

STUDI

The Star of Bethlehem in the *Hêliand*

Omar Khalaf
Università di Padova

ABSTRACT: *In his reelaboration of the Gospels, the author of the Hêliand dedicates several verses to the star of Bethlehem; its description as a 'bright sign' and 'God's token' more frequently than a 'star' reflects the hesitation of the Fathers of the Church in defining it a miracle or a natural phenomenon. However, none of the sources traditionally associated with the poem can be identified as a reliable model for the author. In this article, I will try to demonstrate that the poet's lexical choices related to the description of the star and the narrative construction of the whole episode find correspondences with the interpretation provided in the De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae, an early ninth-century treatise whose earliest witness was originated in the Carolingian context and thus could have been used as a source for this episode.*

KEYWORDS: *Hêliand – Old Saxon – Carolingian exegesis – De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae – Karlsruhe manuscript*

1. *The star of Bethlehem in the Hêliand*

The seventh fitt of the *Hêliand* depicts the Magi as swift thanes hurrying on their way to Jerusalem:

[...] uueros ôstan,
suîðo glauua gumon gangan quâmun
threa te thero thiodu, thegnos snelle,
an langan ueg oþar that land tharod:
folgodun ênun berhtun bôkne endi sôhtun that barn godes
mid hluttru hugi.
(ll. 541b-546a)

[...] men of the East, very wise men, three strong thanes, came to this people, walking the long road over the land to get there. They were following a bright-shining beacon, and with clear mind were looking for God's Child.¹

In this paraphrase of Mt 2:2, which the poet reasonably drew from a version of Tatian's *Diatessaron*² and where the star is referred to as «*stella ejus*» 'his [Christ's] star', *stella* was not translated with its most obvious Old Saxon equivalent, *steorro*, but with *bôgne* (a variant for *bôcan*, acc. sg.) 'beacon', thus focussing the audience's attention not on the appearance of the object, but on its function as a token used by God to mark the birth of His Son. Its brightness in the sky is a characteristic that confirms its extraordinariness: the word is bound to an alliterative pattern with *berhtun* 'bright' and *blêc* 'shone', thus establishing a formal connection between the radiance of the object and its divine nature. The audience of the *Hêliand* is therefore introduced to the star in the form of a heavenly sign glowing in the sky, not as a globe of the firmament.

Once at Herod's court, the Magi are interrogated by the king on the reason for their journey; they reply that they are following the token that would lead them to the Son of God, in fulfilment of an ancient prophecy. This passage re-elaborates and expands considerably Mt 2:5-7 («[...] sic enim scriptum est per prophetam: "Et tu Bethlehem terra Juda, nequaquam minima es in principibus Juda: ex te enim exiet dux, qui regat populum meum Israel"»); the Saxon poet dedicates fifteen lines to a detailed description of this sign made by one of the Magi, who eventually identifies it as a star:

sô quað he that ôstana ên scoldi skînan
 himiltungal huît, sulic sô uui hêr ne habdîn êr
 undartuisc erða endi himil ôðar huerigin,
 ne sulic barn ne sulic bôcan. Hêt that thar te bedu fôrin
 threa man fon thero thiodu, hêt sie thenkean uuel,
 huan êr sie gisâuuin ôstana up siðogean,

¹ All passages from the *Hêliand* are taken from Behagel 1996. English prose translation of this and all subsequent passages is based on Murphy 1992 with occasional, minor modifications.

² This hypothesis was first proposed by Schmeller 1840, p. XI and has been so far remained unchallenged. The most authoritative edition of the text and its Old High German translation remains Sievers 1872. For an overview of the vast criticism on the relationship between the *Hêliand* and the *Diatessaron* see Petersen 1994, pp. 322-324 and Schmidt 2011. For a collation of the poem with Tatian, see Windisch 1878. For the poet's treatment of the evangelical narration see, among others, Sowinski 1985, Gantert 1998, and Haferland 2002.

that godes bôcan gangan, hêt sie garuuuian sân,
 hêt that uui im folgodin, sô it furi uurðî,
 uuestar ôbar thesa uueroldi. Nu is it al giuuârod sô,
 cuman thurh craft godes: the cuning is gifôdit,
 giboran bald endi strang: uui gisâhun is bôcan skînan
 hêdro fon himiles tunglun, sô ic uuêt, that it hêlag drohtin,
 marcoda mahtig selbo. Uui gisâhun morgno giuilikes
 blîcan thana berhton sterron, endi uui gengun aftar them bôcna herod
 uuegas endi uualdas huuîlon.
 (ll. 589-603a)

He [one of the Magi] said that in the East there would shine a bright heavenly body such as we had never seen before between the earth and the heavens nor anywhere else – never such a baby nor such a beacon. He [the soothsayer] ordered that three men of the people should go to do adoration – he told them to remember well that when they saw God’s beacon journeying upward they should get ready immediately. He said that we were to follow it as it goes before us, in a westerly direction, over this world. Now this has all happened, it has come true by the power of God. The king is born, daring and strong. We saw His beacon shining cheerfully from the stars of heaven, and thus I know that the holy Chieftain powerfully placed it there Himself. Every morning we saw the the bright star shining, and went toward it, following the beacon all the time over roads and through forests.

The passage contains six references to the star: *himiltungal* ‘celestial body’ (590a), *bôcan* (592a, 595a, 599b, *bocna* 602b), and, finally, *sterron* (602a). What might be considered a typical case of poetic variation, instead, reveals an accurate choice of the words used to express the uniqueness of this portent, which causes the Magi hesitation in attributing it to nature or Divine Providence. The two words that open and close the passage identify it with a natural phenomenon, but with different nuances of meaning: *himiltungal* is a compound whose second element is widely attested in other Germanic languages: from germ. **tungla-* n. ‘star, celestial body’, Goth. *tuggl*, OE *tungol*, but also ON *tungl* and Älvdalsmål *tunggel* ‘moon’, it seems to indicate an astral object characterised by movement, especially if connected to Nw. *tanga* v. ‘to run around, dash about’, Du. *tongelen* v. ‘to drag, move about’, and PDE *dangle*.³ The compound is also attested in ON (*himintungl*) and OHG (*himilzungal/himinzungan*), with an acceptance that more frequently refers to a material object in the sky

³ Kroonen 2013, s.v. I do not share Orel’s acceptance of *sterron* as «constellation (in cmpn.)» (Orel 2003, s.v.).

than a sign of God.⁴ The etymology of *sterron* is also debated: from PIE **h₂stér/h₂stérón*, Goth. *stairno*, ON *stjarna*, OE *steorra*, OHG *sterro*, etc., it has been derived from **h₂h₂s-* ‘to burn’ with a *-ter* suffix;⁵ although Kroonen does not rule out the hypothesis of a loan from Semitic **attar-*, (cf. Akk. *Ištar*), which connects the star to a divine dimension,⁶ in the Germanic languages this word was used without exception to refer to the physical objects that populate the celestial vault.

Himiltungan is the word chosen by the poet to indicate the sign that appeared in the sky according to the prophecy; it is only when the Magi acknowledge it as a divine token and accept to be guided by it that the star assumes its real nature, a *bôcan* ‘beacon’ from God, as the poet reiterates four times in the space of eleven lines – an object which is now clearly distinguished from the rest of the firmament (599-600). On the other hand, with the phrase «von himiles tunglun» ‘from the stars of heaven’,⁷ the poet still binds the star to the physical domain; despite being a divine token, it seems to originate from the space pertaining to the celestial bodies and as such it appears in the Magi’s eyes every morning (601b-602a).

⁴ *Himintungl* is attested in both prose (*Heimskringla*, *Rímbegla*, and *Stjórn*) and poetry. Christian references are only found in poetic texts, where the word always appears in a kenning: in Kálfr Hallsson’s *Kátrínardrápa* 41 Saint Catherine is identified as «ljúfrí [...] lofðungs ambátt himitungla» ‘the beloved handmaid of the king of heavenly bodies’, i.e. God (Wolf 2007, p. 957). In Einarr Skúlason’s *Geisli* 46 the word occurs in the kenning «lofðungs ranns himitungla» ‘of the prince of the house of heavenly bodies’, i.e., Christ (Chase 2007, pp. 44-45). Interestingly, *Geisli* 59 has *himiltungl* as part of another kenning related to the body of a clergyman: *himiltungl heila* ‘the heavenly bodies of the brain’ refers to the eyes of a priest stuck from his head by unlawful murderers (Chase 2007, pp. 55-56). As for the Old High German forms, which are found primarily in glossaries, *himilzungono* translates *sidera* as it appears in Sap 17:5 and which refers to the stars in the sky (Steinmeyer - Sievers 1879, p. 560), while its variant *himilzungon* renders *elementa coelitus* as found in Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (Steinmeyer - Sievers 1882, p. 342). A notable exception is *himilzungalon* (dat. pl.) found in *Muspilli* l. 4b; the word clearly refers to the heavens from which the celestial forces will descend to oppose those coming from the infernal pitch (*pebbe*, l. 5a). A particular mention should be made of the *Hrabanisches Glossar*: allegedly compiled by Rabanus Maurus himself, it is extant in one complete witness (Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 162) and in three fragments (Heinemann 1881, pp. 1-3). Against other related glossaries belonging to the so-called *Hrabanisch-Keronische Sippe*, which translate *sidera* with *sterno(n)*, it has *himilzungal* (Steinmeyer - Sievers 1879, p. 247).

⁵ Mallory - Adams 2006, p. 129; see Pinault 2007.

⁶ Kroonen 2007, s.v. Cf. Orel 2003, s.v.

⁷ Here I disagree with Murphy’s translation «among the stars of heaven» (Murphy 1992, p. 23), which overlooks the meaning of prep. *fon* ‘from’ (see Tiefenbach 2010, s.v.).

This syncretic interpretation of the star is ultimately epitomised in the account of the moment when the prophecy is fulfilled. The eighth fitt of the *Hêliand* recounts the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem; the star stops its course and finally irradiates its divine light over the place where Christ was born: «berht bôcan godes blêc an himile | stillo gistanden. The steorro liohto scên | huuît ôbar them hûse that that helage barn uuonode an uuilleon» ‘God’s bright beacon was glowing, the white light in the heavens, standing still. The bright star shone brilliantly over the house where the holy Child willed to live’ (661-664a). The powerful image of the star that reappears to the three voyagers after their encounter with Herod and drives them to their final destination has its source in Mt 2:9, «[e]t ecce stella, quam [Magi] viderant in oriente, antecedeat eos usque dum veniens staret supra ubi erat puer».

The only other reference to the star as *steorro* is also the most interesting: it is found in the compound *cuningsterro* ‘king’s star’, which occurs at l. 635 in alliteration with *cumbal*, a word that the poet used in alternation to *bôcan*.⁸ Windisch collocates this line in a passage spanning from l. 630 to 636 that reworks Mt 2:7, «[Magi] dicentes: ‘Ubi est qui natus est rex Judæorum? Vidimus enim stellam ejus in oriente, et venimus adorare eum’» and where the star is presented with no attributes.⁹ In this case, the inventiveness of the poet is not limited to expanding the biblical account, but is aimed at ascribing a specific quality to the star, which, unique among the other celestial bodies, exhibits Christ as King of the kings, thus confirming the prophecy of the Magi. Although the reason for this *hapax* can be easily found in the satisfaction of the metrical requirements of the verse and the poet’s narrative skills, I argue that *cuningsterro*, considered in the aboveseen interpretive context of the star, hides subtle reflections on the nature of this object and the possible influence of hitherto unnoticed exegetical sources.

2. *The star, Christian exegesis, and the Hêliand*

The origin of the star of Bethlehem was subject to various interpretations among Christian commentators: the Platonic view of stars as living crea-

⁸ See ll. 648b (*cumbal*) and 657a.

⁹ Windisch 1878, p. 90.

tures, divine and eternal, created by the Demiurge as keepers and final dwellings of earthly souls¹⁰ favoured their identification with angels by the early Fathers of the Church, who immediately established a connection between the Magi and the prophetic tradition of Balaam found in Num 24:17b: «Orietur stella ex Iacob, | et consurget virga de Israel».¹¹ In his *Homilies on Numbers* and *Contra Celsum* Origen suggests that the Magi were familiar with Balaam's prophecies and thus recognised the star as a sign of the birth of the Messiah. The same thought was shared by Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrosiaster, and Jerome, with the latter strongly condemning astrology as a demonic practice.¹² Several writings concerning Matthew, including John Chrysostom's homilies, speculate that what appeared to the Magi may have been a disguised expression of God's power rather than a conventional star; the author also posited that it could have been an angel, a view echoed in other early Christian texts including Prudentius's *Apotheosis*, where the star is referred to as a winged messenger, and the Arabic Infancy Gospel. Although this evaluation soon found the authoritative opposition of Origen, who again in *Contra Celsum* interpreted the star as a comet and thus justified its abrupt appearance in the sky, uncertainty seems to prevail.¹³ Other commentators preferred to interpret it as a unique creation of God, distinct from both the celestial bodies and the angels; this view is expressed in Augustine's *Contra Faustum*, but it is particularly emphasized in Ambrose's commentary on Luke. There, reinforcing the connection between the Magi and Ballam, he asserts that they «[v]iderunt novam stellam, quae non erat visa a creatura mundi. Viderunt novam creaturam, et non solum in terra, sed etiam in coelo».¹⁴

As seen in the previous section, the extraordinariness of the star was abundantly described by the *Héliand* poet through the use of adjectives and verbs relating to splendour and brightness; apart from a very early exception represented by Ignatius of Antioch and his *Letter to the Ephesians* of the second century, where the star is described as the most lumi-

¹⁰ «Once he [the creator] had a complete mixture, he divided it up into as many souls as there are stars and he assigned each soul to a star. [...] Any soul which made good use of its allotted time would return to dwell once more on the star with which it had been paired, to live a blessed life [...]» (Plato 41D-42B, p. 31).

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the question see Hannah 2014.

¹² Hegedus 2003, pp. 87-88.

¹³ Hegedus 2003, p. 94.

¹⁴ *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, II.48. See Hegedus 2003, pp. 93-94.

nous body of heavens, which outshone the sun, the moon and all the other stars,¹⁵ these qualities were largely overlooked by later commentators.

In his detailed investigation of the light in the *Héliand*, G. Ronald Murphy aims at demonstrating that the pervasiveness of this element in the poem contributed to the creation of a «complex poetic role [...] throughout the epic, where light is portrayed continually in connection with the emotion of happiness, is always associated with the birth and death of ordinary people, and is the created beauty of daylight».¹⁶ He substantially agrees with Rathofer¹⁷ in identifying the Transfiguration episode featured in fitt 38 as the structural and theological centre of the whole poem, but observes that this is just the climax of a narrative where «light marks the beginning (the Nativity), and the end (the Resurrection) of the story of Jesus».¹⁸ However, Murphy's only reference to the Nativity is the appearance of the angel to the shepherds drawn from Lk 2:9, while no mention is made to the star. Moreover, the centrality of the Transfiguration episode Murphy shares with Rathofer affected decisively his search for possible sources; excluding the Patristic authors that have traditionally been considered available to the poet (Bede, Alcuin, and Rabanus Maurus), Murphy argues for a dependency from the Gospel of John, in whose prologue (Jn 1:1-9) the association of Christ with light is obvious.¹⁹

In fact, the controversial issue of the sources of the *Héliand* is far from being solved. Apart from the Tatian, which, according to most, was used by the poet as a point of departure for the construction of the narrative and was then integrated with other authorities,²⁰ scholarship has so far not found agreement on their identification. In particular, the role of Rabanus's *Expositio in Mattheum libri octo*, which has traditionally been con-

¹⁵ «Stella in coelo fulsit, splendore exsperans omnes stellas, et lux illius ineffabilis erat, et stuporem incussit ipsius novitas. Omnia autem reliqua astra, una cum sole et luna, chorus fuere stellae; ipsa vero lumen suum extendebat super omnia. Et perturbatio erat, unde prodiret novitas illis dissimilis» (PG, v, 659B). An English translation is provided in Schoedel 1985, p. 87. Cf. Hegedus 2003, p. 89.

¹⁶ Murphy 1997, p. 5.

¹⁷ Rathofer 1962.

¹⁸ Murphy 1997, p. 6.

¹⁹ Murphy 1997, pp. 15-16.

²⁰ As Murphy states, «Tatian is used on the level of form, that is, used as a 'Vorlage' for the sequence of events to be found in the baseline narrative of the story. Rabanus and Bede, on the other hand, are used on the level of content for information and occasionally for interpretive comment» (Murphy 1997, p. 17, note 13). See also, *inter alios*, Haferland 2002 and Pakis 2013.

sidered one of the principal references for the theological framework of the *Hêliand*²¹ and which brought Heyne even to hypothesise the composition of the poem at Fulda,²² was progressively downplayed. Following Jellinek,²³ Krogmann argued that the differences from Rabanus's commentary found in the *Hêliand* are so conspicuous to exclude its use by the poet; instead, he could have employed an Old English (more precisely, Northumbrian) translation of the Gospels.²⁴ This hypothesis was convincingly disproved by Rathofer,²⁵ whose criticism, however, is directed to the method employed by Krogmann rather than the question of the poet's actual use of Rabanus. More recently, the role of the *magister Germaniae* in the construction of the *Hêliand* has finally been reassessed and is now taken as a matter of fact.²⁶ Krogmann's repeated attempts to identify additional sources for the poem, including Orosius, the Old English poem *Christ III* and various apocryphal texts,²⁷ demonstrate that the question remains open to debate. Moreover, they highlight the *Hêliand* poet not only as a skilled versifier, but also as a fine expert of Christian exegesis and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which he endeavoured to adapt for the benefit of his audience.

Is it therefore possible to associate the interpretation of the star found in the poem with sources traditionally known to be available to the author? None of the abovementioned texts provides an interpretation of this phenomenon identical or similar to that found in John Chrysostom, Prudentius, and Augustine. While no mention of the star was made by Alcuin in any of his exegetical works, in the first of the eight *Quaestiones* traditionally attributed to Bede,²⁸ the commentator refutes to assign any super-

²¹ See the seminal studies by Windisch 1868, Sievers 1876, and Weber 1927.

²² Heyne 1869.

²³ Jellinek 1892.

²⁴ Krogmann 1956a.

²⁵ Rathofer 1962, pp. 10-16.

²⁶ Phelan 2020, pp. 168-170. In his investigation, the scholar provides evidence for Rabanus's drawing from *De sermone Domini in monte* by Augustine for the Lord's Prayer, in particular l. 1607, «Gef ûs dago gehuulikes rād, drohtin the gōdo» 'give us support each day, good Chieftain', which paraphrases Mt 6:11 «panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie»;²⁶ moreover, he identifies Rabanus's reference to Jerome in his apocryphal expansion of the episode of the dream of Pilate's wife (5427-5480, corresponding to Mt 27:19), who, as reported also in the *Hêliand*, was visited by the devil and received great trouble from it.

²⁷ Krogmann 1956b; Krogmann 1956c; Krogmann 1960; Krogmann 1962.

²⁸ See Sharpe 2001, p. 74.

natural characteristic to this object, especially regarding its presumed ability to fade away and reappear in the sky:

Sed et stella, quae eis apparuit quidam minus diligenter Scripturam intuentes, eam ab Oriente usque ad viciniam Bethlehem ducem eis itineris exstitisse dixerunt, viaeque praeuam. At ubi, relictā via Bethlehemitica, ad Jerosolymam iter et oculos deflexerunt, disparuisse stellam, quae eos ducebat, donec rursus a Jerosolymis pedem referrent ad Bethlehem. Quod nequaquam ita esse factum ipsa Evangelii veritas inquisita demonstrat, sed potius in Oriente tantum eos stellam vidisse, statimque intellexisse quia haec ortum nati in Iudaea regis signaret, de quo praedixerat Balaam: *Orietur stella ex Jacob, et consurget virga de Israel, et percutiet duces Moab.*

The only element of extraordinariness attributed to the star stands in the fact that it should have been much closer to the earth than the other stars of the firmament if it had been capable to show the Magi the place where Christ was born:

De qua stella notandum quia nequaquam eis Bethlehem venientibus in summa coeli altitudine inter caeteras stellas, sed in vicina terrae visa est. Cum enim dicat evangelista: *Antecedebat eos usque dum veniens staret ubi erat puer*, patenter insinuat tum vicinam eam domui in qua erat puer stetisse. Namque sidera quae in summo sunt coelo locata, ubi ad centrum coeli pervenerint, quamvis amplissima sit civitas, unicuique domui supra verticem stare videntur.²⁹

A different interpretation is provided in Rabanus's *Expositio* II.1, where the author, as well as resuming the Balaam tradition, describes it as an extremely bright object, whose radiance illuminated the whole world:

Ad confusionem Iudaeorum, ut nativitatem Christi a gentibus discerent, oritur stella in Oriente, quam futuram, Balaam, cujus successores erant, vaticinio noverant, sicut in Numeris legitur. Ait enim inter caetera sic: *Orietur stella ex Jacob, et exsurget homo ex Israel.* [...] Idcirco autem magi apud Israel praecipue natum regem requirunt, quia per Balaam de Israel nasciturum eum audierunt. Nova enim stella novum adventasse hominem revelabat. Quibus vero radiis, quantove lumine illam Domini stellam antiqua credimus tunc inter astra fulsisse! Quantum in splendore praecessit, tantum praeibat in munere. Quae velut quidam totius orbis oculus, caligantis mundi veterem novavit aspectum.³⁰

²⁹ PL, XCIII, 0456B. All references to PL are taken from *Patrologia Latina Database*, available at <<https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/PLD/>> [last access: 11/08/2024].

³⁰ PL, CVII, 0757A.

However, Rabanus hastens to clarify that, despite its splendour and extraordinary nature, the star is not an angel, but a celestial body: «[s]ed quaerendum nobis est quidnam sit quod Redemptore nato, pastoribus in Judaea angelus apparuit, atque ad adorandum hunc ab Oriente magos, non angelus, sed stella perduxit». Furthermore, he explains that the angel and the star play a different role according to the addressees of God's messages: while the Jewish shepherds were able to listen to the word of the angel announcing the birth of Christ, only a visible sign would be understood by the pagan Magi: «Quia scilicet Judaeis tanquam ratione utentibus rationale animal, id est angelus, praedicare debuit; gentiles vero, quia ratione uti nesciebant, ad cognoscendum Dominum non per vocem, sed per signa perducuntur».³¹ Therefore, Rabanus is straightforward in associating the star with a natural phenomenon employed by God to communicate with the Magi and not with a miraculous event. Another work by Rabanus, *De natura rerum* (also known as *De universo*), an epitome of Isidore's *Etymologies*, proposes a neat distinction between *stella*, *sidera*, and *astra*: «Nam stella est quaelibet singularis: sidera vero sunt stellis plurimis facta, ut Hyades, Pleiades; astra autem stellae grandes, ut Orion, Bootes».³² However, Rabanus admits that there is confusion in their identification in the Bible («haec nomina scriptores confundunt, et astra pro stellis, et stellas pro sideribus ponunt»), but *stella* should be identified as a body that does not carry light.³³ Although no reference is made here to the star of Bethlehem, the only instance in which celestial bodies (*astra*) are identified with angels occurs later, in a reference to Job 38:7, «cum me laudarent simul astra matutina, et jubilarent omnes filii Dei»;³⁴ this association traces a tenuous, yet suggestive, connection with the final sentence of the Magi's abovementioned answer to Herod in *Héliand* 601b-602a, «Uui gisâun morgno giuilikes | blîcan thana berhton sterron», but it is impossible to determine whether the poet took this quotation directly from the Scriptures or from Rabanus. Moreover, the lack of any reference to the star of Bethlehem in this chapter of *De natura rerum* is revealing of the difficulties encountered by early medieval authors to provide a sensible explanation to this phenomenon, and, at least apparently, all authori-

³¹ PL, CVII, 0757B.

³² PL, CXI, 0271D.

³³ Rabanus seems to be coherent with this distinction in his glossary, where he translates *sidera* with *himilzungal*. See note 4.

³⁴ PL, CXI, 0272B.

ties recognised by critics as sources for the Saxon poet do not address this specific issue.

However, a hitherto unnoticed commentary where the question of the star is amply dealt with was present in ninth-century *Francia*. Titled *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, it circulated extensively in late-medieval Europe, but its *Vorlage* can be located in the Carolingian context; the earliest manuscript, produced in the early ninth century, preserves a redaction of the text which was possibly known and used by the poet as a source for the description of the star.

3. *The De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae: a source for the Hêliand poet?*

The *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae* (henceforth *DmSS*)³⁵ is one of the most famous texts traditionally ascribed to early Hibernian exegetical tradition.³⁶ As pointed out by Castaldi,³⁷ the reasons for this success are to be found in the originality of the theme; according to the author, all phenomena traditionally labelled as ‘miracles’ are actually divine interventions in the natural world and not extraordinary events going beyond the rules of creation:

Tunc ergo creator, nunc gubernator Deus intelligendus est: ac per hoc etiamsi novi aliquid in creaturis exoriri videamus, non creare ibi novam naturam, sed gubernare olim creatam Deus putandus est. Sed ita potens est in gubernatione creaturae qui condidit, ut veluti naturam novam creare videatur, cum ab abmolditis naturae sinibus, quod in illa latebat, depromit. Illa igitur inusitata gubernatione, cum res per voluntatem potentiam gubernationis ostendunt, quod per efficaciam quotidianae administrationis non faciunt, in Scripturis mirabilia memorantur.³⁸

The *DmSS* is extant in 71 manuscript witnesses, most of which are dated between the 13th and the 15th centuries;³⁹ the investigation carried

³⁵ Following Castaldi 2012.

³⁶ Bischoff 1954, pp. 268-269 (*Wendepunkte* 38). See Castaldi 2012 and Mattaloni 2024 for relevant bibliography.

³⁷ Castaldi 2012.

³⁸ *PL*, xxxv, 2151-2152.

³⁹ For a complete list of the extant manuscripts see Mattaloni 2024, pp. 676-679. A printed tradition of the *DmSS* is also attested. See Gorman 2000, pp. 82-83. The longer version is available in *PL*, xxxv, 2149-2200.

out by Esposito⁴⁰ demonstrated the existence of a long and a short recension, which McGinty confirmed, coming to the conclusion that the former was the original version and the latter an epitomised redaction.⁴¹ Furthermore, the presence of a preface with the names of Augustinus, Eusebius, Bathanus, and Manchianus,⁴² as much as the chronological computus used to determine Manchianus's death, prompted Esposito to identify *DmSS* as an Irish work produced by a 'pseudo-Augustine'. However, Castaldi's investigation demonstrated that the tradition followed a reverse path: the short recension is, in fact, an earlier version which was progressively expanded so as to give birth to the long recension.⁴³ Therefore, although Castaldi did not declare it explicitly, it is reasonable to argue that the origin of the *DmSS* is continental, rather than Irish; supporting evidence is provided by the date and place of redaction of the older witness of the text, now extant in Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. 191 (ff. 132r-149v), which Bischoff describes as produced in an «Alemanisches Zentrum» in the first half of the ninth century.⁴⁴ This favours the hypothesis of a Carolingian context of production of the text, independently of the origin – Hibernian or not – of the material; although the Karlsruhe manuscript appears sketchily organised in the form of a notebook,⁴⁵ the material collected therein must have been circulated in the environment of the *schola palatina*, so much as it was one of the sources used by Alcuin for his *Interrogationes et responsiones in Genesin*.⁴⁶ Therefore, it may also have been available to the *Héliand* poet and used for the characterisation of the star, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

⁴⁰ Esposito 1918-1920.

⁴¹ McGinty 1971.

⁴² The author, who calls himself Augustinus, informs that he wrote the work on the instigation of Eusebius, continuing what masters Bathanus and Manchianus had started earlier. Cf. *PL*, xxxv, 2152.

⁴³ Castaldi 2012.

⁴⁴ Bischoff 1998, p. 354, n. 1690.

⁴⁵ In Castaldi's words, «le caratteristiche stesse del testo di J [the Karlsruhe witness] consentono di ipotizzare che questa sia la copia a pulito di un brogliaccio, di una raccolta di minute; di materiale di lavoro che poi ha goduto di autonoma diffusione e trasmissione» (Castaldi 2012, p. 59).

⁴⁶ See Mattaloni 2024, p. 695. Smyth declares that the *DmSS* «was known on the continent throughout the Middle Ages: sections were incorporated in commentaries during the Carolingian period» (Smyth 2008, p. 563). Also Sedulius Scotus's commentary to the Gospel of Matthew, one of the possible sources of the *Héliand*, cites this work (Huber 1969; Smyth 2008, p. 563).

Book III chapter 4 of the *DmSS* (a transcription of which is offered in the Appendix below) is wholly dedicated to the star of Bethlehem and the explanation offered there openly contradicts the work's interpretive frame; in fact, the author initially expresses a degree of hesitation, seemingly remaining open to any explanations offered by the Fathers of the Church: «de ista vero stella utrum stella simpliciter an engelus an Spritus Sanctus accipitur maioribus elegendi voluntatem concedo».⁴⁷ The position of the author becomes clearer when he poses questions regarding the star's behaviour, which, according to him, finds no explanation; if this really was a star, how did it detach from the firmament and guide the Magi, even keeping their pace? The passage reads as follows:

si est enim stella semper a ceteris stellis quomodo in hoc ducatu deviavit? Si in firmamento caeli maneret inter Bethlehem et Hierusalem dux fieri ambulantiibus qualiter posset? Et si per aera sagittae morae quamvis paulo lentiore curso propter sequentes pervolaret adsumptum in firmamento locum et cursum interim desereret. (f. 146r)

Therefore, and unexpectedly, the author excludes a natural origin of this object so strongly advocated by Origen and Rabanus and rather agrees with the abovementioned interpretations offered by Augustine and Ambrose of a prodigious object that was not a star (thus recalling Ambrose's «novam creaturam»), but was named as such: «nisi forte aeretis ille ignis tale ministerium suscepit propter similitudinem stellae vocabolo vocatur» (f. 146r). However, he immediately rejects the possibility that the star could be an angel in disguise, as already posited by Prudentius, although he admits that angels assume various forms in the Scriptures: «aut si angelus habita stellae ministerium fecit qui repugnat dum in se angeli quando se hominibus ostendunt in multos habitus se transformant?» (f. 146r).

Therefore, the only possible identification is with the Holy Ghost: according to the author, this 'star' is in fact one of its fiery emanations, similarly to the dove descending on Christ during his baptism (Mc 1:10; Mt 3:16; Lc 3:22; Jn 1:32) and the tongues of fire that settled on the Apostles

⁴⁷ All quotations are taken from the Karlsruhe redaction of the *DmSS*, which I transcribed from the digital reproductions available at <<https://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de/blbhs/content/titelformat/4598402>> [last access 16/08/2024]. The text has been normalised, the abbreviations expanded and modern punctuation added. A transcription of the whole witness is offered in MacGinty 1987.

on Pentecost (Acts 2:4): «vel certe si neque angelus neque stella neque alius quisque ignis haec stella fieri concedatur ut in columbae speciae descendit et ut in igne super apostolos ita nimirum in specie stellae magos ad Dominum Spiritus Sanctus deduxit» (f. 146r).

Echoes of this interpretation can be found in the *Héliand*. First, the *cuningsterron* used by the poet at l. 635 closely reflects the description of the star in the first part of the *DmSS*, «excellentem sideribus stellam [...] Dei esse et regis» (f. 145v); as noted above, this *hapax*, whose creation could be easily explained *metri causa*, is one of the only two references to the object as a ‘star’; in particular, this occurs in the question Herod asks the Magi regarding the first time they saw it:

[...] he frâgoda aftar thiu,
huan sie an ôstaruuegun êrist gisâhin
thana cuningsterron cuman, cumbal liuhtien
hêdro fon himile.
(ll. 633b-636a)

He asked them when they first saw on the roads of the East the King’s star coming, the sign shining down cheerfully from heaven.

Naturally, Herod’s concern stemmed from the arrival of an earthly leader who would depose him and established his own rule; the poet could have paraphrased the passage found in the *DmSS* and, reversing the dual nature of the star. In this line, it first becomes a symbol of kingship (*cuningsterron* = *stella* [...] *regis*) and then a radiant shin (*cumbal liuhtien* = *stella* [...] *Dei*), whose brightness was, unsurprisingly, not recognised by Herod as a manifestation of God.

In turn, the larger use of *cumbal* and *bocan* appears to reflect its interpretation as a miraculous object people call ‘star’ just for lack of other words to define it, as declared in the *DmSS*. This uncertainty is well expressed by the poet, who assumes the Magi’s point of view in the recounting of their arrival in Herod’s court and, eventually, in Bethlehem; *himiltungal* (l. 590) and *berhton sterron* (l. 602) both occur in the Magi’s account to the king, but only at the points of the narration where a sort of definition of the object was necessary: as seen above, when one of them reports the prophecy of the wiseman («geuittig man», l. 569b, a clear derivation from the Balaam tradition), «quâð he that ôstana en scoldi skinan | himiltungal huit» ‘he said that in the East there would shine a bright

heavenly body' (ll. 589b-590a), thus etymologically 'an object from the sky with autonomous movement', which is similar to, but not completely identifiable with, a star. 'God's bright beacon' («berht bôcan godes», l. 661a), which guides them through the lands of Galilee, becomes a 'star' when it finally stops over Christ's dwelling and irradiates its light on the Baby: «the sterro liohto skên | huuit oðar them hûse, thar that hêlage barn | uuonode an uuilleon» 'the bright star shone brilliantly over the house where the Holy Child willed to live' (ll. 603b-605a).

The *DmSS* author's admission that the star was an emanation of the Holy Ghost – and, consequently, of God Himself – also appears to be echoed in the *Hêliand*: starting from the references to it as 'God's beacon' («godes bôcan», l. 595a; «cumbal godes», l. 657b; «bôcan godes», l. 661a), one of the few incursions of the poet in God's mind, which occurs at the beginning of fitt VIII, could support this interpretation. The account of Herod's hostile intentions against Christ after hearing the Magi is followed by a rather obscure passage:

Than eft uualdand god
thâhte uuið them thinga: he mahta athengean mêt,
gilêstean an thesum liohte: that is noh lango skîn,
gicûðid craft godes.
(ll. 645b-648a)

In my view, the translation provided by Murphy is not convincing: «But the ruling God thought about this: He [the Child] should accomplish more, do more in this world: His light must shine longer, making known the power of God».⁴⁸ The identification of «He» with Christ and the insistence on the connection between him and light strongly influenced the scholar's interpretation of these lines.⁴⁹ However, if considered within the context of the passage, *liohte* should be interpreted as another reference to the star of Bethlehem. Incapable to recognise the divine nature of the object, Herod (who, I argue, is the most logical referent of *he* as he is the subject of the entire initial part of the eighth fitt instead of Christ, who appears in the sentence as a syntactic object – «them barne» – at l. 644) could see this sign as a mere light and not a divine token; God re-

⁴⁸ Murphy 1992, p. 25.

⁴⁹ It must be noted that the Cotton witness has *endi* as variant reading for *be*.

grets the king's blindness and lack of piety, which preclude him from accomplishing more with *that* light. The determiner *thesum* (dat. sg.) suggests that the «liohte» is the star itself rather than a radiant manifestation of Christ's divinity. Through it, Herod, not Christ, could have achieved more, if only he had not been «slîðmôð» 'evil-minded' (l. 630b) but pure enough in spirit as recognise the star as a beacon of God.⁵⁰ This light, the star's light, remains visible for a long time («that is noh lango skîn»), and, for those who believe, is an ostensible creation of God («gicûðid craft godes»). When it starts to move, the Magi take leave from the king and hurry after it in the direction of Bethlehem («Thô gengun eft thiū cumbl forð | uuânun undar uuolcnun. Thô uuârun thea uuison man | fûsa te faranne» 'the sign then moved on, shining among the clouds. The wise men were ready to travel', ll. 648b-650a), ready to fulfil the ancient prophecy and pay their homages to the King of the world.

4. Conclusions

In various parts of the *Héliand* the poet refers to the star as originating from God. This interpretation corresponds to the exegesis offered in *DmSS*: despite the author's intent to explain the miracles in the Scriptures as occasional divine interventions on natural objects or phenomena – the same interpretation offered by Rabanus – the star is an extraordinary creation of God, an emanation of the Holy Ghost that, made manifest to the Magi through the form of a bright orb, guided them on their journey to the Holy Child. Their hesitation in identifying it reflects the difficulty of the author of the *DmSS* to provide an explanation for it; although it must have been a miracle, it could not be named otherwise than 'star'. This is the way this object was identified and described to Herod by the Magi (*sterron*, *himiltungal*). However, as soon as it was recognised through an ancient prophecy, the star began to be called *Godes cumbal*, a mysterious token whose brightness and movement in the sky could only be attributed to divine intervention. Only when it stopped its course over Christ's dwelling, shining brighter than the other stars and irradiating its

⁵⁰ Therefore, a possible alternative translation can be: «But the ruling God thought about this: he [Herod] could have accomplished more through this light: it is still visible, making known the power of God».

light onto the Child – yet still resembling the other celestial objects – was it identified again as *sterron*.

The hypothesis that the *Hêliand* poet might have had at his disposal a copy of the *DmSS* is not farfetched. Relying on Castaldi's reconstruction of the tradition and the circulation of the text in the Carolingian context as demonstrated by the influence exerted in Sedulius Scotus's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew and, especially, in Alcuin, it is possible to posit that a copy of it (certainly preserving the shorter redaction and possibly the Karlsruhe manuscript itself) could have been available to the poet and employed to describe one of the numerous mysteries that characterise the Holy Scriptures.

The poet's renowned ability to operate a synthesis of Christianity and Germanic warrior society does not exclude his use of the finest biblical exegesis; whether sung in a mead hall or a monastery,⁵¹ the *Hêliand* remains an outstanding example of the author's ability to weave fundamental Christian doctrine and complex theological issues into magnificent poetic patterns.

5. Appendix: a transcription of the Karlsruhe *DmSS*, ff. 145v-146r

In order to facilitate a direct comparison with the relevant points in the *Hêliand*, a transcription of Book III ch. 4 of the *DmSS* preserved in the Karlsruhe manuscript is provided below. For the editorial procedures, see n. 43 above.

[145v] Iij De magis ab oriente venientibus et stella duce qui de terra sua usque in Hierusalem hanc ducem sui itineris habuisse magos estimant.

Videns si hoc ex evangelica auctoritate firmare possunt quia quod ab Hierusalem pergentibus magis usque Bethlehem dux itineris fuerit evangelii dicta exponunt. Quae magi cum essent in terra sua excellentem sideribus stellam videntes, Dei esse et regis, quae iuxta prophetias tan ipsorum quam ecclesiasticas, ex Israel nasceretur sive ex propria eorum scientia, sive angelica monitione intellegentes, ad terra Israel et ad Hierusalem ubi [146r] principatus totius provinciae fuit uerunt, oracolis vatum de

⁵¹ Cf. Murphy 1992, xi. For an overview of the ample discussion on the relationship between Christian and Germanic themes in the *Hêliand* see Rathofer 1962, pp. 170-194, Gantert 1998, Dick 2000, and Angerer 2021.

loco nati acceptis pergunt. Egressi urbem mox ducem itineris ad Christum stellam sequentes deveniunt. De ista vero stella utrum stella simpliciter an engelus an Spritus Sanctus accipitur maioribus elegendi voluntatem concedo. Si est enim stella semper a ceteris stellis quomodo in hoc ducatu deviavit? Si in firmamento caeli maneret inter Bethlehem et Hierusalem dux fieri ambulantibus qualiter posset? Et si per aera sagittae morae quamvis paulo lentiore curso propter sequentes pervolaret adsuctum in firmamento locum et cursum interim desereret. Quod nec maioribus que luminaribus accedit cum in signis aut steterunt aut reversa sunt. Nisi forte aeretis ille ignis tale ministerium suscepit propter similitudinem stellae vocabolo vocatur. Aut si angelus habita stellae ministerium fecit qui repugnat dum in se angeli quando se hominibus ostendunt in multos habitus se transformant? Ut Moysi de rubo angelus ignita facie et velut milis armatus Iesu et in incurram equisque igneis Helia ascendente et Heliseo et Abrahæ et Loth etc., et imaginariae stellae VII in apocalipsi ecclesiarum VII angelis. Vel certe si neque angelus neque stella neque alius quisque ignis haec stella fieri concedatur ut in columbae speciae descendit et ut in igne super apostolos ita nimirum in specie stellae magos ad Dominum Spiritus Sanctus deduxit.

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