

WHAT WAS THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM?**STANSBURY HAGAR.***Continued from page 159.*

Annually at midnight on June 21 the festival of the foundation of the temple and of the birth of the new year was repeated. This date marked also the birth of Hathor and of Horus. How was it determined? We know at least that then Spica, the bright star of the Virgin, was setting upon the western horizon just before midnight. That star had been figured in many times and places as the divine celestial mother with the divine child in her arms. The image of Hathor was then carried on the roof of the temple, there to hold communion with her divine father Ra, the sun god, at the same time that the celestial Virgin was supposed to join the sun in the west. Upon the temple walls Hathor is depicted as the Virgin Mother with the rays of the divine splendor streaming from the circle of her womb and the names of the temple halls and chambers farther indicate their association with a divine birth. Its chief hall is that of the Child in His Cradle, apparently also called the Chapel of the New Year. Around it are the Halls of Birth, Golden Rays, Gold and Frankincense and Incense and the planisphere adds to these hieroglyphs signifying Chamber of Holy Adoration and Palace Chamber of Supreme Light. From this symbolism we may justifiably surmise that the night of the great festival of birth was known as the Holy Night. We know that it was called the Night of the Child in his Cradle.* True this festival seems to invert the solar symbolism by its connection with the summer solstice instead of the winter solstice, but the explanation is quite simple. In rainless Egypt agriculture and life itself depended upon the annual inundation of the Nile, so that there the normal solar seasons were of slight significance and the natural year began, not with the return of the sun, but with the beginning of the rise of the river. This rise reached lower Egypt at about the summer solstice, consequently the Egyptians began their year then and assigned to that date the symbolism of solar birth. The circular planisphere of Denderah was placed within a chamber upon the roof of the Hathor temple, where the priests in quiet and solitude could at any time readily compare its figures with the aspect of the sky. The upper half of the planisphere depicts the zodiac from Libra to Pisces inclusive—exactly the aspect of the summer solstice midnight

* Denderah, Mariette Pacha tome 1. pp. 189, 190.
Wm. M. Adams, The Book of the Master pp. 75, 76.

two milleniums ago. Doubtless the priests memorized this aspect of the planisphere and then determined the date of the birth festival by watching the advance of the zodiacal constellations until the celestial aspect corresponded with that of the planisphere. Thus the stars verified the sacred date for them just as the pole star had verified it for Pepi three milleniums earlier. And as they watched the stars pass on, each to occupy its destined place in the celestial plan, we can understand why they called the temple the Seat of the Heavenly Dances in the Six Heights of Osiris. The writer of the Book of the Master* gives an eloquent description of the scene at the foundation of the temple. He asks us to picture the monarch keeping watch from midnight to midnight upon the sacred design of the heavens. "Then every portion of the celestial surface before him will be divided into groups of stars or constellations corresponding to the sacred images depicted upon the planisphere, and consequently with the various chambers of the temple to which those images themselves correspond. Thus the whole field of the watcher's view would be marked out with precision into well-defined groups or constellations, each represented by its distinctive symbol, immediately recognizable by those, and those alone, who should understand the nature of the temple plan and should be acquainted with the temple structure. And as each midsummer came round, opening a fresh Egyptian year, the hosts of highest heaven gathered around the 'Child in his Cradle', and the festival of the starry universe was fitly celebrated in the temple of Hathor, the Mother of God, herself the 'Habitation' of the holy Light.

"Deeply solemn must have been the scene surrounding the Grand Master, Pepi, on that memorable night when, obedient to the star given command of his long-departed predecessor, he stood and measured the earth. Every feature, every detail, every ornament, speaks with a silent eloquence which echoes through space and time. There lay before the monarch the archaic design, traced out in characters telling of an age already bygone, and, itself new risen from the tomb, giving expression to the eternal destiny of man beyond the grave. In his hand was the Royal 'Khus,' the masonic rule of ancient Egypt. Upon his head sparkled the luminous tiara of Hathor, figuring forth the supernal beauty wherewith the Illuminate should be crowned in the day of immortality. Far in the northern horizon the pole-star shone before his feet, proclaiming the advent of the long-appointed hour. All round, throughout the immensity of the illimitable vault, burned amid the profound stillness of the night the countless multitudes of infinitely distant suns, recalling the sublime passage in the Book of the Master:

* W. M. Adams, London 1898.

'I make the shining circles of the years: and billions are my measurement.' Upward from out the darkling depths of the unfathomable abyss, stretching like boundless wings on either hand, and high aloft by the zenith of the translucent dome, rose, invisible to the common eye but present ever to the mind of the astronomer, the plane of our planet's orbit,—that celestial plane of man's earthly course,—girt by the zodiac, like an azure belt of gleaming gems,

"Those lights most lustrous of the firmament
Which through the heaven lead the gliding Year."

Then when the circuit was accomplished, and the surface of the heaven grouped into constellations according to the sacred plan, the monarch gave the signal for laying the foundation of the temple, and, fixing his eyes upon the northern centre of the revolving heaven, commanded the attendant ministers to stretch out the measuring cord in the predetermined direction, which he as Grand Master, and he alone, foreknew."

In the Book of the Dead the soul following the course of the sun exclaims: "I come daily through the house of the god in Lion form and I pass forth from it to the house of Isis, the Mighty, that I may see glorious, mysterious and hidden matters even as she has caused me to see the divine offspring of the Great One."* Recalling the Lion, and the Isis (or Hathor) and Horus of the circular planisphere, this passage seems also to refer to the signs Leo and Virgo with the sun god of the new year located in the latter. The determination of time has now taken a long step forward. It has been surrounded by an elaborate, refined and beautiful ritual and myth interwoven with the arcana of religion and aided by an actual picture of the sky at the critical moment.

The festival of the Virgin Mother and of the Divine Child in His Cradle was not confined to Denderah. It was celebrated at Alexandria and in the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece at midnight on December 25 in the centuries preceding and following the rise of Christianity. We have a vase painting of the child Liknites exposed to the gaze of the initiates in his mystic cradle or liknon at the festival called Liknophoria. The torches carried by his two attendants signify the night, and the curtain behind him the secrecy of the mysteries. The liknon was a shovel shaped basket used also to carry fruit. Plutarch writes that the Hosioi performed a secret sacrifice in the sacred precinct of Apollo, the sun god, when the Thyiades women raise up Liknites, the Child in the Cradle. This child deity was identified with Dionysus who was slain, dismembered and then reborn, also with the newborn

* Renouf, Book of the Dead, chap. 78 in Pro. So of Bib. Arch., vol. XVI, p. 103.

fruits of the earth as well as with the holy child Brimos, the ear of grain reaped. The ceremony of awaking him was connected with solar rebirth and was a mimetic summons to the earth to bring forth her



FIG. 3. THE LIKNOPHORIA RITUAL. J. E. HARRISON.

fruits in due season. A fresh ear of grain recently reaped was shown to the epoptae at Eleusis by night as the supreme revelation and the announcement was made to them: "Holy Brimo has borne a sacred child, Brimos." Brimo is the name of a cereal drink, also a form of the Divine Mother.* We can hardly avoid seeing in these cereal symbols the star Spica, the Sheaf of Wheat, the Celestial Mother, who rose on the eastern horizon exactly at midnight on December 25 and whose rising announced the rebirth of the sun of the new year, lying in his celestial cradle in the zodiac. At Christmas time in the early centuries of our era and probably before, both the Greeks and Saracens celebrated a festival called that of Increasing Light. They ended it at midnight, going into the inmost shrine, whence coming forth they cried, "A virgin hath brought forth a child, the light is about to grow again."† Elsewhere Epiphanius describes in the following words a similar or perhaps identical festival held in the temple of Kore, the celestial Virgin at Alexandria: Having kept watch during the whole night, chanting to the image (of the goddess) with songs and flutes and having brought the night festival to an end with the crowing of the cocks, the torch bearers descend into a subterranean shrine and bring forth a wooden statue (of the goddess) seated in a sedan chair

* Plutarch, *De Isis et Osiris*, 35; J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena* pp. 402, 519, 525, 548-552; Lenormont, *Beginnings of History* p. 263.

† Epiphanius *Schol. Gregor. Bodley* 43. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* II, 1227, note z.

and having cruciform symbols marked upon her brow, hands and knees. They carried this statue seven times around the midmost temple and then returned it to its subterranean shrine.* Let us observe that this Christmas, birth festival of Increasing Light, evidently refers to the birth of the sun of the new year. And the announcement of the virgin birth at the climax of the ritual is made as exactly as possible at the moment when the celestial Virgin with the Divine Child in her arms rises in the east, a remarkable coincidence if it be such. The nocturnal rites imply the presence of star worship. The "inmost shrine" will suggest the "holy of holies" of the Egyptian temples. In this ritual did not the participants enter the inmost shrine to observe the rising of Spica and having observed it, did they not then announce the virgin birth of the sun of the new year, and having done this did they not carry in procession the image of the celestial virgin Kore in imitation of the passage of Virgo across the sky from the darkness in the east to the darkness in the west?

The cult of the sun god Mithra presents another interesting aspect of the birth festival. This cult is supposed to have originated among the Aryans in or near Persia prior to their separation from the Hindu stock. It became closely related with the cult of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman and the religion of Zoroaster of which the Magi are supposed to have been priests. Spreading westward the Roman soldiers came in contact with it in their oriental campaigns.

Mithra was then known as the invincible god, a title which naturally appealed to them. He became the god of the Roman armies and his cult was quickly spread by them throughout the Empire in the centuries preceding Christianity. It seems indeed strange that so little popular recognition is given to the fact that in the first centuries of our era it had become the dominant religion of the Empire and the principal opponent of Christianity. Thereafter it gradually disappeared before the advance of its younger rival.

The relations between Christianity and Mithraism are most remarkable and mysterious. They have never been satisfactorily explained. Though hostile, many of their most important tenets were held in common so that, from the viewpoint of any other religion, they seem almost like divergent branches of one cult. For example, Mithraism is said to have shared every sacred and fundamental dogma of Christianity and again Tertullian, Jerome and other early fathers of the church assert that Mithraic mysteries were celebrated in the cave in which Christ was born at Bethlehem, "the city of the house of the sun."†

* Epiphanius, Dindorf Ed. 11, 483.

† Dupuis *Origins de tous les cultes* Tome III, p. 51 ed 4 to Higgins' *Anakalypsis* Vol. II, p. 99.

Yet there were marked divergences at least exoterically. The basis of Mithraism was frankly symbolic, astronomic and calendric. In his most usual aspect on the monuments Mithra is figured in a cave, mounted upon and slaying a bull while animals below lap the blood that flows from the wounds. On opposite sides of the scene stand two heralds with an upright and an inverted torch respectively. In the corner overhead the sun and moon are represented by two smaller human heads with a halo and a crescent while the signs of the zodiac are arched above the head of the deity. Astronomically the scene undoubtedly represents the sun in the zodiacal sign of the Bull bringing the spring rains and nourishing the crops on which the animals feed. The scorpion directly beneath the bull represents the sign Scorpio in opposition to the sun and demonstrates the basic significance of the picture as reproducing the aspect of the sky at the joyous moment of the vernal equinox. Sometimes two trees further confirm this interpretation, the vernal leaf bearing tree with the bull's head attached being placed opposite the autumnal fruit bearing tree to which a scorpion clings. The heralds typify the morning and evening stars, day and night, summer and winter and in general the alternations of day and night and of the seasons and the passage of time. But who can study the calm serenity of the face of Mithra as sculptured on the bas relief at Petrograd for example, or the passion of the face of the so-called Dying Alexander, now believed to be Mithraic, without perceiving the probability in the whole setting of the scene that behind the seasonal and astronomic symbolism we have a picture of the struggle and triumph of the spiritual self over the physical.

The real name of Mithra, the mediator between God and man, the light that lightest every man that comes into the world, was probably not given except to the initiates of his cult. On the Mithraic monuments we see tablets left blank for the sacred name which is never revealed and then we may wonder if this is the unknown god, the nameless deity of Paul's Athenian inscription. But that is improbable for few Mithraic inscriptions have been found in Greece.

We know little of the myths describing the life of Mithra because apparently they were taught only by word of mouth and in the mysteries, but we can piece together parts of his life story from representations on the monuments. This has been ably done by Professor Franz Cumont. Thus we learn that Mithra was miraculously born from a rock on the banks of a river and under the shade of a sacred tree. Shepherds alone ensconced upon a neighboring mountain where they were tending their flocks, had witnessed the miracle of his entrance into the world and they had drawn near to worship him and to present

the first fruits of their flocks and their harvests.* The scene becomes more interesting to us when we learn that the birthday of Mithra was celebrated on December 25 and it attains a climax when we study it as depicted upon certain Mithraic cameos. On the principal face of one of these Mithra is figured in the center rising from the rock. Over



FIG. 4. MITHRAIC CAMEO. WALSH.

his head are the two stars, Castor and Pollux. Beside him on opposite sides the Dioscuri appear as two crowned kings mounted upon horseback and accompanied by attendants. They have come to worship and have raised their arms in adoration before the new born deity, who himself adores the heavens. It is worthy of note that the heads of the Magian order were always represented as kings, this being an honorary title like the English king at arms.† Two prostrate human figures under the horses may suggest death in contrast with resurrection symbolized by Mithra himself. We know that skeletons were used in the Mithraic ritual. At the top of the scene are the sun and moon and the two birds of day and night. In the center between the sun and moon the eagle holding a serpent in his mouth represents the constellations of Aquila and Serpens, directly opposite Castor and Pollux in the sky. On the left of the lowest line of figures, appearing from behind the mountain of the east, the bread and cup of the Mithraic communion stand for the constellation Crater, the Cup. We are left in no doubt as to the significance of these constellation figures. They are so placed relatively as to reproduce the aspect of the sky just before midnight on December 25, two thousand years ago when Gemini was on the meridian, Aquila on the inferior meridian and Crater rising on the eastern horizon. A star, probably Procyon, is also figured in correct relative position under the left fore-leg of the horse on our left and a dog occupies the position of the constellation of the Greater Dog in the lower right hand portion. The serpent on our left probably represents

* Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, pp. 131: 132.

† Higgins' *Anakalypsis*, Vol. II, p. 98.

Hydra, that on the right possibly Eridanus. At any rate the whole scene is a picture of the sky at or immediately before the moment of the supposed birth of the solar god. We see the time and place of this sacred event marked primarily by the two stars which stand over the generative rock beside the two worshiping kings whose horses evidence that they have come from a distance. This is plainly the Mithraic Nativity and Star of Bethlehem and it is quite possible that the cameo depicts the actual ritual of the festival of birth. It represents a later calendar than that of the Mithraic Bull, so that it must probably be assigned to the later period of Mithraism, possibly post Christian, but whatever its date it is purely Mithraic in character. A similar symbolism is represented upon another cameo.*

We may go much farther afield in both time and place and still find analogies for the story of Bethlehem.

The birth of numerous other deities and personages was announced by a star, for example Yu, founder of the first Chinese dynasty, Lao-tse, inspired sage, Abraham, Aesculapius, Augustus and various other Caesars. According to Jewish legends a star appeared at the birth of Moses and was seen by the Magi of Egypt who informed the king.† In the uranography of ancient China the stars Epsilon, Mu, Nu of Aquarius, through which the sun was actually passing at the time of the winter solstice, were called the House of the Virgin. At this time the asterism presided over the marriage of the principles of light and shade and the union of heaven and earth. The fruit of this marriage was the new light born at the winter solstice apparently a year later. The sign of the celestial Child therefore governed this date and was also known as the Hour or Palace of Generations. So, also, the twelfth moon in January was called the Buds and it was pictured as a newly born infant with its arms raised.‡

The Hindu deity Krishna, the good shepherd, was born among shepherds at midnight in December. A chorus of devatas or angels saluted him with divine hymns and a prophet having examined his stars

* The first named cameo was originally figured by Walsh, *An Essay on Ancient Coins, Medals and Gems*, 2nd Edition, London 1830. We have no further information concerning it. Though probably of post Christian date it exhibits no Christian influence. Cumont, our best authority on Mithra, regards it as unquestionably Mithraic, and as referring to the Mithraic birth accompanied by the Dioscuri, the Eucharist and other symbols of the cult. The present writer is responsible for the remainder of the description.

See Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figures Relatifs aux Mysteres de Mithra* p. 450. *The Mysteries of Mithra* pp. 124: 185.

† A. D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science*, Vol. 1, p. 172.

‡ Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise*, pp. 48, 50, 64.

declared him to be of celestial descent and visited his father and mother at Gokul. Soon after his birth he was carried away by night and concealed in a remote regoin for fear of a tyrant, whose destroyer it was foretold he would become and who had, for that reason, ordered all male children born at that period to be slain. This story is the subject of an immense sculpture in a cave at Elephanta the date of which, according to Higgins, is at least several centuries prior to the time of Christ.* While some doubt may exist, however, as to the priority of this birth legend and of its freedom from Christian influence there is no question as to the priority of the Budhistic legends. Budha was born at midnight on December 25, of the virgin Maya. When residing in the fourth heaven, astronomic signs and the appearance of a Messianic star announced to him that the time had come for his reincarnation upon earth. His birth was heralded by a supernatural light. Then the Rishis and Devas, the spiritually advanced beings who dwelt upon earth, exclaimed with great joy: "This day Budha is born for the good of men, to dispel the darkness of their ignorance." Then the four heavenly kings took up the strain and the gods of the thirty-three heavens sang: "Today Bodhisatwa is born on earth to give joy and peace to men."† At the time of his birth the constellation Pushya (Flower-Cancer) descending, waited in the rear of the other stars.‡ A Chinese version states that the time of his incarnation was marked by the conjunction of the constellation Kwei ($\gamma\delta\epsilon\theta$ Cancris) with the sun. Ornaments to be presented to him were made when the constellation Chin was setting and Koh (α and ξ Virginis) coming on. As was predicted his mother was on a journey at the time of his birth, and at this time a saint descended from heaven to journey to the child.¶ Zoroaster is said to have predicted that a sacred personage would issue from the womb of an immaculate virgin and that his coming would be preceded by a brilliant star whose light would guide those who sought him to the place of his birth. Plato said that three Magi came to Socrates at his birth bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh.||

[To be Continued.]

* Higgins, *Anakalypsis*, Vol. I, pp. 129, 130.

† Bunsen, *Angel Messiah*, pp 25, 33, 35.

‡ *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. X *Sutta Niphata*, p. 19.

¶ *The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha*, Samuel Beal, London, 1875, pp. 32, 56, 64 et seq.

|| Higgins, Vol. I, p. 96.