

## **European Iconography: Magi and the Brazilian *folia de reis***

### **Abstract**

Religious lore in the *folia de reis* tradition strengthens the human need to contextualize and recreate the Magi experience through its participants' expressions of faith and obligations to the divine as fulfilled by the ritual journey. As part of a folk Catholic celebration the event involves a group of musicians with different roles who, between Christmas and Epiphany, go on a pilgrimage asking for alms for social-religious purposes. In Brazil the *folia de reis* celebrates and reenacts the Biblical journey of the Magi to Bethlehem and back to their homeland guided by the Star of Bethlehem through a series of procedures and rituals. This research paper examines the historical and ethnographic data associated with the *folia de reis* development in Brazil and the words “*folia*” and “*reis*” in relation to the construction of a Brazilian folk identity based on imagery and religious facts. The study links historical evidence such as European iconographic information to present time and reaffirms the mystical character of the Magi by tracing beliefs of ancient eastern lands in reference to Persia and Zoroastrianism.

### **Background**

The *folia de reis* is a folk Catholic tradition in Brazil aimed at celebrating the adoration of baby Jesus by the Three Kings Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar is celebrated. Its origins can be traced back to colonial Brazil and to the Iberian Peninsula. The ritual of the *folia de reis* is based on Saint Mathew's (2: 1-12) biblical passage, which narrates the visit of “wise men” to the Christ Child.

According to Guilherme Porto (1982), the *folia de reis* tradition migrated to Brazil from Mediterranean Europe during the colonial period of Brazil. In Portugal, there are references to groups having performed songs during King's Day (January 6) in the districts of Beira-Alta, Beira-Baixa, and Trás-os Montes (Porto 1982:32). Accounting of *folias* mention a group of men dressed in elaborated stylized clothing and accompanied by musical instruments such as accordions, tambourines, and drums. The starting point of the *folia* tradition in Brazil is generally associated with the Portuguese settlers and the waves of farm workers coming to the large *capitanias* (the first large administrative provinces of Brazil) during colonial times. The Portuguese *jornada das pastorinhas* (journey of the shepherdesses) that included songs and prayers is the Portuguese event

closest to the Brazilian *folia de reis*. The *jornada das pastorinhas* shares some of the characteristics of the *folia de reis*, such as visiting the homes during the Christmas season and collecting money and other contributions for social purposes. In Brazil the celebration of the Three Kings through music and prayers has been diversified and transformed according to local communities.

From the 1500s through the twenty-first century the Three Kings have been important personages among the rural populations of Portugal and Brazil, and their journey is always celebrated with great devotion and similar manners. The *folia de reis* tradition involves a group of participants who go on a journey (referred as *giro*) between Christmas and Epiphany<sup>1</sup> asking for alms for social-religious purposes. These offerings are often used to promote a final celebration or encounter (*encontro*) and to assist participants of the community. The tradition consists of musical ensembles made up of predominantly low-income country workers from various regions of Brazil. Musicians, singers, and other devotees travel from house to house and farm to farm singing and praising the birth of Christ. The tradition reenacts and celebrates the Biblical journey of the Three Kings to Bethlehem and back to their homeland. As they travel, they bless the families they visit by singing in exchange for food or money.

For many Brazilians living in remote areas, *folia de reis* is the core vision of their worldview and of their understanding of life. Their isolation from mainstream national Brazil has given them a special understanding and appreciation of their world, influenced mainly by daily chores and a bucolic life style. Indeed, the adoration of Jesus through music is their center of their life or *axis mundi*.

## **The *Folia***

An examination of existing literature dealing with the origin of *folia* in the context of the Brazilian tradition reveals that, like many other folkloric manifestations, the *folia*

---

<sup>1</sup> Epiphany is a Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God in human form in the person of Jesus Christ. It falls on 6 January or, in many countries, on the Sunday that falls between 2 January and 8 January.<sup>[2][3]</sup> Since the Julian Calendar, which is followed by some Eastern Churches, is at present 13 days behind the Gregorian Calendar and the revised Julian Calendar, 6 January in that calendar corresponds at present to 19 January in what is the official civil calendar in most countries. On this feast, Western Christians commemorate principally the visitation of the Biblical Magi to the Baby Jesus, i.e., his manifestation to the Gentiles; Eastern Christians commemorate the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, seen as his manifestation to the world as the Son of God. It is also called Theophany, especially by Eastern Christians.

has its roots in various Portuguese traditions. The many names found for the *folia* are part of an ancient and complex tradition introduced to Brazil by the Portuguese. From the early times of Christianity, it was a custom among Christians to celebrate the birth of Christ. Pope Telesphorus (Pope #8), one of the successors of Saint Peter, officially recognized these festivities in the year 138 A.D. Prior to this official recognition; the celebration did not have a specific date, occurring sometimes in January and sometimes in April. Pope Julius I assigned December 25 as the official date (Araújo 1949).

The first Portuguese use of the word *folia* refers to song. The writer Gil Vicente in his pastoral poem *Auto da Sibila Cassandra* of 1505 (Casculo 1980:336) mentions characters singing a *folia*. Gil Vicente, like many other writers in the early sixteenth century, incorporated themes from medieval stories and liturgical drama. Examples of these plays include *Visitação, ou Monólogo do Vaqueiro* (Visitation or Herdsman's Monologue) of 1502, *Auto Pastoral de Castellano* (The Castilian Pastoral Play) of 1503, *Auto da Fé* (Play of Faith) of 1510, among many others (Parker 1967:29). According to Richard Hudson (1982:690), Francisco de Salinas used the word *folia* in 1577 to refer to a melody in his *De Musica Libri Septem*. The following example is a Portuguese citation written in the sixteenth century by Gil Vicente (my translation):

Em Portugal vi eu já	In Portugal I have seen
Em cada casa pandeiro	In each house a tambourine
E gaita em cada palheiro;	And a bagpipe in each barn;
E de vinte anos a cá	But for the last twenty years,
Ná há ni gaita nem gaiteiro.	No bagpipe or piper.
A cada porta hum terreiro,	At each door a dance area
Cada aldeia dez <i>Folias</i>	Each town ten <i>Folias</i>
Cada casa atabaqueiro;	Each house a drumbeater
E agora Jeremias	And now Jeremias
Ele nosso tamborileiro.	He our drummer.

The word *folia* also referred to an old Portuguese fast dance accompanied by musical instruments such as *pandeiro* or *adufe* (type of tambourine) and voices. The *folia* in Portugal was also associated with a male chorus that wore devotional signs while carrying the image of saints in procession. These festivities took place during the celebration of the *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo* or celebration of the Divine Holy Spirit

(Casculo 1980:335). Several Portuguese writers place the word *folia* in more than one context. Braga (1885:285-286), for example, refers to the *folia* as any celebration in the Catholic calendar. Because of the strong Catholic influence, these celebrations were popular among people in the Iberian Peninsula and are part of the cultural inheritance left by the Portuguese in Brazil (Dias 1944:85). In Brazil the word *folia* is used to describe many types of celebration. It is also used to represent sacred festivities, such as *folia de reis*, *folia do divino* (the Holy Spirit *folia*), and *folia de Nossa Senhora* (the Virgin Mary *folia*). *Folia* is also used to indicate any secular or folk celebration, like the *folia de carnaval* (carnival *folia*). The closest word to *folia* in the English language in a broader sense is “revelry”, which is associated with a festive activity.

### **The Reis -- also called Magi**

The Portuguese word “*reis*” (kings) refers to folk celebrations in countries such as Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Belgium, and Germany (Casculo 1980:668). These celebrations were dedicated to the three Kings in reference to Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar during their purported visit to the baby Jesus at his birth. The words *reis*, *reisada*, *reisado*, and *divino* are closely related to one another, and are very often interpreted as referring to the same thing. The celebratory concept of “de Reis” (of the King), Three Kings, Magi, or Wise Men is associated with early Iberian folk tradition devoted to the pilgrimage of several important people to visit the birth of Jesus. In the Iberian Peninsula this tradition was first identified with members of local communities who, between December 25 and January 6, dressed as Kings, visited friends, and asked for provisions. The Portuguese terms *reisado*, *reisada*, or *reiseiro* are additional names for the group or groups that sing and dance before January 6. While *reis* and *reisado* are part of the same Portuguese tradition, in both Portugal and Brazil *reisado* (*reisada*) is also a song form. A *reisado* can be sung or organized in a series of religious processions (Chaves 1942:144). The most common term for the Three Kings, however, is Magi (usually capitalized), a word that probably referred to a particular culture. The word “Magi” comes from the Persian (Farsi) word *magus*, meaning “magician, a member of a priestly caste of ancient Medes” (Schwartz 1993). Historically, the Magi were an “indigenous priestly tribe much resembling the Brahmans, who worked their way into the priesthood of the Persian

religion, probably after the reform of Zoroaster had (somewhat feebly) influenced it” (Moulton 1917:9). Another definition of the word Magi is used in the work of Castro and Couto (1961:73); translated from the word *mag* or *magush*, Magi means “the divine intermediary.”

In tracing the history of the Magi with reference to the *folia de reis*, we must consider the many distinctions found in the tradition of the adoration of the Three Kings. How can these three personages be described? Were they real people? If so, were they astrologers, diviners, interpreters of dreams, magicians, mystics, prophets, shepherds, wise men, holy men, or real kings? Why did they come from distant lands in the East to celebrate the birth of Christ in Bethlehem? From a folk perspective and their association with these characters or “saints” ordinary people are able to identify their own world of religious expectations, and to reinforce the concept that they are the first humans, after the Holy family, to visit Jesus at the site and accept and Him as Savior. These dynamics does not only help to understand the character of members of *folia de reis* groups in Brazil, but brings to light an important characteristic of the social behavior among participants in the ritual and tradition. Furthermore, it will open another dimension to the understanding of the importance of the birth of Christ in local tradition. While answers may be moot, we can give more significance of these three figures with the issues involved by presenting and analyzing this historical evidence.

### **The West Asian Origin of the Magi**

According to the *Biographical Dictionary of the Saints* (1969) the development of the Magi tradition began in Persia and may be related to Zoroastrianism (Holweck 1969:639), a religion based on an ancient form of nature worship founded by the prophet Zoroaster (his dates are variously given as 630-553, 628-551, and 618-541 B.C.). Zoroastrians practiced a ritual that involved pouring libations of milk, oil, and honey over a flame while chanting prayers and hymns. Gradually, the religion incorporated Babylonian elements, including astrology, demonology, and magic (Schwartz 1993), three characteristics that may have influenced the Magi.

Scholars (Upham 1873, Moulton 1917, Zaehner 1956) of the Magi, however have determined that a Persian Magi culture existed that was different from Zoroasterism.

According to them, the Magi were one of the six tribes that made up the population of Media, an ancient country of West Asia that corresponded to the northern section of present-day Iran. These inhabitants, who were known as Medes, and their neighbors, the Persians, spoke Indo-Iranian languages that were closely related to old Persian.

Historians know very little about the Median culture except that a polytheistic religion was practiced and a priestly caste called the Magi existed. In fact, there are scholars such as J.G Bennet that claim the Magi existed even before the religion of Zoroaster first appeared and their acceptance of the prophet was important:

“The Magi were members of a caste or class that existed in central Asia from before the time of Zoroaster. They accepted Zoroaster when he to court of King Vishtaspa, the Bactrian king of Khorasmia. Two Magi were given the task of testing Zoroaster’s credentials and found that his initiation went beyond anything they themselves knew of. The king was converted on their advice”.

### **The Magi According to Christianity**

Almost two thousand years ago, according to a story that is lovingly narrated over and over every year by Christians, a company of Eastern kings, priests, astrologers, magicians, or wise men made a long journey to the Holy City of Jerusalem: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men (“Magi” in New International Version) from the east to Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1, King James Version). These men were possibly pilgrims who came in the days of Herod the King saying, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east [“when it rose” in New International Version], and are come to worship him” (Matthew 2:1-2, King James Version). By adding “from the east,” Saint Matthew thereby suggested that they were pilgrims belonging to a sacred or priestly order in Persia. For more than a century before the Christian era, the world beyond the Tigris River was not very familiar to the Greeks or the Romans. Incessant wars restricted Roman armies to the Euphrates, or the Tigris Rivers, and their legions never climbed the peaks of the Zagros Mountains that protect the western frontier of Persia. The Zagros Mountain range is a complex of many parallel ranges separated by valleys and plains, some of which are covered in perpetual snow. Anyone coming from the Eastern side of these mountains into Israel was considered “from the east” (Upham 1856:5--8). In the

Roman World, it was commonly held that magic originated with the priests of the Persians, and those who practiced magic were called Magi. The lines from Saint Matthew's Gospel are the only mention of the Magi or Wise Men in the Holy Scriptures. They do not figure in the Gospels of John, Luke, or Mark. In addition, Matthew does not mention their number. The only reference to number is to the gifts of the Magi: "The number of three has generally been associated with the three presents mentioned: gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Tournier 1982:254). Moreover, in Psalms 72 there is a passage, which claimed that the Messiah would be visited by Kings who would offer their gifts before Him: "Let him reign from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. The desert nomads shall bow before him; his enemies shall face downward in the dust. Kings along the Mediterranean coast—the kings of Tarshish and the islands—and those from Sheba and from Seba—all will bring their gifts. Yes, kings from everywhere! All will bow before him! All will serve him" (Psalm 72:6-11). Castro and Couto (1961:73) portray the Magi as shepherds with great control over their sheep. Also according to them, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) considered the Magi to have the knowledge of astrology, which links them with the apparition of the star of Bethlehem.

*The Story of the Three Kings* by John of Hildesheim (1375), a friar of the Carmelite order, introduces the Three Kings as royalty. He explains that the reason they were called Magi originally was because of ignorance on the part of non believers and envy on the part of the Jews. The discussion concerning the origin of the Three Kings started in early medieval times and it was very controversial, as Freeman (1955:66) explains: "Saint Jerome (about 340-420 A.D.) furthered the idea of a 'black Ethiopian' by suggesting that the Magi represented the three sons of Noah, and thereby, the three races of man." Not only did the Magi appear to be different in character, but also it is evident that the answer for their identity was based on personal interpretation and understanding of the tradition of the adoration of the Magi. Ludolph of Saxony (cited in Freeman 1955:66), a contemporary of Hildesheim, in his popular *Vita Christi* (Life of Christ), argues more reasonably: "The three pagan Kings were called Magi not because they were magicians but because of the great science of astrology which was theirs. Those whom the Hebrews called *scribes* and the Greeks, philosophers, and the Latins, *wise men*, the

Persians called Magi. And the reason that they were called Kings is that in those days it was the custom for the philosophers and wise men to be rulers...”

The Magi had special customs and beliefs of their own, some of which they brought with them into their adopted cults. The title “Magi,” in its oldest sense, was distinctive and honorable, as Upham (1873:3) writes: “Before the rise of the Roman power, in the days of the old Persian Empire (558-331 B.C.), the Greeks knew the Magi well, as the imperial priesthood of what was then the Great Empire of the earth. After that Empire was destroyed by Alexander the Great, they continued to know them well, so long as they themselves ruled over Persia. This lasted but about a century; and, like the English in India, the Greeks in Persia attempted no radical changes in religion.” The word “Magi” however, was somehow misinterpreted during the course of history, as Upham (1873: 5) again explains: “In the Roman World it was common opinion, that in very ancient times, magic originated with the priests of the Persians; and in the Roman World those who practiced magic assumed the name of Magi.” According to this conviction, the word “Magi” came into common use in a way that was related to the distinctive name of the Persian priesthood; it was, therefore, misused as “magician.” The actual names for the Three Kings are also a mystery. Christian tradition from about the seventh century names them as Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar. These names are found with various spellings at different times and in different places and are derived from legends and apocryphal writings. (Apocryphal comes from the Greek, meaning secret or spurious which contains group of several books, not considered canonical, included in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as part of the Old Testament, but usually omitted from Protestant editions of the Bible): “The *Codex Egberti*<sup>2</sup> has two: Pudizar and Melchias; a Paris Ms. [manuscript] of the seventh and eighth century, three: Bithisarea, Melchior, and at Gathaspa; later on: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthassar” (Holweck 1969:639). The bodies of the Three Kings

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Codex Egberti* stands out even amidst the richly illuminated manuscripts from the prolific period of the arts under the Ottonian kings. The Gospel Pericopes, or Evangelistary, referred to as the *Codex Egberti* represent the readings from the four Gospels throughout the ecclesiastical year on 165 leaves. Each reading starts with a large initial I, which is filled with an interlace band in gold and silver. Precious gold was also used for the fine details in the countless miniatures, e.g. for emphasizing the three-dimensionality of drapery folds. Bishop Egbert was active during the second half of the 10th century, a period considered to be among the most fruitful in the history of art. Centres of outstanding artistic creativity emerged from the scriptoria of the abbeys at the time, and the Benedictine Abbey of Reichenau was the most famous of all. The artist-monks of Lake Constance developed a style which was to mark Ottonian book painting. The monks successfully created a breathtaking synthesis between northern and southern art forms. Their pictorial heritage includes the precious Carolingian traditions as well as traces of Insular painting and Byzantine influences. The *Codex Egberti* represents an early pinnacle of this new form, where the spirit of the old meets with the new in a very special manner.

after death are said to have been brought to Constantinople by Empress Helen, mother of Constantine, then taken to Milan, and finally to Cologne in 1162 by Frederick Barbarossa. Since that time they have often been called the Three Kings of Cologne (Freeman 1955:68).

### **The Three Kings in *Folia de Reis* Tradition**

For participants in the *folia de reis* tradition, the question of the origin of the Three Kings is often debatable. It is common to find participants in this tradition describing the origin of the Three Kings according to their own background. The existence of Three Kings with different backgrounds may have changed the perspectives of the participants of the *folia de reis* tradition in Brazil. The Three Kings are commonly known in Brazil as Belchior (or Brechó or Melchior, among other variations), Gaspar, and Baltazar. They symbolically come to represent the racial diversity of the Brazilian population. The origin of the Three Kings for the *foliões* (*folia de reis* members) is the result of personal experiences of interethnic contact between the participants in the tradition. The participants learn from their respective families who the Three Kings were, and just as they came from different places, they brought different gifts. The *folia de reis* in Brazil manifests a universal character of the world's Christianity. Furthermore, the origin of the *folia de reis* tradition is not always perceived or narrated in the same way by its participants. Perhaps, because believe and faith in the tradition is constructed based on the different personal views on the character of the Three Kings. Nevertheless, the groups seem to agree that the historical facts narrated about the birth of Jesus are based on the experience and faith learned through tradition and experience. Members narrate stories on the adoration and birth of Christ to anyone that wants to know the origin of the tradition. Joaquim Moreira da Silva, *mestre* (master or leader) of *folia de reis* in the city of Santa Fé do Sul, São Paulo, narrated the following story about the journey of the Three Kings (my translation):

“In the year of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, January 6, the Three Kings Gaspar, Belchior, and Baltazar arrived around midday on the backs of camels. After a long journey from the Middle East that lasted twelve days, and guided by an unusual star, they arrived in the city of Bethlehem. With the Three Kings were a Captain and a Colonel from King Herod's palace. These soldiers came disguised as

the personal security guard of the King's territory. These camouflaged soldiers had in mind the cruel mission ordered by King Herod: to kill the Child! The soldiers also searched for the foreign travelers who initially had stopped by the palace looking for information on the child. The King of Judea was irritated to know that his position as King of the world was going to be shaken by the King of the Jews. The same star that had earlier extinguished Jerusalem's city entrance shone again soon after the Three Kings left the city. This beautiful and large star that also had been seen by the Three Kings in the Middle East the night the Son of Mary was born shone once more in front of them, and from the sky guided the Three Kings to a stable in Bethlehem. After the Three Kings arrived and dismounted their camels, they walked in and found the little boy Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The Child seemed to be like other children; however, the Three Kings knew that this Child was somehow different. They acknowledged the New King they had been searching for. They knelt before the Child and adored Him. "Dear Lord we are very happy to find you," said the Three Kings. Soon afterward they gave myrrh to the man, gold to the King, and frankincense to God. Joseph and Mary, happy and thankful for the gifts, blessed the Three Kings. The captain and the colonel, after seeing so much humility in this act and through the Holy Ghost's aid, forgot the cruel mission they had first planned. They followed the mission of the Three Kings; kneeling and adoring the Child they asked for forgiveness. Through Mary, they were forgiven and found salvation. Through the evening the soldiers wrapped themselves in warm clothes and the next day continued their journey to their homeland. The Three Kings, tired after their long journey, went to sleep. During their sleep a dream came to them. They heard a voice saying not to go back to Herod the king because they would be punished as traitors. The Three Kings did not forget their dream and chose a different route to return, avoiding the palace. What might have happened to the captain and the colonel if they had returned to Herod saying they had found the Child but did not kill Him? Or if they had returned saying that they found the King of the Jews and the King of the world, the promised Messiah, the Father for salvation! Herod discovered that he was betrayed and ordered the assassination of all infants less than two years of age (as written in Saint Mathews, 2-16). The soldiers renounced the benefits of the palace...and exchanged their duties as soldiers for the true love of the Father, and of little Jesus, son of Mary. They followed the path of Three Kings. The Three Kings' education and intelligence gave them the title of Kings. The Three Kings asked the Virgin Mary for consent to celebrate a feast in honor of the day they had arrived. The request was accepted. However, lacking resources, sufficient time, and physical space, it was not possible to celebrate at the stable. The Three Kings were also astrologists, musicians, and singers. During their trip home the Three Kings, followed by the Captain and the Colonel, stopped in different places to sing their hymns. They solicited donations to

collect funds to celebrate the day in which they had the honor of meeting the Father of Salvation, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Singing was the way of acknowledging each donation received. The day they arrived home, their wives were very pleased to know that they were safe and sound. After seeing that they had come from a distance, the wives, ... very excited, were glad to see every one coming back, especially after knowing that they had followed an unusual star with no idea where it would take them nor when they would return. This was highly emotional and a very exciting moment for the Three Kings. Their journey was successful for everyone because saw everyone happy. In celebration of happiness and success, together they commemorated their victory day. As long as they lived, every year the Three Kings repeated the same scene in which they found Jesus the infant, Saint Joseph, and the Virgin Mary in a stable. Many people who believed in the enchanted encounter of the Three Kings with the Sacred Family during their journey to Bethlehem followed their example. Through decades and hundreds of years this celebration continues to grow and to expand. Today it has reached the five continents.

### **The Magi in European Iconography**

The Magi figures can also be found in different sites throughout Europe. Just as the Epiphany was from early times one of the greatest feasts of the Church, the adoration of the Magi was one of the most popular themes in early Christian and medieval art. According to Beckwith (1966:1), “The scene appears in wall-painting in the earliest Roman catacombs, in the fourth and fifth-century in Santa Maria Maggiore at Rome, on ivory carvings and gold medallions executed in the sixth-century at Constantinople and in various parts of the Near East.” Iconographies of the journey of the Magi are good sources for information on the common understanding of the birth of Christ. For instance, in Luke’s gospel, Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem from their home in Nazareth to be counted in a census “of all the inhabited earth” ordered by Caesar Augustus. An interesting observation is that none the iconographical information associated with the iconographies ever depict the Gospel of Luke, but only describe the views in the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-2).

In Brazil, the story of the nativity scene described in Luke and Mathew’s Gospel is found stamped on the banner of *folia de reis*. The iconographical representation not only describes the *folia de reis* personal liking for the paintings, but also allows the participants to fabricate their own understanding about the characters’ present at the site

of Christ’s birth. Additionally, while the Gospel story has inspired devotion and faith through the centuries, it sparks curiosity and interpretations of the story told at the site of Christ’s birth. From the number of gifts, the age of the Magi, and their skin colors, these images and depictions reflect the *folia de reis* views on race and the story of the first Noel (the first Christmas in French).

## Site Examples

There are several sites where the nativity scene has been depicted and presented as images of the true story of the nativity scene and the Magi’s role in the event. In a Sacramentary at Bamberg, Germany, the adoration of the Magi takes place in front of an architectural screen (figure 1.1), as Beckwith (1966:33) writes: “The adoration of the Magi before an architectural screen can be traced back to Carolingian examples, cf. the mid ninth-century ivory book cover, executed at Mertz, Paris, Bibl. Nat. Lat. 9393” (Goldschmidt. op. cit. I, No. 72). In England, a wall painting with the procession of the Kings is found at the Church of Clayton in Sussex, a former county, on the English Channel in southeastern England (Beckwith 1966:21). The Church is a pre-Conquest structure, but the wall paintings appear to date towards the end of the eleventh century. (figure 1.2)



Figure 1.1 (Beckwith 1966)



Figure 1.2 (Beckwith 1966)

The iconography of the Virgin and Child seated under an arch receiving the adoration of the Magi can be traced to Ottonian models (this term is derived from Otto III, son of Otto II, born in Kessel, Germany). An example of the adoration of the Magi is found at Reichenau, at the Court School of Otto III in Munich. This work is found in the Gospel Book of Otto III (997-1000) (See Figure 2.1). One of the earliest representations of the Magi in Spain dates from the first half of the twelfth century. It is from a carving in the Church of Santa Maria at Uncastillo, Zaragoza, where a stone tympanum includes a relief of the adoration of the Magi on the north portal of the Church (see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.1 (Beckwith 1966).



Figure 2.2 (Beckwith 1966).

## PAINTING

The paintings of the Franco-Flemish Jan Mabuse in 1497-1507 provide a notion of who these three men were who came from the East to adore the baby Jesus. Through the description found in these paintings, Brockwell (1911) was able to describe several characteristics of the physical appearance and dress of the Three Kings. Because his description (1911:1-6) is so clear and poetic, it is included here in almost its entirety:

[The scene is laid amid the ruins of a quasi-real Gothic Palace, the dislodged walls of stone and brick symbolize, together with the upturned tiles of the pavement, the down fall of the pagan dispensation of the Birth of Christ (**Plate I**).

The virgin is seated in the center, and seen nearly in full face towards the spectator. Her hair falls in curly locks on to her shoulders; her downcast eyes regard the Infant Christ whom she holds on her right knee. She is clad in a dark red under-skirt and loose sleeved blue robe, cut sufficiently low at the breast to show a little fine linen beneath; her robe, held in position at the neck by small gold ornaments, envelops her person, and falls in numerous ample folds and sharp arbitrary breaks to the pavement, which occupies the full breadth of the foreground. With her left hand she holds the stem of a pyx or chalice containing gold coins. The Divine Child, with a cruciform nimbus floriated, holds one of the coins in His left hand as a token of His acceptance of the gift of gold just offered by Jaspar (or Gaspar), King of Tarsus. The oldest of the Magi, represented as a man with gray hair, a cloven-shaven face, and a wart on his cheek (**Plate II.**), kneels on the right. He is seen almost in profile to the left, his hands joined in adoration. He wears a gold-patterned damask robe, and a dark red loose-falling mantle, the latter ornamented with sprays of floral design, and lined and edged with fur; round his neck he wears a gold collar, set alternately with sapphires and rubies. Before him, in the centre of the tiled pavement foreground, lies his elaborated sculptured sceptre or mace, adorned with the figure of Moses, holding in his hands the open Book of the Law. On the ground at his side is placed his crimson cap, lined and trimmed with fur (**Plate III.**); round it is a chain of gold with links set with jewels, while the brim is edged with seed pearls. Near by, on the edge of the Virgin's robe, is placed, as if by accident, the cover of the chalice. It is inscribed: ROI IASPAR. On the right, behind and beyond King Jaspar, stands forward Melchior, attired in a highly ornamental tight-fitting coat of gold, and in a sea-green robe edged with two rows of pearls (**Plate IV.**); a gold flecked girdle passes around his waist, his brocaded loose-sleeved, ermine-lined mantle falls to the ground in ample folds, the sleeves being three times tied with black silk chords. His rich red peaked bonnet is lined with blue and decked with pearls, his fancifully bejeweled crown being super-posed upon it. Melchior, who is long-haired and bearded, and should make an offering of frankincense, holds before him in his outstretched, strong-lined right hand a highly ornamental monstrance; his left hand falls by his side. From the left of his very varied and thickly peopled composition advances Balthazar, the dusky King of Saba, with scanty beard (**Plate V.**) He is attired in a rich gold-shot tunic woven with floral designs;

his ample fur-lined red mantle, the sides of which are attached across the chest by a ribbon of juicy green, is edged with a highly ornamental border of rubies, sapphires, and black pearls. The puce-colored scarf wound round his waist and hanging down by his left side, together with the loose-fitting orange garment covering his lower limbs, intensifies the effect of his splendid appearance. He holds out before him in both hands, in token of his traditional offering of myrrh, and elaborate Gothic monstrance (or reliquary) of gold, with *puti* at the summit. The foot of the vessel is reverently protected from his touch by a long, white silk shawl, which is passed round his neck in stole-like fashion; it has fringed ends and hangs down elegantly before him; the border of the shawl is embroidered in pink, with light blue characters denoting the legend: SALVE REGINA, and in continuation to the right, letters which, with some element of doubt, may be interpreted: MDVII. King Balthazar wears a sumptuous headdress of dark blue velvet wrought with gold floral designs, the gilt rim edged with rubies mounted in gold, and pearls set in white rosettes that are placed in a blue field (**Plate VI**). Beneath this regal head-dress he wears a copious head-covering of precious dark blue material, trimmed with a red border; on it is inscribed in waving line the artist characteristic signature IENNI . GOSSART . OG . MABU. From the lower edge of his red border depends a row of pearl ornaments. On the summit of the crown may be read his name: BALTASAR. Between the standing figure of Balthazar and the seated form of the Virgin, but placed some distance away and in the background, may be observed St. Joseph, bearded and clad in simple robe; he enters silently upon the scene and leans his left hand on his staff and his right against the portal at his side; he gazes fervently upwards towards the sky. On the extreme left of this well-knit composition, and far removed from the six principal figures, are dimly observed, behind a two light window, a middle aged man wearing a bronze-colored and turban-like head-covering. High above their heads luxuriant plants are already growing in the clinks of the down-fallen brick edifice, and a withered tree raises its branches. More towards the front are grouped three courtiers in attendance upon Balthazar. The mantle of the King of Saba is held up by a youth standing on a raised step; he wears a light blue and green patterned and quartered robe with dark red sleeves; a red and gold pouch at his side, and a red cap tied with blue strings and bejeweled in front. By his left side is a middle-aged Oriental man-at-arms with his lilac-purple turban piled high on his cranium (**Plate VII**);

his fur-lined robe is left open at the neck to show a gold-trimmed under-robe; round his neck he wears his torque or metal gorgeret inscribed with part of the artist's name: IENNINE GOS . . .]

The plates (see Figure 3) in which Mabuse describes the Magi are highly ornamented. His descriptions reflect the elegant northern European views on the scene of the adoration of the Magi. In contrast, the southern European painters and sculptors seemed to have presented a more simplistic view of this particular event. This is perhaps associated with the perception that northern Europeans had a wealthier life style than southern Europeans. The adoration of the Magi seemed to be a fairly popular theme for painters in northern and southern Europe during the early fifteenth century. These iconographic representations are evidence of the development of the Magi tradition in Europe. The tradition was carried into Brazil where the event of the adoration of the Magi is very often depicted as bucolic and placed outdoors, usually at a crèche (manger scene). All seven plates are found in Brockell's "The Adoration of the Magi by Jan Mabuse" (1911) and are reproduced here in Figure 3.

Figure 3 (Plates I – VII from Brockwell 1911).



Plate I



Plate II



PLATE III.

Plate III



PLATE IV.

Plate IV



PLATE V.

Plate V



PLATE VI.

Plate VI



**Plate VII**

Schwartz (1993) lists several other painters who represented the theme of the adoration of the Magi (including Gentile de Fabriano, Rogier van der Weyden, Masaccio, Domenico Veneziano, Sandro Botticelli, Hieronymus Bosch, and Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez) and provides internet links to photographic examples. A number of these are included here (Figure 4) to exemplify the perception early iconography had over people in Europe as well as to create a body of material that the reader can use for comparison with Brazilian *folia de reis* costumes and other regalia depicted in this research. What will become obvious is that northern European (and northern Italian) depiction of the nativity scene emphasize rich clothing, fancy settings, and a general opulence, while Portuguese and Spanish depictions emphasizes the humility and simplicity of Jesus' birth.

Figure 4. Eight paintings from the Renaissance, depicting the Magi.



Gentile da Fabriano – Florence, 1423  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/g/gentile/>



Rogier Van der Weyden – Flemish, c.1452-55  
<http://www.abcgallery.com/W/weyden/weyden.html>



Masaccio – Florence, 1426  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/m/masaccio/>



Domenico Veneziano – Florence, 1440-43  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/d/domenico/venezian/>



Sandro Botticelli – Florence, c1475  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/b/botticel/index.html>



Hieronymus Bosch – Netherlands, 1510  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/b/bosch/index.html>



Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez – Sevilla, 1619  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/v/velazque/>



Benozzo Gozzoli – Florence, 1440-41  
<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/g/gozzoli/1early/>

Throughout the Renaissance painters were fascinated in depicting the birth of Christ in their images representing the theme of the adoration of the Magi. Gentile da Fabriano (circa 1370-1427) was an Italian painter in the International Gothic style. Originally named Gentile di Niccolò di Giovanni di Massio, he was born in Fabriano, Ancona Province. Much of his work has been lost, but what remains shows the influence of the French and Flemish edition of the International Gothic style then current in Lombardy. His work is characterized by sparkling color and graceful figures with animated and smiling faces. Gentile was active in a number of Italian cities. In Venice in 1411, for example, he executed frescoes for the Ducal Palace and greatly influenced Pisanello and the early Venetian school. In Florence in 1423 he painted his masterpiece,

“Adoration of the Magi” (in Uffizi gallery), and in Rome in 1427 he painted frescoes illustrating the life of Saint John the Baptist (in Saint John Lateran Church) and the Holy Family (in Santa Maria Maggiore Church).

Rogier van der Weyden (circa 1399-1464), the leading Flemish painter of the mid fifteenth century, is known principally for his sensitive, deeply moving renderings of religious themes. Mostly notably is his late masterpiece, “Adoration of the Magi” (in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Masaccio (Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone) (1401-27?) is the first great painter of the Italian Renaissance. He inaugurated a new naturalistic approach to painting that was concerned less with details and ornamentation than with simplicity and unity, less with flat surfaces than with the illusion of three dimensionality. Together with Brunelleschi and Donatello, he was a founder of the Renaissance. Only four unquestionably attributable works of Masaccio survive, although various other paintings have been attributed in whole or in part to him. Masaccio, originally named Tommaso Cassai, was born in San Giovanni Valdarno, near Florence, on December 21, 1401. His “Adoration of the Magi” (now in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin), was a simple, unadorned edition of a theme that was treated by other painters in a more decorative, ornamental manner.

Domenico Veneziano (circa 1405-61), Italian painter, was one of the chief innovators in early Renaissance painting in Florence. While many of his paintings have been lost and others are of doubtful attribution, three works remain that illustrate his style. The *Carneseccchi Tabernacle* (circa 1440, in the National Gallery, London), a fresco, is an early work that reveals the influence of the earlier Florentine master Masaccio. The “Adoration of the Magi” (circa 1440, in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin) contains a well-developed landscape background that was unique in Florentine art of the time and paved the way for further Renaissance landscape developments. The Santa Lucia dei Magnoli Altarpiece (circa 1445, in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence), painted in pale, cool colors and bathed in strong, white light, has a clarity and lightness that was Domenico's most important contribution to Florentine art and was an alternative to the heavy monumentality characteristic of Masaccio's style.

Sandro Botticelli (real name Alessandro di Mariano dei Filipepi, 1445-1510) was one of the leading painters of the Florentine Renaissance. He spent almost all of his life

working for the great families of Florence, especially the Medici. He painted portraits of them, such as “Giuliano de' Medici” (1475-76, in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and the “Adoration of the Magi” (1476-77, in the Uffizi gallery, Florence), in which members of the Medici family appear.

Hieronymus Bosch (circa 1450-1516), was one of the most famous Flemish artists of the sixteenth century. He was known for his large, enigmatic panels illustrating complex religious subjects with fantastic, demonic imagery. Two of his most popular works are the “Adoration of the Magi” and “Christ Carrying the Cross.” Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660), Spain’s greatest baroque artist, belongs to the triumvirate of Spanish painters which also includes Francisco de Goya and El Greco. In his “Adoration of the Magi” (1619, in the Prado, Madrid), the artist painted his own family in the guise of Biblical figures, including a self-portrait as well.

Another important iconographic representation of the adoration of the Magi is found in the Chapel of the Magi in the Medici Palace in Florence, Italy, which Cosimo il Vecchio built (starting about 1444). The Chapel is famous for the series of wall paintings by Benozzo Gozzoli (1420- 97), including “Angels in Adoration” in the rectangular apse and “Journey of the Magi” in the large hall. Painted during the years subsequent to 1459, they are the masterpieces of this painter.

These paintings and sculptures are representations of the adoration of the Magi in Europe during the Renaissance period, which covers roughly two-hundred years between 1400 and 1600 (Schwartz 1993). Paintings and iconographical examples are reliable evidences of the adoration of the Magi throughout history. They tell us that the depiction of the adoration of the Magi represents an old Christian virtue: faith in God. Faith is revealed not only with sacred books but also through the visual representation and characterization of historical events. Through these paintings people in the Renaissance and throughout subsequent history created perceptions of the Magi. The painters’ perceptions of the birth of Christ throughout history brings in one more concept in the understanding of the mystery surrounding the character and origin of the Magi described in Matthew’s gospel: participants in the *folia de reis* tradition through the Magi’s intermediation with the divine believe one can achieve anything in life.

Because the *folia de reis* is an oral tradition, they also rely on visual information, such as paintings and figures to create their religious organization. The illustrations of the nativity scene in Figure 4 are not only examples of historical paintings describing the nativity scene, but are sources of material painted on *folia de reis* banners. The Magi, because of their special place within the cosmological hierarchy have the power of healing sickness and of giving and promoting wealth. Their power is unlimited, say the participants. *Folia de reis* tradition dictates that the power, which can be acquired through personal faith, cannot be used for promoting personal revenge or to take advantage of others. It is very important that a participant accept the Magi with good intentions and with an open heart.

These scenes are not only samples of historical paintings depicting the nativity scene, but are sources of information and inspiration to *folia de reis* banners (*bandeira sagrada*) which ultimately is the physical object that identifies each tradition and provides for its key symbolic form of activity. It not only identifies the group, but also symbolizes the journey the Three Kings made to Bethlehem and the intention of the members of the group like the Magi to go on a journey. The colors used to embellish the banner represent and symbolize the colors adorning the clothes used by the Three Kings at the birth of Christ. Although the colors may vary from group to group, it is common to find a colorful material with bright pigments. The banner is adorned with lace, silk paper, mirrors, and artificial roses resembling those used in ancient Catholic traditions of saint veneration. Many *folia de reis* participants write personal requests on a piece of paper and attach them to the banner. Pictures of family members are sometimes clipped next to the image of the Holy family. The gesture of attaching family requests and pictures of loved ones reinforces a group's faith in the Three Kings and personalizes the banner.



Folia banner 1 (photo by the author)



Folia banner 2 (photo by the author)

## Conclusion

This research has explored historically the many possibilities for the Three Kings' origin associated with the birth of Jesus Christ and has presented an historical analysis of the words *folia* and *reis*. Even though scholars may see the Magi's story interpretative, it represents the people's view and their acceptance becomes the truth. In this way, the participants in the *folia de reis* tradition in rural Brazil validate the story of the Nativity as they were told, and the tradition is reinforced through paintings, sculpture, architecture, and other historical attributes. The history of the Magi and how they came to Jesus is also part of the story explained by the Gospel of Matthew. However, this Gospel seems to give a much different picture of events surrounding Christ's birth, following a less mystical course. In this scenario, the Magi came from the east, following a star, which has been considered to be an alignment of planets or a comet. In either scenario, Christians agree that the Bethlehem star was a unique astronomical event. These assumptions and historical events reflect the deep-rooted aspects which surround the birth of Christ and the Magi's real story. In any case, the story described in this research through pictures, paintings, stories, scenarios, and carvings is still being used in *folia de reis* tradition and is the inspiration for songwriters and leaders of certain Brazilian communities.

As proposed there are many possibilities for the Three Kings' understanding and

role mediating *folia de reis* tradition. Even though scholars may see the Magi's story interpretative, it represents the people's view and their acceptance becomes the truth. In this way, the participants in the *folia de reis* in remote Brazil validate the story of the Nativity as they were told and depicted on the banner, and the tradition is reinforced through paintings, sculpture, architecture, and other historical attributes. In this scenario, the Magi came from the east, following a star, which has been considered to be an alignment of planets or a comet. In either scenario, Christians agree that the Bethlehem star was a unique astronomical event. These assumptions and historical events reflect the deep-rooted aspects, which surround the birth of Christ and the Magi's real story. In any case, the story described in this research through pictures, paintings, stories, scenarios, and carvings is still being used as inspiration for *folia de reis* tradition and community leaders.

## REFERENCES

- Araújo, Alceu Maynard. 1949. *Folias de Reis de Cunha*. São Paulo: Sep. da Revista do Museu Paulista.
- Beckwith, John. 1966. *The Adoration of the Magi in Whalebone*. Victoria & Albert Museum. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Bennet, J.G. 1995. *The Masters of Wisdom*. Santa Fé, Bennet Books.
- Braga, Teófilo. 1885. *O Povo Português nos seus Costumes, Crenças e Tradições*. Lisboa: Portugal.
- Cascudo, Luís da Câmara Cascudo. 1943. *Antologia do Folclore Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Editor Martins.  
 \_1967. *Flor dos Romances Trágicos*. Rio de Janeiro: Edição do Autor.  
 \_1980. *Dicionário do Folclore Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Editora Melhoramentos.
- Castro, Zaíde Maciel de. & Couto, Aracy do Prado. 1961. *Folias de Reis*. Editora Itambé. Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Departamento de Assuntos Culturais. Editora Itambé.
- Chaves, Luís. 1942. *Páginas Folclóricas*. Porto: Portugal.
- Dias, Jaime Lopes. 1944. *Etnografia da Beira*. Lisboa: Portugal.

- Freeman, Margaret B. 1955. *The Story of The Three Kings: Melchior, Balthasar and Jaspas, which was written by John of Hildesheim in the fourteenth century and is now retold by Margaret B. Freeman*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.
- Gilbert, Adrian G. 1996. *Magi the Quest for a Secret Tradition*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Hoehner, Harold W. 1981 *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan
- Holweck, F. G. 1969. *A Biographical Dictionary of the Saints*. Gale research Company. Detroit: Book Tower.
- Hudson, Richard. 1982. *Folia. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Edited by Stanley Sadie. London: McMillan Publishers limited.
- Moulton, James Hope. 1917. *The Treasure of The Magi - A Study of Modern Zoroastrianism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Stanley and Sadie. 1980. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Mcmillan Publishers limited.
- Parker, Jack Horace. 1967. *Gil Vicente*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.
- Porto, Guilherme. 1982. *As folias de Reis no Sul de Minas*. Rio de Janeiro: MEC-SESC-FUNARTE. Instituto Nacional do Folclore.
- Reily, Suzel A. 1995. *Political Implications of Musical Performance*. *The World of Music* vol. 37(2): 72-102.
- Schwartz, Martin. 1993. *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*. Microsoft Corporation. Funk & Wagnall's Corporation.
- Tyre, Carl A. 1938. *Religious Plays of 1590. Comedia de la Historia y Adoración de los Tres Reyes Magos, Comedia de Buena y Santa Doctrina, Comedia del Nacimiento y Vida de Judas*. Yowa: University of Yowa.
- Tournier, Michel. 1982. *The Four Wise Men*. Translated from the French by Ralph Manheim. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Upham, Francis W. 1873. *The Wise Men: Who they were; How They Came to Jerusalem*. New York: Nelson & Phillips.
- Young, Karl. 1933. *The Drama of the Medieval Church*. Volume 2, pp. 2-101. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Zaehner, Robert C. 1956. *The Teachings of The Magi* - A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.