

VISTAS IN ASTRONOMY

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Maria Magdalena, the Morning Star

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men,
but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31)

THE DOVE: a luminous dove represents the Holy Spirit in Christian iconography. The dove of the Holy Spirit does not preach innocence, it incarnates it. By 'innocence' I also mean a new start, beginning or initiation. The dove of the Holy Spirit visits the Virgin Mary on the first day of Spring.

Birds in general, D. Fabre has shown, have offered their language and colorful feathers to gallant discourses: "*The identification to birds fills the double erotical registers of the codified images of courtesy for sentiments and, more directly and crudely, of carnal appetites expressed by such common metaphors as birds, their nests, and their eggs.*" (Fabre, 1986:16)

Among all the birds, those that have most and best represented love are the doves and pigeons. Probably because it was noticed that "*The male and the female form an almost life-long lasting couple and seem to feel for each other a sharp and jealous affection.*" (Vigouroux)

Even if figured by birds, those unions are any but volage. "*The peasants tell about a young lady called Helena, in despair for not being allowed to accompany her lover Montgomery over the sea with William for the conquest of England. She died of sorrow on the coast where she was buried. Fishermen have observed that every year, the day and hour of her death, a dove comes in the evening and flies away only at morning's dawn.*" (P. Sebillot, II:80; citing E. Le Hericher, *Itinéraires du Mont Saint Michel*).

The dove gives itself passionately but only to the one it loves. "*It is told in Normandy that a virtuous young girl escaped from the room where a rapacious priest had locked her, ran through an underground tunnel and reappeared at the sea shore: she has been locally canonised as the Holy Dove, Sainte Colombe.*" (P. Sebillot, IV:236; citing J. Fleury, *Litt. orale de la Basse Normandie*, pp. 7–11). Interestingly, we may notice here a set of relations between not only love and dove but, moreover, with evening and morning twilights, the sea-side and an underground passage between a sinful situation and sanctity. We will later have the occasion of understanding better the origin of such a legendary complex. We could easily fill up volumes with examples showing how the meaning of the dove repeats itself in hundreds and thousands of variations in literature; however, let us start from the beginning.

2. BIBLE

2.1. Genesis

No doubt love is bound to the act of creation, of renewal, of new start. And this is true from the very beginning. The Spirit of the Lord is present in the shape of light in the text of Genesis: *"And God said: let there be light: and there was light."* (Gen. 1:2). In Christianity, this light has often been represented by a shining dove.

2.2. Noah

At the creation of the world, or at its recreation, we find the dove announcing the start of a new era, after the destruction of the old, at the end of the flood: *"And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off; So Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more."* (Gen. 8:11–12) A fragment where the dove is again present in the time of a recreation, as in Genesis, a new separation of land and waters, an emergence from chaos. Notice here the mention of two seven days periods, the longest period of disappearance of Venus at inferior conjunction.

2.3. Jonah

We encounter the dove a third time as a new start in the proper direction in the story of Jonah. The Lord orders Jonah to go East; immediately, Jonah runs West, embarking for Tarshish. *"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."* (Jonah 1:17) Until: *"The Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land."* (Jonah 2:10) Here, do we not only find the idea of diving into the sea and of a reappearance on dry land related to a prophecy of total destruction preceeding forgiveness and a new start, but the whole story plays on the opposition between East and West. When the Lord orders Jonah to go East to Nineveh, Jonah escapes to Tarshish in the West, swallowed by the big fish, he spends three days at the depth of the abyss and reappears again in the East, spat on the coast. All this, most probably, refers to the movements of the planet Venus as an evening and morning star and its three days minimum disappearance at inferior conjunction. This is not an all improbable interpretation, as in Hebrew Jonah means a dove (A. Wiercinski, pers. communication). We will soon have the opportunity of making this connection clearer. Already here, in this context, we should pay special attention to the prayer of Jonah at the bottom of the Abyss: *Out of the belly of hell I cried, ... I went down to the bottom of the mountains; the earth with her bars was around me forever, etc."* (Jonah 2) The last quotation is a prayer clearly describing a subterranean journey, a passage through Hell.

At the beginning of Genesis we found a faint hint at the dove in the time of absolute creation, at the start of all times.

The tale of the flood told the forgiveness of the Lord and the new start of humanity through Noah, after an almost universal destruction and a choice for future life.

The book of Jonah was telling the story of the promise of destruction of the population of Nineveh by the Lord and at last His forgiveness and allowance for a new start. The dove brought to Noah the sign of the renewal of humanity. Jonah, as a dove himself is a picture of the renewal of Israel: *"And why the wings of a dove and not of another bird? Because the assembly of Israel is compared to a dove, in the passage: The wings of the dove are covered with silver and her feathers are of a bright gold color."* (Ps. 68:14, Talmud Bab. Chabbat 192).

2.4. Esther

Basically, the same story is told again in the book of Esther. The Jews of Shushan are condemned to a general extermination by the intrigues of Aman and saved, in the end, this time by Queen Esther. This is a difficult and mysterious book, but it is most probably connected to the questions of fecundity and birth. Now we assist to the birth of a nation, because until then the Bible only mentions Hebrews or the Sons of Israel, it is in the book of Esther that the term 'Jew' appears for the first time (M. L. Levy, 1989:7). But other aspects of this book refer to new start, fecundity and birth-giving. The book of Esther is the foundation text of the celebration of Purim, the feast of ramble game, which might have taken its origin in old spring-time fecundity ceremonies (geneticists will agree with the importance of ramble games in the process of reproduction). Whenever the year is ambolismic, that is to say it has 13 months, Purim will be celebrated in the thirteenth month, second Adar. Such a year is called a pregnant year. The feast of Purim always follows the rule of intercalation of the thirteenth moon, and we may recall here that the rule of intercalation '*Sod ha Ibour*' may also be read as '*secret of the embryo*'. (M. Cohen, pers. comm.)

Queen Esther behaves as a perfect wife, a perfect lover, most attractive and glorious and altogether modest, humble, perfumed by a whole year of preparation to meet the king, "*six months with myrrh and six months with sweet odours*" (Esther 2:12); then, when told about the plot of extermination of her people, she starts mourning and praying, uncombed, dressed in rags and covered with ashes: it makes the most striking contrast with the description of the queen before the decree was signed. After this period of mourning in ashes for three days, she will return gloriously on the scene. Esther's prayer compares with the prayer of Jonah at the bottom of the Abyss: "*Listen to the voice of the desperate, Take us out of the hand of the evil, Liberate us from the fear.*" (Esther 4:17) She passed through hell just before a glorious return as the Morning star: "*Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house...and the king sat on his royal throne in the royal house.*" (Esther 5:1) In her prayer, Esther had been calling to the Lord to "... *put on my lips charming words, when I come in front of the lion.*" (Esther 4:17). The lion here, of course, is the king, Ahasverus, whom Esther will charm and tame. This taming of the lion will appear more relevant soon. Anyway, R. Assi agrees well with this interpretation of the queen Esther, when he says: "*Why is Esther compared to the morning dawn? This is to teach that she is concluding all the miracles just as the dawn comes at the end of night.*" (Talmud Bab. Yoma 34) Presented in this light, this passage of the book of Esther recalls the myth of the descent of Inanna in the Underworld. Although faintly, discretely allegorical, the book of Esther apparently bears some reminiscence to Mesopotamian mythology, if only by the name of the queen, Esther is simply Ishtar, goddess of the planet Venus. But it must be mentioned here that some doctors of the Talmud disagree with such a name and its etymology, we read: "*Why this name of Esther? The pagans called her so, thinking of Ishtar.*" (Talmud Bab. Meguilla 39) They propose several other solutions, among which '*Hadassa*', the other name of the queen, which means myrrh. Of course, we can well understand the reason for the discussion and disagreement on the etymology of Esther, because of the fights against idolatry and astrology in Jewish traditions, but why, if so, did the biblical Hebrew text keep 'Esther' written and not Hadassa (the myrrh)? The myrrh being, in any case, an aromatic plant consecrated to Venus as well. The reference would be the same, just a bit more discrete. In the Assyrian language, Ishtar is a dove. (Handwörterbuch, under Ishtar; R. Eisler 1910). Ishtar, as every one knows, is in Assyria and in Babylon the name of the goddess of the planet Venus, a goddess of love. In the same treatise, Meguilla hints at the dove eventually with a discussion on Esther 5:1: "*The third day, Esther dressed herself in her royalness.*" Why in her royalness and not in her royal

clothes? This is teaching us, says R. Eleazar, in the name of R. Hannina, that Esther indeed was carrying the Holy Spirit. (Talmud Bab. Meguilla 39).

2.5. *The Song of Songs*

We may now better understand the identity of the Sulamite, in the Song of Songs of King Solomon: *"I slept but my heart was awake. Listen my lover is knocking: open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night."* (Song 5:2) The dew, the drops of the night refer of course to the early morning, the end of night.

The confrontation of some biblical fragments will cast light on the strong ties that exist between the lover, the dove and the morning star. By simply looking for the same context and changing one term at every step, we can easily pass from one to the other: *"Thou art fair, your eyes are like doves behind your veil"* (Song 4:1) which can be compared to Ben Sira: *"As the morning star in the midst of clouds ..."* followed by: *"... as the full Moon, as the bright Sun"* (Si. 50:6,7), a context which appears also in the Song of Solomon: *"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun."* (Song 4:10) The loose and undone curly hair of the marvellous lover girl is praised and admired in the Song of Songs: *"Thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead."* (Song 4:1) No wonder that the beauty of King Solomon is the same as the goddess Venus, also represented with abundant hair.

Among the different glosses and commentaries concerning *the Song of Songs*, one of the interpretations of its origin is that it could be an ancient cult song concerning the sacred marriage of Tammuz and Ishtar. (Dict. Bib. Bordas sous Cant.)

3. JESUS

When Jesus is asked for a sign of his prompt return, well in accord with the book of Jeremiah *"... do not learn the ways of the nations, or be terrified by signs in the sky"* (Jer. 10:2), he refuses rather angrily: *"An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign given to it."* (Matthew 12:39) Still he gives them one, at last, and even an astronomical one at that: *"No sign will be given to it, but the sign of prophet Jonah."* (Matthew 12:40) Indeed, the resurrection of Christ after three days repeats the three days of Jonah at the bottom of the Abyss and the three days of mourning in ashes of Esther and the Jews of Shushan. A messiah from the descendants of David could wear his star and would wear it at each of His returns as it is written in the book of Revelation: *"I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star."* (Ap. 22:16) In the revelation of John, the return of Christ is promised with the return of Venus *"... and I will give him the morning star."* (Ap. 2:28) Those prophetic words are uttered in a world running to its ruin, when darkness is falling on a declining empire, the evening star disappears, promising to return on a new day, a new dawn. Therefore Peter writes in the second epistle: *"We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the morning star rises in your heart."* (Peter 2:19–20) It is also very possible that the Star, followed by the three kings looking for the new born King of the Jews starting a new era, was simply Venus, preceeding them in the West on their way to Jerusalem. It disappeared from the sky during their stay in the city, and reappeared in the other direction when they returned (C. Flammarion 1880; p. 121).

4. VENUS: MAN OR WOMAN?

In the few examples given above, we have noticed the ambivalence of different aspects of Venus traditions, sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine. The reason for this hesitation may come from the fact that the dove, rather than being considered male or female, represents the power of attraction between them. The full symbol of the dove is rather given by a couple of doves. Doves were offered in sacrifice two by two and are still commonly sold this way at the market place. Among the different animals sacrificed by Abraham (each one cut in half and disposed on each side of the altar, one of each species), a special treatment was reserved to the dove and pigeon: *"Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds however, he did not cut in half."* (Gen. 15:10) It was as if to separate a couple of doves would mean the same as to cut in the middle of *'one flesh'* (Gen. 2:24). Jesus as a messenger of love, and respectful of the Law, with a special relation to Venus, through the star of David and Jonah the dove, could only have reserved a special attention and care for doves when he drove the merchants from the temple: *"And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the ship and the oxen, and poured out the changer's money, and overthrew the tables; and said unto them who sold doves: take them hence; make not my father's house a house of merchandise."* (John 2:15-16) Jesus is fighting with all of the rest of the commerce in the temple but addresses the doves gently.

5. ISHTAR-ASTARTE-INANNA-APHRODITE-VENUS

In a list of cuneiform astrological correspondences, we find this straightforward statement: *"When Venus is high, brilliant, pleasure of copulation."* (Van der Waerden, 1974) We find here, reduced to a few words, one of the basic main aspects of the goddess of love and the mechanistic system of the religion which created its mythology. Of course, the full mythology and iconographical aspects of this goddess are infinitely more rich than this lapidary sentence. The historical transformations, its adaptations to foreign religions, its fusion with other divinities from other regional traditions would be of great interest, but we will content ourselves here with its principal features and attributes.

In Mesopotamia, the planet Venus was figured as the goddess Ishtar, the Cult of Ishtar spread West where she became known under the names of Astarte and Innana, and further as the greek Aphrodite and, lastly, Venus, among the Romans. The mythology of this goddess is broadly known and there is no point telling her story again. One of the most well known episodes of her mythology is the Travel of Ishtar or Inanna to the Netherworld. She had planned to be absent for only three days, but once there, she is delayed because she has to undress and abandon all of her ornaments at the seven gates of the land of the dead. She will recover all of her brilliance at the other seven gates of her return to the upper world. She surely would have preferred to return as soon as possible: three days as she says, but the world has to mourn her absence. This really seems to illustrate the disappearance of the planet at inferior conjunction when it is invisible for the longest period (about two weeks), recalling us of the two seven day flights of the dove of Noah. This number seven seems attached to the cult of Venus in general. For example, the priest of Aphrodite in the holy city of Heliopolis, near Antioch, would stand every year for seven days on the top of a column in her temple in order to come nearer to the goddess and to please her (Reau 1955; I:310). We also know that Ishtar had mastered the lion, as her Sumerian iconography shows her with one foot on the animal. We remember in this place the prayer of Esther: *"When I shall come in front of the lion."*

In general, authors agree with the qualities, specificity and attributes of the goddess: femininity,

tenderness, wetness, warmth, gold and silver jewelry, luxury, beauty, marriage, love, fecundity, crown, diadem, pity, perfumes, shining eyes and beautiful hair. (Handwörterbuch, Venus)

Based on classical mythology and sources, but which were more richly documented in the Renaissance, Venus is frequently found figured in a chariot drawn by two doves, especially in the great clocks, as an allegory of Friday, *Veneris Dies*. In most representations, she is accompanied by Eros, usually a small fat angel, and sometimes a beautiful, slim, adolescent. The assumption of Venus (being carried up in the sky) is also a common theme of her iconography (for example: Louvre, coffret Nr.OA 2517, *triomphe de Venus*).

Two different cults were associated with the goddess. Rev. Pluche resumes the case: "*The Cistophores, or girls in the temple of the celestial Venus observed a perfect chastity; but those who served in the popular temples of Venus started to behave according to the ways attributed to the goddess. We can read in Herodotos (Book xvi) and in the prophecy of Baruch (6:42) into which excesses and revolting prostitution the old religion had degenerated.*" (Pluche I:201)

6. PROVENÇAL TRADITIONS

We know without doubt that the cult of Astarte was brought to the Mediterranean coast of France by Phoenician merchants who had established harbours, especially in Phos, the predecessor of Marseille. The cult of Venus seems to have been of great importance there: "*We know from a very interesting inscription found in the ruins of the Saint Victor Abbey in Marseille, that Phos had a temple dedicated to Venus. Boeck has remarked that this divinity was a Phoenician Astarte. There is in the Museum in Lyon, a statue of the Marseille Venus, in an archaic version especially interesting for art historians, she carries on the hand, against the breast, a dove, another symbol of fecundity.*" (H. Bazin, 1887:594)

In Antibes, deposited on a Venus altar, was discovered a long stone pebble, rounded and polished in the stream, covered with a greek inscription that reads: "*I am Terpon (The Phallus or the pleasure-giver), the servant of the awesome goddess Aphrodite; May Cypris pay back those who have deposited me here.*" (H. Bazin, 1887) It was, properly speaking, an object of veneration.

7. MARIA MAGDELENA

The great devotion to Astarte-Venus in Provence is probably at the origin of the choice of the saint patroness of that region where the church, in order to Christianize it more easily established and developed the cult of Maria-Magdalena (Faillon, 1848). The specific attributes, which are used in designs of the Saint in Christian iconography, are a book signifying the scholarly tradition attached to her and a vase of perfumes which refer to the courtesan. These two attributes reproduce the traditions attached to the cults of Venus in antiquity. She is also often represented meditating on a skull in a cave, an allusion to the underworld journey, or taken in the sky as Venus in triumph. The bishops who established the cult of Maria-Magdalena were well aware of the connections mentioned here between the cult to Venus, the Morning Star, the dove, and some allusions in the Old Testament, especially from the Song of Songs of Solomon. This becomes clear from the choice of texts chosen for the liturgy of the Saint's feast day on 22nd of July: "*Arise, come my darling, My beautiful one, come with me, My dove in the cleft of the rock, In the hidden places on the mountainside.*" (Song 2:12-13)

The church liturgy was thus fully in accord with local traditions that have survived up to the present day. Venus up in the sky at the time of taking the sheep to pasture or when

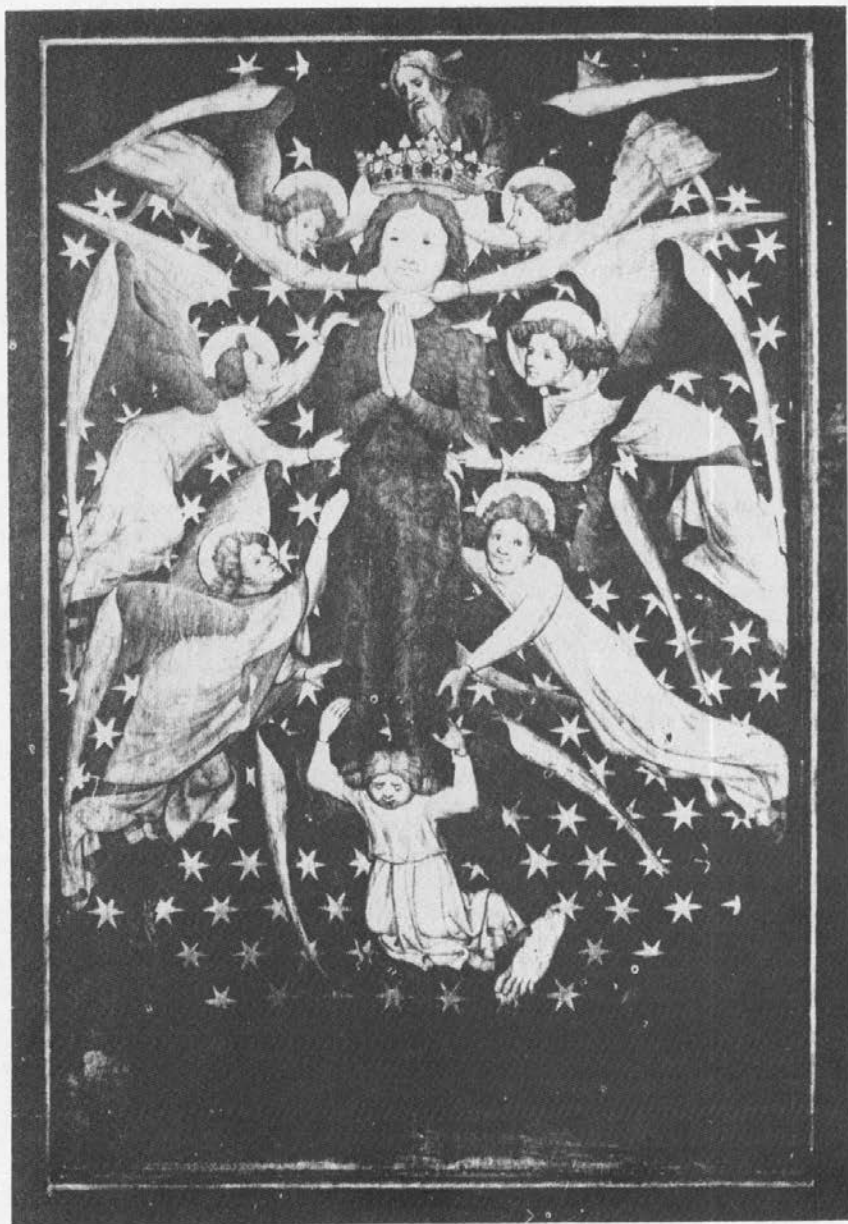


Fig. 1. *Maria Magdalena Ravished*, ca. 1435, Warsaw, National Museum.

coming back in the evening is, in Provence, not only called the shepherd's star but also '*Bello Magaluno*', the beautiful Magdalena. The antic Venus has naturally become Saint Magdalena in the local folklore, and again the church was accompanying the popular devotion as we find in the cantique sung on the Saint's day in the cave of Sainte Baume the following words: "*Be happy holy church, enjoy yourself because of her who has been taken out of the grave by Christ; run after her perfumes; be happy for your dove; delect yourself of the sweetness of her honey and of her many riches; admire the purpur colours of your rose, the splendor of your precious stone. Happy Provence, walk after your morning star, may she enlighten you.*" (Sicard II:198)

The XIIIth century liturgy of Provence reorganises all the elements and fragments already mentioned: "*Benedicta maris stella; Magdalena Dei cella; Columbina specie; Claro coeli matutino; Mundi cursu vesperino; Nova lux apparuit Magdalene claruit; Radians luce virtutis; Tu praeclara maris stella; Tu columba speciosa.*" (Faillon, 1848: pp. 809–815)

The very name of the saint marks a reference to doves, as: "... the doves of Palestine gather in thousands in the rocky regions where it nests in high cliffs far from human dwellings. Several valleys have been named Oued el hamam, or pigeon valley it is especially the case of the valley near Tiberiade at the ancient city of Magdala." (Vigouroux) Besides, it is a well known fact that very often in the near and middle East, the temples of Venus were simply round towers used as pigeons houses. The legendary castle of Magdala could have simply been one of those towers, the nesting place of the dove, a place for the devotion to the sacrality of life, '*kedesha, Dei cella, a nest for the Holy Spirit.*' The mention of castles related to Maria Magdalena appears in recent folklore and constitutes a striking example of historical continuity. We have mentioned the phallic stone on the Venus altar in Antibes, let us recall it and compare to a Provençal tradition reported by Paul Sebillot at the site of the cave where Maria Magdalena was said to have retired. "*In Provence, in the neighbourhood of the Sainte Baume, where so many pilgrims have come for centuries, we see...the custom is very ancient. Young girls in search of a husband, after they had stopped at the oratory of the cave, climbed the holy mountain and left there a triangle made by three flat stones; a fourth one was placed in the center. If, the following year, they still found their 'castelet' (small castle) intact, it was the sign the saint was favorable to their hopes.*" (P. Sebillot T.I:350–351). Concerning those votive constructions, Sergio Calvi (1986) adds a more precise note that the stone placed at the center was '*of a long shape*'.

The number seven is present in the Gospel text and the legend of Magdalena: the Lord expels seven demons from the Magdalene's body. After retiring to the cave she prays, and she is taken in extasis to kiss Jesus seven times a day carried by seven angels (the subject of many representations of Magdalena ravished in heaven). When at the end of her life, she comes to take communion in the church at Aix, she is taken to heaven after seven hours of intense prayer, and the whole church stays perfumed of her body for seven days (Reau M.Md.)

Maria-Magdalena has very often been confused with another saint relevant to the same legendary tradition, Saint Mary the Egyptian. They share a number of features: prostitution, travel over the sea, renouncement in the desert, nakedness, long hair covering the body, and ecstatic apotheosis. An aspect lacking in the iconography of Maria-Magdalena but present for the Egyptian Maria is the lion: just as Ishtar, Mary the Egyptian is sometimes depicted standing on a lion. We recall here, Queen Esther and Assuerus the lion.

Popular traditions have played with the sinner to express all the varieties and aspects of love:

- Children songs playing hobby marriages: "*Si c'est ainsi marions la donc, l'ami d'la Madeleine, etc., etc.*" (P.N. Boratav, 1970).
- During familial ceremonies and banquets in France, after having drunk enough wine, people start singing the old good songs where Magdalena is presented as a nice innocent girl offering drinks and love: "*La Madelon vient nous servir a boire, lorsqu'on lui prend la taille ou le menton, elle rit c'est tout ce qu'elle sait faire, Madelon.*" (French popular song)

- Pilgrimages and prayers to the saint for a husband, a happy marriage, beautiful children.
- Proverbs and superstitions telling, for example, that the evening star, when it appears, is for good girls the sign that time has come to return home. (Sebillot) Also her role of redeemer and protector of the girls born of an unmarried mother, to whom the name of Magdalena was given in the Tirol. (Handw. Deut. Aberg., under Magdalena). We find her also necessarily in less innocent pieces of literature, although sometimes just irreverent, other times at the limits of blasphemy; for the painter she was, very often, just a pretext to paint a beautiful nude and all the emotions of ladies, in rapture, in ecstasy. But in all of these representations, if the physical beauty, charm and eroticism are undoubtedly present; there is no way to hide it; they are also accompanied by deep spirituality. These paintings are generous in showing the sublimation of the creature for which Venus and Magdalena have offered inexhaustible sources of inspiration, and repentance well shared in folklore: "*In Provence, the source at the cave of Sainte Baume has been produced by the tears of Maria Magdalena.*" (Sebillot)

Anyway, the very church liturgy and commentaries of clergymen and priests had augmented the popular imagination for centuries by clearly presenting the saint as a figure of the lover:

- In the Middle Ages, she used to be called "*happy lover of Christ*" (Reau III:848).
- In order to justify the nakedness of the saint in her cave, a Jesuit father wrote that she was so much burning of her love for the Lord that she could stand to wear no clothes. (Reau 1958; III:855)
- For centuries, one of the most attractive events for the pilgrims to Aix, was on Magdalena's day the miracle of the boiling of Christ's blood in a bottle brought by Saint Magdalena from the Holy Land (Sicart).
- The following fragment of the Song of Songs was read during the celebration on July 22nd: "*Inveni quem diligit anima mea. Tenui eum, nec dimittam.*" (I found the one my heart loves, I hold him, and will not let him go; Song 3:2). When she saw Jesus on Sunday early morning after His resurrection, the two doves were together again, as he appeared to her as a gardener, recalling Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a chance for a new start. She wanted to hold him, but He then said the famous words "*Noli me tangere*" ("don't touch me": John 20:15-17). Again here shall we find a game of language, a savant construction of botanists, who have given this name (*noli me tangere*) to a plant which explodes its seeds at the slightest touch. The same plant is also known under the names of '*Impatient*' and '*Balsamina*'.

In mediaeval iconography the hairy aspect has been developed to the point of representing her naked, all covered with body hair like a bear coming out of some cave in the wilderness, a personification of the wild woman. So we clearly see that most of the elements of the cult of Saint Magdalena are Christianised features of Venus in antiquity.

8. ASTRONOMICAL REFERENCES

A treasury of myth, literature, legends, folk beliefs and rituals have been derived from ancient interests in the movements of the planet and its cycles. Further, Christianization built a new message from ancient materials. Artists, painters and writers, even when they did not mean to carry a religious or moral message, were rooted in those venerable traditions. At the very moment they tried to mock or dispute it, the strength of their common heritage was revealed. From all these marvelous pieces of art and meditations we can still try and draw today the way back to astronomy. The full analysis of the semantic fields contained in ancient mythologies and Christian traditions may help us to understand better the practical or technical knowledge

found in the related cultures, or at least may provide us with indications and directions for further research. I have chosen here almost exclusively the female aspect of the planet, and moreover only its fecund side.

Nevertheless, I do not ignore a male and a warlike aspect. I have insisted as well on the representation of Venus as a dove; this choice could by no means exhaust the rich alegorical iconography of the planet. For example, Lajard refers to a numerous series of medals where the Cypres depicts Astarte placed between a lion and a bull which represent Sun and Moon, according to, says the savant, the usual hieratical language of the Orient (H. Bazin, citing Lajard). If so, the Sumerian and Babylonian iconography of Ishtar and Mary the Egyptian, both standing on a lion, would refer to the near conjunction of Venus with the Sun, probably when it rises in the Sun's glare in the East (Orient) as a Morning Star. We had already met this image in the book of Esther. When Esther is mourning and praying while covered in ashes, she prays to the Lord for strength when she presents herself to the Lion. In the text, the lion means Ahasverus but, further, as a king, he is an earthly representation of the Sun.

In the same way we can understand the presence of Maria Magdalena around Jesus, the King, the Sun, and why, up or down, she twice pours perfumes on him, first on his feet, then on his head. This is maybe not a sufficient interpretation: a special interest could have been attached to the inferior conjunction of Venus with the Sun when it happened in the astrological sign of Leo, eventually a conjunction with Regulus. The choice of the date for the feast of Maria Magdalena on July 22nd, at the entrance of the Sun in Leo, corresponding as well to the period of *canicula*, the heliacal rise of Sirius (J. P. Parisot 1988:27), would represent a fossilized remnant of such traditions.

In any case, Maria Magdalena is most frequently painted in a cave, in darkness, with a skull nearby, alluding to her passage in the underworld, the disappearance of the planet at inferior conjunction. We see her painted in clair-obscur by Latour with a candle, a light in darkness. The long beautiful hair of the goddess and then of the saint are without any doubt the image of the rays of the glittering star.

Very often the iconography of Maria Magdalena shows the saint with ruddy hair, which is also, often, the color attributed to Venus although it is simply a white star. However, the redness refers to observations made near the horizon, Evening Last or Morning First. Of course, the redness of the lady's hair is as well a very archaic conventional sign of her as a seducer, the red lady fox as an irresistible woman losing the hunter that tracks her is a common figure of Siberian, Asiatic and European folklore, The Song of Songs also hints at foxes: "*Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.*" (Song 2:3) Maria Magdalena is often represented in mediaeval art, covered only by body hair, like a brown bear or a wild woman out of the cave. (For more information on the bearlike woman, see A. Lebeuf, 1987). It seems that the redness rather meant colorful, or multicolored as the rainbow colors of diffracted light on a dove's throat feathers. The repeated presence of the dove at the new start of time counting, associated with the annunciation of pregnancy and the Esther reference to the pregnant year and thirteenth month intercalation might hint at a Solar-Lunar-Venusian conjunction near the Pleiades (the doves in Ancient Greece). The Pleiades have been the marker of the first lunar month and the key for the intercalation since ancient times (about the Pleiades as the place of incarnation, see A. Lebeuf, 1993). All this is associated to the start of new eras where the return of the Morning Star is represented as a multicolored bird.

The reason why this planet has been choosen, among others, to represent the Lover, a courtesan, also seems to stem from a simple symbolical shift on an elementary empirical observation of the Planet's motion in loops. We will better understand the matter starting from a renaissance text of Ambroise Paré describing the solar system:

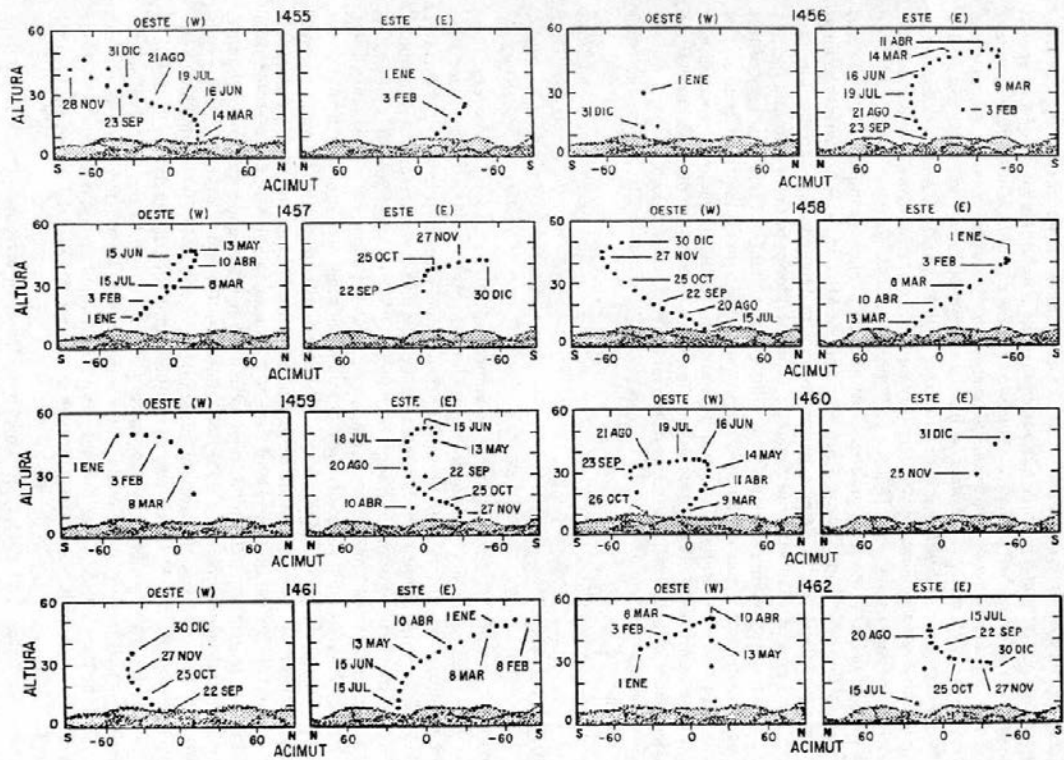


Fig. 2. The Loops of Venus, (D. Flores, Mexico).

"The Sun is the chariot and fountain of the light of all the celestial bodies. They are but small streams running from its source, the reason why it is called King of the stars and the greatest of all the celestial objects. It stays three skies or floors over the Moon ... He walks in the middle of six planets; If they come near to him, they retire apart, at the top of their epicycle in order not to disturb his advance; and when he has passed they fall down at the lowest of their epicycle to accompany him on escort as princes are doing to their king. And then, when they have done their duty, they stop and with a shy and shameful reverence, they get back as to contemplate from a distance the face of their lord. And when he approaches again, they regress to the top of their epicycle to come towards him, feeling him at a distance of four signs, as if they were waiting for his approach, and when they have saluted him, they walk in front, a bit apart, not to disturb his natural march and parade." (A. Paré 1562; in C. Flammarion 1882:342)

A nice parallel between the King and his court and the planets around the Sun: Venus is the brightest of this court, and excepted the very discrete Mercury, the nearest to the king-Sun, she simply is the Favorite. Being a planet near to the Sun, she turns around him as a courtesan. The simple graph of various Venus positions and loops in the sky around the Sun makes a clear image of her maneuvers. There is little doubt that the Chaldeans noticed this continuous attraction of Venus to the Sun, her loving dance around him, and built on this base of empirical observation the allegorical tales and mythology of the lover par excellence. They must have been interested not only in the number of days of her disappearance in the Sun's flames, but also in the various shapes of her loops.

9. CONCLUSION

I have limited myself here, with showing a number of interrelated traditions and their exemplary historical continuity. The ancient lores bound to the goddess of love kept alive through the centuries at all levels of culture, in popular and scholarly literatures, framed by clerical and savant reorganisation of local ancient cult places and devotions, and the creation of a new liturgy. If on the basis of modern sources concerning Maria-Magdalena, it is difficult to recognise at once the fruit of some inspiration of astronomical phenomena, we can nevertheless trace back its tradition to an historically proved practice of religious astronomy bound to the observation of the cycles of the planet Venus. This continuity in long term evolution gives us an illustration of what culture might be first of all, a tradition, a memory, a permanent interwoven fabric of cultural influences and a set of references to our past, a respect for all of our roots in order to maintain a common language and the means of understanding each other. This specific attitude has marked the policy of the Roman Catholic Church all through the many centuries of its conquest of paganism, more often covering old beliefs with Christianity than replacing them drastically. In this respect, Catholicism has been remarkably tolerant and thus left to the student of anthropology or history of religions or of the history of science the astonishingly rich treasury of so many marvelous works of art ordered, paid, shown and precious kept by the Church. These rich collections and mountains of archives are the pride of Christian Europe. A civilisation where through arts people have leaned to love the life they are granted.

In his late years, Reverend Pluche, the great moralisator of astronomy must have agreed with the Wisdom of the Creator when he wrote: *"It is strange that it takes thirty or forty years to form a useless philosopher when fifteen are enough to make a girl perfect."* (Pluche, *Histoire du Ciel*, 1740:456)

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