflection of the page holding a monstrance, which should also probably be seen as intended to reinforce its symbolic resonance. If the head of another waterbird, a goose, appears a little below the duck in the same fresco, in the scene of *Angels adoring...* the duck swims alone in the centre of a small pond, the other members of the feathered world arranged around its edges. Never before had painters attached such importance to this apparently very ordinary bird. It is hard to identify the precise meaning of this fragment on the west side of the altar wall, but we can be reasonably confident in asserting

Benozzo Gozzoli,
Angels adoring
the Christ Child
1459–1460. West wall
near the altar, Chapel
of the Magi, Palazzo
Medici–Riccardi

¹ I would like to say a few words about the depiction of monkeys. They certainly did have symbolic meaning, a meaning that was identical both in the bestiary and in the *Hieroglyphica*. In the latter this meaning was extremely precisely formulated: the monkey is used “to depict one whose inheritance passes to a hated child”. In the painting by Gentile da Fabriano and the fresco with the eldest magus by Benozzo Gozzoli, the depictions of monkeys are particularly noticeable. In the first instance, the beast might be a reference to Herod, in the second, to the fact that when Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paeologus died in 1448 he was succeeded by his brother, who had from the very beginning been an enemy of the Union and who had supported several of the metropolitans who opposed it. Such an interpretation nonetheless seems too stretched, too tenuous, and we must recognise that the monkeys may simply have been a traditional element in the theatricalised playing out of the procession of the magi.

² Some scholars have noted that the image of the falcon was probably borrowed from Domenico Veneziano’s tondo: Acidini Luchinat, “The Procession of the Magi”, *Op. cit.*: 179.

that the duck was not merely introduced to fill the space of the lower left corner (where there are no angels) and to add decorative variety.¹ In the first book of the *Hieroglyphica* is a paragraph dealing with a waterbird, the goose, as a symbol of “son” and “self-sacrifice”.² Translations of this section differ, however,³ and we shall therefore refrain from citing particular analogies.

For all its naturalistic colour and apparently clear and open readings, the fresco cycle in the Medici Chapel was surely a coded work. Most unexpected, for instance, is the depiction of shepherds on the narrow sections of the north wall, who appear totally unaware of the birth of the Saviour and simply look around them at the peaceful valley.⁴ Certainly they take no part in glorifying the Nativity, in absolute contradiction to established tradition. Perhaps only the most enlightened, those as wise as the magi themselves, were intended to understand the true meaning of the scene.

If we accept the suggestion proposed here as to the application of the *Hieroglyphica*, we are forced to reappraise the works described, to see them not only as a continuation of the traditions of International Gothic, with its desire to reflect the multiplicity of the natural world. If those who composed the programmes of these works did indeed take the *Hieroglyphica* as an iconographical source, we find ourselves faced with a somewhat paradoxical historical and cultural situation. The new “hieroglyphical compendium” compiled in the late fourth or fifth century CE first appeared because the caste of priests had almost entirely forgotten the ancient “hieroglyphical system”, but it continued to be needed to create sacred inscriptions. The Quattrocento humanists, mistaken as to the date of its creation and the nature of the content, imbued the treatise with mystic significance. Thus a falsification was perceived as sacred knowledge and turned by the humanists into a new “crypto-language” that became a model and a starting point for the creation of emblematic treatises in the Renaissance.

¹ Acidini Luchinat, “The Choirs of Angels”, in: Acidini Luchinat, ed., Op. cit.: 270.

² Van de Walle, Vergote, Op. cit., I, no. 53; Sbordon, Op. cit., I, no. 53: 111–112; Boas, Op. cit., I, no. 53: 66–67. Our text here is based on the French translation; Boas’ English rendition is: “If they wish to represent a son, they draw a vulpanser [*Chenopolex*]. For this bird is very philoprogenitive. If it should ever be pursued in order to be taken with its young, the father and mother give themselves voluntarily to the dogs, so that their young may be saved. For this reason it has seemed fitting to the Egyptians to revere this animal.”

³ Van de Walle, Vergote, Op. cit., “goose”; Boas, Op. cit., “vulpanser (*Chenopolex*)”; Aleksanyan, Op. cit., “sheldrake”.

⁴ Acidini Luchinat, “The Procession of the Magi”, Op. cit.: 253.