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## Ferenc Veress:

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### Following the Star

Nativity Scenes and Sacred Drama  
from the Middle Ages to the Baroque

#### Abstract

This study discusses the origin, and liturgical function, of a popular accessory of the Christmas celebrations, that is, the Bethlehem nativity scene. The events of the life of Jesus attracted much attention in the early period of Christianity, as a result of which the Holy Land was visited by flocks of pilgrims. Descriptions of the sentiments aroused by a pilgrimage to Bethlehem may be found in sources as early as the letters of Saint Jerome. Fragments of the Bethlehem manger were kept in the Santa Maria Maggiore Cathedral in Rome, so it is here that one of the first nativity scenes, a sculptural group by Arnolfo di Cambio, can be found (late 13th century). The work of Arnolfo was commissioned by the same Pope Nicholas IV who also sponsored the ornamentation of the Cathedral of San Rufino. One screen of the Giotto Assisi fresco cycle depicts Saint Francis' Miracle of Greccio, in which the Holy Mass is celebrated over the manger and the Child comes to life.

The Bethlehem nativity scene was the subject of numerous paintings and sculptures during the Renaissance and the Baroque era. From the sacrificial procession of the faithful in the liturgy evolved the genre of sacral drama, from which in turn mystery plays were developed, leaving the premises of the church. Nativity scenes incorporating elements of mystery plays, such as the presence of the shepherds, were intended primarily to make the miracle of embodiment a palpable reality for the believers. The presence of the Holy Family, the three Magi and the shepherds made the nativity scene

realistic, always with a touch of the day and age. A tabernacle cabinet carried by angels was erected in 1589 over the Chapel of the Nativity in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica; commissioned, again, by a Franciscan Pope, Sixtus V. Caravaggio's Adoration of the Shepherds altar paintings (the Museo Nazionale, Messina, and the San Lorenzo church, Palermo), represented a novel interpretation of the subject. In sculpture, Antonio Begarelli's terracotta groups (1526-1527, Modena Cathedral), which resemble paintings, preceded baroque art.

The nativity scene, as a genre in sculpture, started to flourish again in Hungary in the 17th century, a symbolic representative of which was the medieval Adoration of the Shepherds sculptural group found by Jesuits in the Town Hall of Lőcse (today Levoča, in Slovakia), a work executed by the master Pál Lőcsei (today in the Basilica of Saint James, Levoča). Three Magi altars are to be found in the churches of Saint Michael in both Sopron and Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, in Romania), which presumably must have had their medieval antecedents. While the Adoration of the Three Magi sculptural group is a work of an immigrant Bavarian sculptor, Georg Schweitzer, in Sopron, it was Franz Anton Maulbertsch who painted a Three Magi altar screen in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca). Maulbertsch also developed the theme of the Three Magi and the Adoration of the Shepherds in two separate fresco scenes in the parish church of Sümeg, deliberately associating with the great tradition leading to the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, via the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in Rome.

**Key words:** Bethlehem, manger, nativity scene, Wise Men from the East

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## Ferenc Veress

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# Following the Star

## Nativity Scenes and Sacred Drama from the Middle Ages to the Baroque<sup>1</sup>

In his volume of essays, József Szauder, a literary historian residing in Rome, published an intriguing piece in which he noted his observations upon seeing the nativity scenes in the 1970s at Christmastime. In the Piazza Navona, he wrote, the tortoise-shaped square of antique origin transformed into a 'world stage'. Only at that time can one truly imagine how the lively bustle of people might have populated the marketplace square decades ago, along with the merchants' stalls filled with all manner of dolls, the nativity scene figurines. 'Here the third smaller stage thoroughly lined the second, the row of stalls, which in turn corresponded to the urban stage' (Szauder 1977, 338). The whole world, all humanity, trooped around the infant Jesus' crib – and not just on account of the holy parents Mary and Joseph or the donkey and ox exhaling warm breath over the manger, but also for the shepherds and the Three Kings from the East.

Insofar as I would like to trace the origin of the nativity scene genre, we are obliged to seek it in the very roots of Christianity. Following Edict of Milan made by Emperor Constantine the Great in 313 CE, ambitious construction projects began in the Holy Land. That is when they laid the foundation of the basilica at Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem, above the grotto where he was born. Additions made to the basilica, arranged longitudinally on an octagonal base, included a courtyard surrounded by a hall with columns that served as a resting place for visiting pilgrims (Krautheimer 1963, 36).

Revived interest in the scenes of Jesus' life motivated numerous pilgrims to travel to the Holy Land. Church Father Saint Jerome testified to their experiences

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in a letter in which he gives a tangible account of the state of mind of his traveling companion, a noblewoman named Paula: 'From there, she entered the cave of the Saviour and beheld the Virgin's inn and the stall, where "the oxen knew its owner and the donkey its master's crib" (Isaiah 32:20) [...] I heard her swear that she could see, with the eyes of faith, the gurgling infant wrapped in swaddling clothes in his crib; the Magi worshipping him as God; the star shining down from on high; the Virgin Mother; the attentive foster-father; and the shepherds coming by night to see "the Word become flesh" [...] Shedding tears mixed with joy, she said, "Hail, Bethlehem, house of bread, where the Bread that comes down from Heaven was born."' (Saint Jerome 2005, 116–117).

During the Middle Ages, interest in the holy site in Bethlehem did not decrease. Indeed, it grew by leaps and bounds, and new legends were associated with it. In his travel journal entry from 1519, Hungarian Franciscan friar Gábor Pécsváradi mentions the quaint legend, according to which Saint Jerome's body returned to its burial site from the altar built by the Patriarch of Constantinople. Then, appearing to the patriarch in a dream, he said, 'Let me remain in my original place, since, in times to come, the pagans will occupy the Holy Land, and my body will be taken to Rome.' (Holl 1983, 153).

Saint Jerome's ashes were truly reburied in Rome at the end of the twelfth century, the body receiving a place in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, near the chapel where the relic of the manger in Bethlehem is kept. The relic could be displayed in Rome as early as the seventh century, and the service in which the Pope places the Holy Host on the manger-relic during Christmas mass could date back to this time as well (Young 1933, 25). Thus, in the liturgy, the manger in Bethlehem is connected to the transformation of the Eucharist, the miraculous transubstantiation of Christ's body.

During the offering, in the course of the liturgy, believers copy the gesture of the Magi from the East by bringing presents to the altar, and the priest gives thanks over them. Developing out of this offering is the 'Three Kings' liturgical performance, a beautiful example of which is the eleventh-century play entitled *Tractus Stellae*, preserved in the missal of Bishop Hartvik of Győr. The liturgical drama presents the Magi's reverence in the following manner. 1. Procession: the Wise Men enter from the vestry. 2. Station: meeting at the main altar, where they collect the gifts. 3. Procession: crossing the chancel, they proceed to Herod's throne in Jerusalem, situated in the centre of the nave. 4. Station: Herod receives the Magi. 5. Procession: journey to Bethlehem, sighting the star. 6. Station: at the



Fig. 1. Adoration of the Magi. Pécs (Hungary), Cathedral

manger (probably located at a Virgin Mary statue), they give their gifts to the infant. 7. Procession: the Magi exit (Karsai 1938, 54).

Art historian Dezső Dercsényi links the text of the liturgical drama in Győr to the relief (c. 1170–1180) along the descent to the undercroft of the cathedral in Pécs. The depictions along the descent to the undercroft show in rich detail the reverence of the three sages from the East before the Virgin Mary's throne and their conversation with Herod, as well as their dream, which motivates them to return home by a different way than they arrived. (Fig. 1) The sack carried by the Three Kings was an attribute of pilgrims, and they asked the church for a blessing upon it before their journey, later donating it to a church out of gratitude at the completion of their pilgrimage (Dercsényi 1950, 93).

As the same time as the creation of the reliefs in Pécs, Emperor Frederick I (Frederick Barbarossa) had the relics of the Wise Men conveyed from Milan to Cologne in 1164. There an ornate reliquary was constructed for their three skulls,

which numerous pilgrims sought out during the Middle Ages. We possess an especially detailed account of the Hungarian pilgrims in Cologne. According to Sándor Bálint, the Hungarian pilgrims arrived in May and resided in Cologne for six weeks as guests of the city. After passing the Hahnentor city gate, they proceeded, singing and praying, to the cathedral, where the men rang the great bell and offered up candles to the relics of the Three Kings. To combat fatigue, those setting out bound the names of the Three Kings around their knees and wore coins around their necks in their honour (Bálint 1989, 141–142).

In all certainty, Franciscan spirituality marked a new level in the development and growing splendour of the Christmas celebration. In the legend of Saint Francis of Assisi's life, we may read of the miracle that occurred in the cave chapel in Greccio. At Christmastime in 1223, at the saint's request, a manger was set up at the altar of the Greccio Chapel with a likeness of the baby Jesus. In the course of the holy mass held 'over the manger', as Saint Francis testified to the Saviour's birth in a soul-stirring sermon, the baby Jesus came to life for the congregation. Thomas of Celano, author of the legend, acknowledged the significance of the saint's deed. '[...] For the Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of His grace, He was brought to life again through His servant Saint Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory' (Celano 1996, 90–93).

The Miracle in Greccio made its way into the 'canonical' events of Saint Francis' life. Thus, Giotto di Bondone also captured it in the fresco series at the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1297). Giotto's fresco



Photo: Ferenc Veress

**Fig. 2.** Giotto di Bondone: The Miracle at Greccio. Assisi (Italy), Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi



Photo: Ferenc Veress



Fig. 3. Arnolfo di Cambio: Nativity Scene. Rome (Italy), Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica

depicts in detail the church's apse, the structure of the rood screen (partition between the chancel and nave), and the columned canopy towering above the altar. (Fig. 2) The faces and gestures of the congregation reflect how they are moved. The curious women may not step beyond the rood screen, since, with the exception of certain members of the laity, only priests could be there. Still, in order to convey credibly the universal significance of Saint Francis' deed, Giotto felt it important to portray the laity's bearing witness as well.

At the same time as the Assisi frescoes, Giotto's contemporary, the sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio, carved the nativity scene for the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome at the commission of Pope Nicholas IV. The pope himself originated from Saint Francis' order, and his great largess made possible the decoration of the basilicas in Assisi and Rome. On the basis of reconstructions, the arch of the recess which housed Arnolfo's Roman sculpture group was framed by the figures of two prophets. Saint Joseph stands on the left. To the right are two of the kings conversing along their journey. (Fig. 3) The figure of the Virgin Mary (now lost) occupied the centre with an old magus kneeling before her. The assembly

was completed by the donkey and the ox on the left, bowing towards the manger. For the visitor or pilgrim, moving and changing position, Arnolfo's sculpture group was exposed from every side. Thus, it may also be considered a *sacra rappresentazione* or sacred play (Pomarici 1988, 155–174).

Franciscan spirituality definitely played a role in the nativity scene's gradually becoming a permanent or seasonal fixture of churches and wealthy Italian homes. Rudolf Berliner, a great expert on the topic, claims that those who had nativity scenes made seemed to wish to see the miraculous birth before them, to become part of it themselves (Berliner 1946 and 1953). To illustrate this phenomenon, we may cite numerous examples from the most varied of genres. For instance, in one limestone sculpture group from Burgundy, we find an older Saint Joseph drying his clothes by the fire (Forsyth 1989, 117–126). The young Virgin Mary kneels at the cradle, embellished with Gothic tracery; however, instead of lying there, the baby Jesus reclines in the manger. (Fig. 4) He is warmed at his head by the donkey and the ox, while an angel holds the swaddling clothes at his feet. Inquisitive shepherds and angels peep in through the crumbling walls.



Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Fig. 4. Sculpture from Burgundy, France: Nativity Scene.  
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Photo: Ferenc Veress



Fig. 5. Hugo van der Goes: Adoration of the Shepherds. Central panel of the Portinari altarpiece. Florence (Italy), Uffizi Gallery

The image is cheerful and harmonious, befitting the Christmas celebration and the happiness people experience during the season.

Merchants established connections between Italy and Burgundy. In the course of their travels, they selected the Three Kings as their patrons. Tommaso Portinari and Francesco Sassetti commissioned the best and most famous artists of the time to paint the Adoration of the Shepherds with the Wise Men's journey in the background. Playing a role in their choice could have been the Medici family's Florentine custom of commemorating the Feast of the Epiphany with a lighted parade on the streets of the city. The procession organised by the Compagna de' Magi (the Brotherhood of the Three Kings) went from Herod's Palace, erected on the Piazza della Signoria, to the Dominican Convento di San

Marco, where they paid their respects to the Virgin Mary (Hatfield 1970, 146). Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco on wall of the Palazzo Medici in Florence is the best evidence of the pomp and decorative costumes of that time.

The Portinari altarpiece (c. 1476), commissioned by Florentine banker and merchant Tommaso Portinari, can now be seen in Florence's Uffizi Gallery. Its creator, the master Hugo van der Goes, surrounds the birth scene with the sacred aura and symbolism of the Holy Mass. (*Fig. 5*) The fragile figure of the Virgin Mary occupies the centre, worshipping her child, who lies on the ground. The bundle of wheat, on which the child rests, is repeated in the foreground, making the Eucharist message clear. The space surrounding Mary is a holy area, made evident by Joseph's removed sandals. The angels that kneel in a circle are wearing vestments (Panofsky 1953, 333). Yet, the viewer is most struck by the rich emotion in the facial expressions of the three shepherds. Hugo van der Goes was probably influenced the *Devotio Moderna*, a Dutch Reformation movement which taught its followers that people should keep certain details of the Scripture as read in their hearts and minds and act accordingly (Ridderbos 1990, 137-152). Therefore, we may interpret the three shepherds' facial expressions as three different ways of experiencing the holy event. Their gestures and expressions testify to the painter's interest in the impact on their souls.

Hieronymus Bosch's 1495 triptych, housed at the Prado in Madrid, links the mass of Pope Gregory I (Saint Gregory the Great) and the adoration of the Magi. When closed, the shutters show a monochrome scene of the pope kneeling at an altar spread with a white cloth. (*Fig. 6*) On the altar, candles burn in the can-

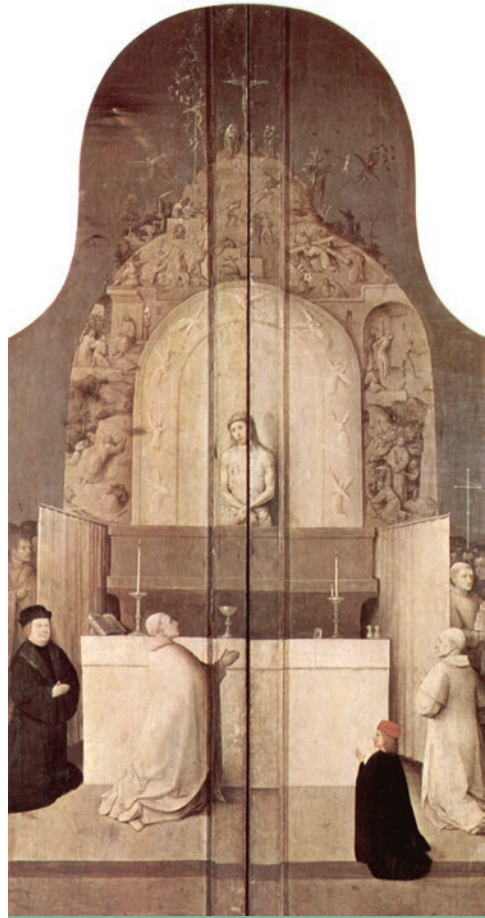


Photo: Ferenc Veress

*Fig. 6.* Hieronymus Bosch: Epiphany triptych. Madrid (Spain), Prado Museum

dlesticks. There is the open missal on the left, cruets (containers for the water and wine) on the right, and a chalice in the centre. It is possible that the image depicts the moment of transformation (transubstantiation), when, according to tradition, Christ himself appeared to the pope. There are no clear witnesses to the miracle in the picture. Most of the figures wait behind a drawn screen.

For altars in the Middle Ages, screens primarily served a practical function: shielding the priest from curious onlookers and creating an intimate space for the performance of the mass (Braun 1924, 135). Nonetheless, this does not exclude an allegorical interpretation of the screen and its role in the liturgical drama. We find reference to the use of a screen in medieval mystery plays presenting the adoration of the Magi, when the screen is drawn aside at the moment the Three Kings spot the Holy Family in the grotto. For instance, a reference to a fourteenth-century drama from Rouen explicitly mentions the screen: 'Then, two [people] wearing dalmatics draw apart the curtain while saying, "Lo, here is the child you seek, make haste to adore him, for he is the Saviour of the world"' (Young 1933, 44). In mystery plays, it is known that pieces were introduced by *festaioli* or celebrants holding the curtain. They also mediated between the viewers and the actors during the performance (Baxandall 1986, 81–81). In the altarpiece *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Hugo van der Goes, now at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, the curtain is held apart on either side by the prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk, who prophesised the birth of the Messiah.

The screen likely has a deeper meaning in Bosch's *Epiphany* triptych, in line with the teachings of *Devotio Moderna*, which distinguished between physical sight and spiritual or intellectual insight (Williamson 2013, 12–13). Indeed, Gert Groote considered pictures effective pillars of faith, but only if they evoked the desired feelings. He disapproved of people remaining prisoners to their emotions. He had more respect for intellectual insight – no longer thinking in pictures, but divorced from them – although he was aware that the everyday man only attained that level in exceptional cases. Hence, the *Devotio Moderna* theology expected of the laity an active, emotionally rich outlook that pervaded their everyday activities. Perhaps this is alluded to by the shepherds' expressions of rapt devotion in Hugo van der Goes' pictures (Ridderbos 1990, 137–152). In Bosch's altarpiece, the screen seems to separate the people, who are slaves to the emotional world, from the spiritual world, where the miracle of the Eucharist occurs. Although the people behind the screen could not be direct participants, they could be witnesses to the miracle and, with the aid of faith, comprehend its meaning.



Fig. 7. Hieronymus Bosch: Epiphany triptych. Madrid (Spain), Prado Museum

Bosch's philosophy regarding sight is also manifest in the triptych's inner panels, which depicts the scene of the adoration of the Three Kings. (Fig. 7) The Virgin Mary and her child are depicted with special care and detail by a dilapidated cabin. Behind the forms of the reverent Magi, we can spot strange figures through the door, including one in an odd headdress that research has identified as the ruler Herod (Falenburg 2007, 178–206). King Herod did not believe in the birth of Jesus, not recognising him as the Messiah. That is why, like his companions, he looks off into nowhere with no concrete goal or object. By contrast, the look of the pastor peering through a crack in the cabin on the right side shows that, in his case, there is true insight. He is moved; he recognises the Messiah. Franciscan spirituality in the thirteenth century and the *Devotio Moderna* in the fifteenth century ushered in the possibility of redemption for believers, and these pictures also played a large role in that.

In the early sixteenth century, the orders (brotherhoods) promoted a reform in faith, represented in Florence by the tragically-fated Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola. In 1517, San Gaetano da Thiene (a.k.a. Saint Cajetan, founder of the Theatine Order) knelt in prayer before the Crypt of the Nativity in Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica when the Virgin Mary appeared to him with the infant Jesus on her arm. In addition, resting near the crypt, Saint Jerome 'was present' and encouraged Gaetano to approach Mary, whereupon the Virgin placed the holy infant in the saint's arms (Ostrow 1996, 46). The symbolic message of this story is notable. It is precisely at the Santa Maria Maggiore's Crypt of the Nativity that the founder of an order instrumental in the Catholic Reformation gained a well-spring of spirituality. In competition with the Jesuits, the Theatine Order erected their church, Sant'Andrea della Valle, in the vicinity of Il Gesù, outdoing even the Jesuit church in terms of architectural feats – for example, the effect of its monumental cupola.

In all certainty, the Franciscan Pope Sixtus V followed the example of Saint Francis of Assisi's manger in Greccio when he used his builder, Carlo Fontana, to construct his own chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore. The pieces from the medieval Nativity Crypt found a new setting in the centre of Sixtus V's chapel, above which was raised a tabernacle carried by angels, the work of Bastiano Torrigiano and Lodovico del Duca (Guinomet 2017, 101–103). The tabernacle hovering over the relic shrine established a permanent connection between the



Fig. 8. Lodovico del Duca: Tabernacle. Rome (Italy), Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica

Photo: Ferenc Veress

mystery of the Word made flesh and the transformation (transubstantiation) that occurs during Holy Mass, whereby Christ is continuously present in the community of believers and the sacred space. (*Fig. 8*)

A special figure of the Catholic Reformation was the Florentine Saint Philip Neri, who lived in Rome. Philip's Congregation of the Oratory, made up of clergy and laity members, originally formed next to the Hospital of San Girolamo della Carità and later moved to the Santa Maria Parish Church in Vallicella. Around 1534, Philip arrived in Rome; and, perhaps not by chance, his spiritual renewal took place at the church built on the site of Saint Jerome's former residence. He came to know the Brotherhood of Charity (Confraternita della Carità), operating at San Girolamo, in 1534; and this order, which regarded as its mission the care of the poor, orphans, prison inmates and the condemned, had a decisive effect on Saint Philip (Türks 2004, 74).

One follower of Philip's congregation, the church historian Cesare Baronio, recounted the gatherings, in 1557, as a return to the times of early Christianity: 'Those who visited the aforementioned site found themselves in a religious gathering, the essence of which was the following. After deep prayer, one of the brothers read a passage from one of the holy books. Then, the father – who was one of the leaders of the entire order – spoke on what we had heard. His explanation was tied to the written word, as though to aid in our understanding of it. The audience, engrossed, hung upon his words. There was even the opportunity for one of the participants to contribute his view of the theme. [...] Following this – on a small platform – a certain scene from the life of some saint was presented. The presenter himself did not speak a word. After the performance, its details were read from the Gospel, or the congregation heard the teachings of the fathers. [...] The atmosphere of it all was like the early Apostolic Age, as though recalling that beautiful period.' For these gatherings and the performances, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, the papal choirmaster, composed motets (Türks 2004, 180).

Because Saint Philip Neri spoke to the people of the street in a direct manner, the research draws a parallel between him and one of Baroque painting's greatest figures, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Friedlaender 1955, 123). Caravaggio's painting was rooted in everyday reality. Evidence of this is his picture *Adoration of the Shepherds*, painted for the Capuchin church in 1609 at the commission of the senator of Messina. The realism of the scene is startling. In a simple barn with plank walls, we see Mary sitting on the ground while leaning upon the manger and holding her child in her lap. The ox and the donkey placidly eat hay from the



manger in the background. Two men of different ages kneel, marvelling at Maria and her child. A third companion stands behind them, leaning upon his staff and observing the scene. (Fig. 9) Similar to Hugo van der Goes' Pontinari altarpiece, the shepherds' facial expressions and gestures testify to their rapt attention. As for their differing ages: one man is old and bald, spreading his hands above the infant; the one to his right is a younger, half-naked man, clasping his hands in prayer. The man sitting closer to us, wrapped in a mantle, is Saint Joseph (identifiable on the basis of his personal halo of light). He appears rather mature and worn-out; none-

theless, a rich spiritual life smoulders within him. The emphatic starkness of the setting – in addition to the wonderfully painted travelling basket and carpenters tools in the foreground – make the miraculous birth tangible and authentic on an everyday level (Chiesa 1997, 101).

Without Saint Philip Neri and Caravaggio, we can barely conceive how the new Baroque style took shape, becoming a movement that dominated all of Europe. Yet, already in the sixteenth century, in the Italian province of Emilia-Romagna, increased realism showed up in the many-sided, theatrical terracotta statue groups of Antonio Begarelli (c. 1499–1565). Such, for

Photo: Ferenc Veress



Fig. 9. Caravaggio: Adoration of the Shepherds. Messina (Italy), Museo Nazionale



Photo: Ferenc Veress

Fig. 10. Antonio Begarelli: Nativity Scene. Modena (Italy), Cathedral

example, is his *Adoration of the Shepherds* group (1526–1527) in the cathedral of Modena. (Fig. 10) Hans Degler produced his work, three vast altarpieces for the Basilica of Saints Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg, Bavaria, at the start of the following century (1604–1607). In Degler's tabernacles, the figures are arranged as though on a stage, betraying a kinship to nativity scenes and the marionette stages of the time (Groiss 1979, 90). At the Saint Afra (Sankt Afra) Church, the scene of the shepherds' adoration is displayed above the main altar – with the Holy Family arranged on the right in front of the humble cabin, along with the figures of shepherds on the left and a number of angels above. We may note that the baby Jesus' crib is directly above the church tabernacle, as though occupying the spot on top of it.

In Hungary in the seventeenth century, while the middle of the country was held under Turkish rule, Middle-Age churches remained in German-speaking, Evangelical towns in Transylvania (now part of Romania) and Upper Hungary (now part of Slovakia). In many cases, the Evangelicals preserved the Catholic images and decorations, protecting them as their own. When the Jesuits reclaimed the Gothic churches from them by force, these edifices gained new Baroque furnishings. On 14 November 1698, Master Pál Lőcsei's Gothic statue group of the birth of Jesus emerged from the basement of the town hall of Lőcse (now Levoča in Slo-

Photo: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Art History Institute, Photo Archive



*Fig. 11.* Georg Schweitzer: Three Kings Altar. Pér (Hungary), Parish Church

vakia), later occupying the Csáky altar cabinet of the Saint Jacob Parish Church (Baranyai 1975, 340–341). The discovery of this medieval statue group is linked to the Counterreformation. Like statues of the Virgin Mary and holy crucifixes, the depiction of Christ's birth may have emphasised the Catholic reverence for images. As noted before, the statue group was situated on the Epistle (south or right) side of the church, which may have signified a visual parallel with the sanctuary of the Eucharist, the tabernacle with its Gothic walls, on the opposite Gospel side (Végh 2000, 471).

In the Saint Michael Churches of both Sopron and Kolozsvár (now Cluj-Napoca in Romania) alike, we may note the establishment of 'Three Kings' altars during the Baroque Period, which had Middle-Age precedents in both places. In Sopron, two citizens, Imre and Péter Lederer, set up the 'Three Kings' Altar Fund for the Saint Michael Church in 1457. Later, the church was used by Evangelicals (Házi 1939, 107). Following the church's return to the Catholics, Georg Schweitzer, a sculptor of Bavarian origin, carved the *Adoration of the Magi* statue group, which can now be found in the parish church of Pér, a village in Hungary (Dávid 1983, 84). On the basis of its composition, the statue group can be linked to a specific pillar of the Gothic church. In front of the cabin, it portrays the Holy Family. Mary sits holding her child on her knee, and Saint Joseph stands beside her. (*Fig. 11*) Revering the Holy Family are three shepherd (on the right) and the Three Wise Men (on the left), all painstakingly rendered by the sculptor. We may compare the *Adoration of the Shepherds* statue group in Sopron to the 'Three

Kings' altarpiece in the Saint Michael Church of Kolozsvár, the latter being an early work by Franz Anton Maulbertsch (Garas 1960, 9). However, we may also draw parallels to Joseph Thaddeus Stammel's nativity scenes as well.

In Sümeg (a town in Hungary), on the parish church's vault, painted by Maulbertsch in 1757–1758, we can see the Magi approaching from the East. Below them, on the southern wall of the nave (the Epistle side), scenes of the shepherds' and the Three Kings' adoration are portrayed beside one another (Kaposy 1930, 189). Its significance is emphasised by the fact that Maulbertsch, in his scheme, wished to have the adoration of the infant Jesus by the shepherds and by the Magi depicted separately. (Fig. 12-13) In the shepherds' adoration, it is worth noting the infant lying in the manger in the foreground with the donkey and ox on either side – while in the centre, we find baby Jesus again in the crib, although there he is cared for by the Virgin Mary, bending over him. Perhaps it is not superfluous to mention that relics of the crib and the manger are kept separately at the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in Rome – the former at the main altar and the latter in the Crypt of the Nativity. The fifteenth-century limestone statue group in Burgundy, mentioned at the beginning of this study, depicted the crib and manger separately. In that case, the infant Jesus lay in the manger. The shepherds and the Wise Men represent Humanity. That is perhaps why the group of Eastern figures wearing turbans returns on the right side of the main altar (the Epistle side) as witnesses of the resurrection.

The equivalents of Maulbertsch's *theatrum sacrum* in sculpture are the monumental and colourful nativity scenes produced by Alessandro Mauro in Dresden and Giuseppe Sanmartino in Naples. According to József Szauder, 'We need



Photo: Ferenc Veress

Fig. 12. Anton Maulbertsch: Adoration of the Shepherds. Sümeg (Hungary), Parish Church

Photo: Ferenc Veress



Fig. 13. Anton Maulbertsch: Adoration of the Magi. Sümeg (Hungary), Parish Church

to investigate the seventeenth century, which, according to current church policy, was able to reconcile perfectly the views of the Counterreformation with the Baroque philosophy on the world stage – resulting in the theatrical nativity scenes, displayed year after year only at Christmastime, made up of dolls and *pupazzi* that can be dressed and moved about, rearranging the setting’ (Szauder 1977, 335). The nativity scene genre – we may add – is eternally relevant, just like the colourful Christmas bustle on the Piazza Navona with its figurine stalls. Visitors feel at home among Maulbertsch’s frescoes in Sümeg, even though the scholastic worldview contained in the Latin script accompanying the pictures is far removed from them and might cause them serious headaches...

The Three Kings, as figures, connect continents and civilizations, which were brought together again momentarily by the marvellous conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter on 22 December 2020. The old prophecy related to the birth of the Messiah – according to which ‘A star will arise from Patriarch Jacob’ – might have occurred to some. According to the *Legenda aurea* (or Golden Legend), the disciples of Balaam, the three Wise Men from the East, met under a similar constellation, whereupon they resolved to set out. The legend appears, in an authentic Hungarian translation from 1519, in the Codex of Debrecen: ‘The noble, saintly Kings embarked from the territory of Persida in the East, which they now call Inner India and the Land of Saba [...] All three were wise in the study of nature. They had acquired great knowledge of the motions of the Firmament. They were what remained of the disciples of the Prophet Balaam, the idol-worshipping priest of the pagans. For as Balaam prophesied to his generation: “A star will arise from Patriarch Jacob, a scourge out of Israel that will vanquish and scourge the Princes of Moab.”’ (Bálint 1989, 140).

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