

The Legend of Aphroditianus

A new translation and introduction

by Katharina Heyden

The *Legend of Aphroditianus* (*Leg. Aphr.*; CANT 55) is a supplement to the pericope of the adoration of the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12. It first explains how the Magi knew about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem and then describes their journey and their encounter with Christ and Mary in more detail than the canonical account. In the Slavic cultures, especially in medieval Russia, *Leg. Aphr.* was a popular text that was read during the Christmas liturgy. In consequence, all modern Russian collections of Christian apocrypha contain *Leg. Aphr.*¹ In the West, however, the legend has remained almost completely unknown, for in Greek manuscripts it is rarely transmitted on its own,² but is usually embedded in larger literary works that were themselves long-neglected by scholars, even though they are preserved in many manuscripts. *Leg. Aphr.* is also known in scholarship as the “Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ,” falsely attributed to Julius Africanus.

Contents

In its first part (chaps. 1–6), *Leg. Aphr.* describes a miracle in the temple of Hera in Persia (1) at the time of Christ’s birth. In the presence of the Persian king and a priest, the statues of the temple dance and sing, announcing that Hera has been made pregnant by Zeus and will give birth to a child (2). Then a star appears above the statue of Hera. A voice proclaims the birth, and all the other statues fall down upon their faces (3). The wise men of Persia interpret the miracle as an announcement of the birth of the Messiah in Judah (4). In the evening, the god Dionysus appears to confirm this interpretation and to proclaim the end of the worship of the pagan gods (5). Then the king sends the Magi to Judea with gifts, the star pointing them along their way (6). The second part of *Leg. Aphr.* (chaps. 7–9) is a report of the Magi about their journey to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, including a discussion between the Magi and the Jewish leaders (7), and their meeting and encounter with Mary and the two-year-old Jesus (8). Of interest here are the precise description of Mary’s appearance (8:4) and the remark that the Magi brought back to Persia a likeness of the mother and child, which they placed in the temple where the star originally appeared. The report of the Magi concludes with the appearance of an angel who, warning the Magi of a plot against them, advises them to return home (9).

1. For an overview of these editions see Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 32–39.

2. Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 134–226, lists 15 Greek manuscripts that transmit *Leg. Aphr.* on its own; the other 43 present the legend as part of *De gestis in Perside*.

Transmission and Editions

Leg. Aphr. has a complex and fascinating history of transmission. The oldest written version is found in an anonymous Greek work entitled *De gestis in Perside* (*Pers.*), a fifth- or sixth-century fictional religious dispute between pagans, Christians, Jews, and a Persian magus at the court of the Sasanian Empire,³ in which *Leg. Aphr.* plays an important part. In *Pers.*, Aphroditianus is a pagan philosopher appointed by the king of Persia as an independent arbitrator in the dispute, but Aphroditianus turns out to be a defender of the Christian position, quoting *Leg. Aphr.* as the main argument in favor of the Christian truth.

Traces of *Leg. Aphr.* can be found in later literature, though these hint too of an earlier origin for the text. In the eighth century, John of Damascus included the legend in a *Homily on the Incarnation of Christ* (*Homilia in nativitatem Domini*),⁴ presenting it to the audience as a pagan oracle explaining why the Magi knew about the birth of Christ. Inserting biblical texts, omitting certain passages, and altering some formulations, John modified the text of *Leg. Aphr.* to harmonize the legend with the Gospels. Two illustrated Byzantine manuscripts of this homily from the second half of the eleventh century (Jerusalem, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Taphou 14 and Mount Athos, Esphigmenou 14) contain splendid miniatures accompanying the homily, bearing witness to the popularity of *Leg. Aphr.* at the time of the Macedonian dynasty of the Byzantine Empire (867–1056).⁵

The Slavonic versions of *Leg. Aphr.* are excerpts of the legend from *Pers.* translated from Greek. The first of these translations (Slav I) was made, probably in Bulgaria, in the tenth century.⁶ Through the southern Slavs, *Leg. Aphr.* was transmitted to Russia during the twelfth century, where it became very popular and was revised several times.⁷ In the

3. On *Pers.* see Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*, 46–271; Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 13–133; Déroche, “La polémique anti-judaïque”; Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 116–70; Külzer, *Disputationes*, 112–27.

4. Bonifatius Kotter, ed., *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos* (5 vols.; PTS 7, 12, 17, 22, 29; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969–1988), 5:324–47. Even though the homily is preserved in 58 manuscripts, it was neglected by scholars because its authenticity was denied for a long time (see Kotter, *Schriften des Johannes*, 307–10). A historical and theological analysis of the homily is given by Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 94–115.

5. The miniatures of Esphigmenou 14 are published in Stylianos M. Pelekanidis et al., *The Treasures of Mount Athos. Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol. 2: *The Monasteries of Iveron, St. Pantaleimon, Esphigmenou, and Chilandari* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1975), 223–52, tabl. 344–407; the 17 miniatures from *Leg. Aphr.* are reproduced in Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 333–41, tabl. 14–30; the nine folios with miniatures on *Leg. Aphr.* from Taphou 14 were first completely published by Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 344–52, tabl. 38–48. For iconographical and historical analyses see Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 67–93.

6. The most ancient Old Bulgarian manuscript of *Leg. Aphr.* dates from the thirteenth century, but it is likely that the first translation was made already during the reign of King Simeon the Great (893–927), who ordered many translations of Greek Christian works.

7. Of the 92 Slavonic manuscripts of *Leg. Aphr.* 78 come from Russia, most of them being part of liturgical collections. An examination of *Leg. Aphr.* and its various redactions in medieval Russia is given in Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 20–56. In the sixteenth century, the Greek monk Maksim Grek published a polemical essay in Russian entitled “Speech of the monk Maksim Grek from the Holy Mountain on accusation and conviction of the lying writing of the erroneous Persian Aphroditianus” (see Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 20–25). Maksim formulated three conditions to accept ancient Christian works within the Orthodox Church: first, that the author is well known and highly esteemed by the ancient authorities; second, that it corresponds with apostolic doctrines and traditions; and third, that it does not contain self-contradictions. In his polemics, Maksim tries to show that *Leg. Aphr.* does not meet these

sixteenth century, Aphroditianus was regarded as one among other pagan figures—such as the Sibyl, Hermes, Homer, and Plato—who are said to have announced the coming of Christ; this association is reflected in Aphroditianus's representation on the bronze portals of Kremlin cathedrals.⁸ The second Slavonic translation (Slav II) was made in the fourteenth century, probably by Serbian monks of Mount Athos, but based on a different Greek text.⁹ This version was translated later into Romanian.¹⁰ It differs from Slav I in some respects, two details being especially remarkable. First, the names of the Magi are given—Elimelech, Elisur, and Eliav—together with etymological explanations (see the note to *Leg. Aphr.* 6). Second, in the title of this version the legend is attributed to “the presbyter Philippus who was syncellus of the great John Chrysostom.” This attribution deserves attention because it provides clues as to how *Leg. Aphr.* came to be incorporated into *Pers.*

The title of Slav II corresponds to an addendum to *Pers.* that clarifies the identity of the historian Philippus whose *History*, according to the initial sentences of *Pers.*, caused the dispute between pagans and Christians in the Sasanian kingdom. The note reads:

This Philippus was a presbyter and syncellus of John, the archbishop of Constantinople. He wrote the whole [history] organizing it in periods in such an admirable way that no other of the historiographers can compare with him. The same presbyter narrated that from the day on which the star appeared in the temple, every year on the same day until the ascension of the Lord, all statues were uttering their own characteristic voices so that the whole city remained there to watch the great miracles and the annual appearance of the star.¹¹

This note identifies the Philippus of *Pers.* with Philip of Side, a Christian historian who, in the fifth century, compiled a monumental *Historia Christianae* in Constantinople, of which only a few fragments have survived.¹² Moreover, mentioning the report of the annual repetition of the miracle in the temple of Hera, the addendum shows that *Leg. Aphr.* was a part of Philip's *Hist. Christ.*, possibly of a book entitled “Hellenic Oracles.”¹³ But was Philip the author of the legend? This seems improbable for two reasons. First, his *Hist. Christ.* is a monumental work composed of many sources.¹⁴ Second, *Leg. Aphr.* contains

criteria. Unintentionally, with this polemic Maksim Grek bears witness to the popularity of *Leg. Aphr.* at his time.

8. Aphroditianus stands beside Homer on the north-portal of the Blagoveschenskij Sobor and on the south-portal of the Usbenskij Sobor, in both cases accompanied by the inscription, “For God was born from the immaculate virgin Mary, in him is the origin of faith.” Of course, Aphroditianus differs from these other pagan figures in that he did not live prior to Jesus. For pictures of the portals see Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 304–7, tabl. 1–4.

9. The Greek pattern of this version is preserved in Mount Athos, Vatopedi, gr. 10 (14th cent.), which contains the entire text of *Pers.*

10. For a German translation of the Romanian version, which survives in a single manuscript of the seventeenth century, see Gaster, “Die rumänische Version.”

11. The Greek text can be found in Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*, 45; and Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 488–90.

12. A descriptive catalogue of the fragments is given in Heyden, “Christliche Geschichte.”

13. This title is mentioned in *Pers.* 5.5 (Bratke), where Aphroditianus asks a slave to read out a passage of Philip's *Hist. Christ.* entitled “Hellenic Oracles.” According to Socrates Scholasticus (*Hist. eccl.* 7.27.4), *Hist. Christ.* was divided into 36 books that were thematically arranged.

14. This is evident from the polemics of Socrates (*Hist. eccl.* 7.27) and Photius (*Bib.*, cod. 35).

some elements that point to a place of origin other than Constantinople and to a time earlier than the fifth century.¹⁵

In 1804, the German scholar Johann Freiherr von Aretin published for the first time a Greek text of *Leg. Aphr.* using two manuscripts from Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Monac. gr. 61 and 199); the text was accompanied by a translation into Latin.¹⁶ Athanasius Vassiliev published the entire text of *Pers.* in 1893 from two manuscripts: Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synod. gr. 252 (11th cent.) and Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, Palat. gr. 364 (14th/15th cent.).¹⁷ This manuscript base was expanded dramatically by Eduard Bratke in 1899,¹⁸ and Pauline Bringel in her unpublished thesis from 2007.¹⁹ Bratke compared 29 manuscripts of *Pers.* and chose Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 1084 (11th cent.) as the base text for his edition. Bratke mentioned also an Armenian version of the text, but this has not yet been published.²⁰ Bringel included 14 more manuscripts and divided the evidence into two redactions: a short one that is preserved in Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, Palat. gr. 4 (10th/11th cent.) and a long one found in all other manuscripts, of which Bringel favored Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Ms. gr. 467 (11th cent.) as the best witness. In 2009, Katharina Heyden published a monograph on the transmission of *Leg. Aphr.* in the East and the West, discussing the literary, theological, and historical aspects for every stage of the text's transmission as well as the origin of the legend.²¹ In this study, *Leg. Aphr.* was presented as an independent apocryphal writing for the first time to readers in the Western world.

Date and Provenance

The miracle in the temple of Hera that is narrated in the first part of *Leg. Aphr.* (chaps. 1–6) has its parallels in the cult of the Syrian goddess Atargatis in Hierapolis, as described by the Roman author Lucian of Samosata in his satirical work *De Dea Syria* in the second century.²² According to Lucian, the goddess was called “Syrian Hera,” and her statue

15. See the discussion of all pre-Constantinian elements in *Leg. Aphr.* in Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 226–94.

16. Aretin, *Beyträge*, 49–69, published again in PG 10:97–108. The manuscripts of Munich attribute the legend to an “Africanus.” Therefore, the legend was considered to be a work of the second-century Christian historian Julius Africanus. This attribution was accepted by the editors of the *Patrologia Graeca* as well as by those of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF 6:127–30), even though Aretin himself in his introduction doubted it. Most likely, the attribution to Julius Africanus is based on a misunderstanding of the Greek abbreviation *Aphr* that actually does not refer to “Africanus” but to “Aphroditianus.” Bringel, however, does not totally abandon the attribution to Julius Africanus (cf. Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 13–14). But, there is information in *Aphr.* that clearly contradicts a note in the *Chronography* of Julius Africanus. According to *Leg. Aphr.* 8:4, Christ was nearly two years old when the Magi came to Bethlehem, whereas Julius Africanus notes that the child was only seven days old. Cf. Julius Africanus, *Chron.*, fragment T 91 in the edition of Martin Wallraff, *Iulius Africanus: Chronographiae. The Extant Fragments* (trans. William Adler; GCS NF 15; Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2007), 274–75.

17. Vassiliev, *Anecdota graeco-byzantina*, 73–125, with manuscript details on pp. xxvii–xxxii.

18. Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*.

19. Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 44–61. Bringel presented a detailed introduction to *Pers.*, a new critical edition, and a translation into French.

20. Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*, 128.

21. Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*.”

22. Edition and commentary in Jane L. Lightfoot, ed., *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 247–86. Other sources for the cult of Hierapolis are Plutarch, *Crassus*; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*; Athenaeus Grammaticus, *Deipnosophistae*; Aratus Latinus, *Phaenomena*, as well as iconographic and archaeological evidence.

combined characteristics of other goddesses, such as Athena, Aphrodite, Selene, Rhea, Artemis, and Nemesis. Her statue was adorned with the belt and the crown of the goddess Urania. By night, a precious stone above the statue of the goddess lit up the temple. In addition to the goddess in the cella, the temple also featured a statue of Zeus-Helios and another mysterious statue identified by many people as Dionysus, who was regarded as the founder of the temple. The temple was sumptuously adorned with gold and silver, and the statues would move and give oracles of their own accord. Near the temple, there was a pool of spring water with fish that were regarded as holy to the goddess. Iconographical evidence shows that Atargatis, the Syrian goddess par excellence, was adored as “Source” and “Virgin.” All these elements suggest that the origin of *Leg. Aphr.* can be located in the environment of the cult in Hierapolis—i.e., in western Syria. The Christian author of *Leg. Aphr.* presumably intended to offer his audience an *interpretatio christiana* of this popular pagan cult.²³

The argument for a Syrian origin is plausible also with regard to the second part of *Leg. Aphr.* (chaps. 7–9). The notice that the Magi at their return placed a portrait of Mary and the child in the royal temple recalls the Abgar Correspondence, according to which Hannan, the courier of King Abgar, made a likeness of Jesus that was placed in the royal palace of Edessa (*Doctr. Addai* 6). Pauline Bringel supposes that, in composing *Leg. Aphr.*, a west Syrian author intended to compete with the Christians of Edessa, claiming the existence of an older image of Christ.²⁴ Provided that these parallels are accurate, *Leg. Aphr.* was probably composed in the third century, because the cult of Hierapolis prospered in the first three centuries of CE, and the Abgar Correspondence also originated at this time—Eusebius of Caesarea (*Hist. eccl.* 1.13) refers to the legend, without mentioning, however, the portrait of Christ.²⁵ In addition, the eucharistic use of the Christian symbol of the fish in combination with the mention of a “source” (see, e.g., *Leg. Aphr.* 2:2 where Hera is named Pege, meaning “source” or “spring”) appears also in the epitaph inscriptions of Abercius and Pectorius that date from the early third century.²⁶ The original language of *Leg. Aphr.* was certainly Greek.

Literary and Theological Importance

Leg. Aphr. combines the characteristics of two literary forms that were very popular in the pre-Constantinian era. In its first part, the text presents “hellenic oracles” in favor of Christianity similar to those attributed by Christians to the Sibyllines, Hermes Trismegistos, Zoroaster, Hystaspes, and other pagan authorities from the East. In comparison with other early Christian collections of oracles, however, the special feature of *Leg. Aphr.* is its literary form, for here the hellenic oracles are presented within a narrative frame.

The second part of *Leg. Aphr.* can be compared to other apocryphal retellings of the

23. See Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 261–70. The location in Syria, however, seems to contradict the first paragraph of *Leg. Aphr.* (1:1), where the temple is localized in the capital of Persia. Perhaps the author already knew a tradition according to which the Magi came from Persia, or perhaps the first sentences of *Leg. Aphr.* were missing in the original legend and were added only by Philip of Side or by the unknown author of *Pers.*

24. Bringel, “Une polémique religieuse,” 54–55.

25. Bratke (*Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*, 151–57) places *Leg. Aphr.* within the context of the mariological controversy of the fifth century. In my view, however, this is not conclusive because the characteristic term of this time, *theotokos*, does not appear in the text.

26. Text and brief commentary on the inscriptions in Margherita Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* (4 vols.; Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1967–1978), 4:380–81 (Abercius) and 4:487–88 (Pectorius).

infancy of Christ, such as the second-century *Protevangelium of James* or the *Liber de Nativitate Salvatoris* (also known as the *J Composition*). But while *Prot. Jas.* was designed to defend the virginity of Mary before a Jewish or Jewish-Christian audience, *Leg. Aphr.* was addressed to pagans and gentile Christians, drawing on the pagan myth of the holy wedding of male and female gods and combining it with the Magi pericope of Matt 2:1–12.

The manifold transmission of *Leg. Aphr.* testifies to the popularity of such a positive use of pagan elements in support of Christianity in various times and contexts. Unfortunately, this openness toward pagans comes alongside polemics against the Jews (see the encounter between the Magi and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem in *Leg. Aphr.* 7).

It is impossible to assign *Leg. Aphr.* clearly to a specific theological school. Composed in an epoch that was rightly called the “laboratory of Christian theology,”²⁷ the legend combines elements of various theological doctrines. Thus, the rejection of the idea that Pege-Mary was made pregnant by an earthly carpenter (2:3) seems to be a reaction to Jewish-Christian groups that denied the divinity of Jesus and the virginity of Mary and emphasized that the carpenter Joseph was the father of Mary’s child.²⁸ The phrase “bride of the triple-named single divinity” (3:1) recalls the doctrine of the Sabellians, who used the term *triōnumos* to express the hypostatical unity of the divine persons.²⁹ On the other hand, the humanity of Christ is emphasized in the interpretation of the miracle by Persian interpreters of prodigies who proclaim “the son of the Omnipotent, carried in bodily form in the bodily arms of a woman” (4:2) and in the report of the Magi who mention that Jesus looked like his mother and that he “smiled and leaped” (8:7). In addition, *Leg. Aphr.* 7 contains soteriological statements that are known from Jewish-Christian writings, especially from the eighth book of the *Sibylline Oracles* (see *Leg. Aphr.* 5 and *Sib. Or.* 8:265–70).

Altogether, the main intention of *Leg. Aphr.* seems to be the defense of the divinity of Christ against Jewish Christians on the one side, and of the humanity of Christ against monarchianistic tendencies on the other. These tendencies, which work to emphasize the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ, is expressed in *Leg. Aphr.* 4:2, in the interpretation of the miracle given by the wise men of Persia: “a divine and royal root has risen, bearing the stamp of a heavenly and earthly king.” From the perspective of the history of religions, the mixture of pagan and Christian elements in favor of a popular mariology and Christology is striking, since it shows that the differentiation between pagans and Christians was actually not as clear as many Christian apologists tried to suggest. The positive representation of the Persian interpreters of prodigies and of the Magi who, according to *Leg. Aphr.*, recognize the meaning of the miracle immediately and of their own accord, points to a certain affinity of *Leg. Aphr.* and *Rev. Magi*.³⁰

Translation

The accompanying translation of *Leg. Aphr.* is based on the critical editions of *Pers.* established by E. Bratke in 1899 and P. Bringel in 2007.³¹ The relevant differences between Bratke and Bringel and my own text-critical decisions are documented in the notes. Fur-

27. Christoph Marksches, “Alte Kirche,” *RGK* 3 (1998): 1:344–60 at 353.

28. Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.27; Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 16.12.

29. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* 3.8.23; Eusebius, *Eccl. theol.* 3.6; Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 3.7.15.

30. On early Christian traditions on the Magi see Heyden, “*Erzählung des Aphroditian*,” 287–93; and Thomas Holtmann, *Die Magier vom Osten und der Stern: Mt 2,1–12 im Kontext frühchristlicher Traditionen* (Marburger Theologische Studien 87; Marburg: Elwert, 2005).

31. *Leg. Aphr.* previously appeared in English translation in *ANF* 6:128–30 as a work of Julius Africanus.

thermore, the notes document the productive reception of *Leg. Aphr.* in the *Homily* of John of Damascus and in the Slavonic tradition. The *Homily* of John of Damascus is translated from the critical edition by Kotter; Slav I. from the text established by Veder,³² and Slav II from the edition by Bobrov.³³ The chapter numbering is newly established. It enables one to reference *Leg. Aphr.* without recourse to the writings in which the legend was embedded during its long history of transmission.

Sigla

A	Pers. from Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 1084
C	Pers. from Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, gr. 467
J	Pers. from Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, Palat. gr. 4
JD	John of Damascus, <i>Homilia in nativitate Domini</i>
Slav I	First Slavonic translation
Slav II	Second Slavonic translation

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32. Veder, “Slavonic Tale.”

33. Bobrov, *Apocryphal Legend* (Russian), 127–32.

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