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SILVIO ZAMORANI EDITORE

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA, THE GLASS FLOOR
AND THE FLOATING TREE-TRUNK*

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1. *The Queen of Sheba in the Scriptures*

The Queen of Sheba, together with Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca and Susanna,¹ is one of the very limited number of female Old Testament characters who appear not only in Jewish but also in Christian-inspired and, finally, Islamic literature. This privileged position derives from the fact that she is named in the sacred writings of all three of the revealed religions. What varies considerably, however, from one sacred text to another is the tone in which her meeting with Solomon is recounted.²

The pericopes dealing with the Queen of Sheba in the Old³ and New Testa-

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¹ Cf. PENNACCHIETTI, F.A., *Susanna nel deserto. Riflessi di un racconto biblico nella cultura arabo-islamica*, Turin 1998, Silvio Zamorani.

² A documentary by Martin Messonnier, entitled 'Sur les traces de la reine de Saba. À la recherche d'une figure de légende au Yémen, en Israël et en Éthiopie', was shown on the evening of Sunday 7 November 1999 on the Franco-German television channel Arte. It was preceded by King Vidor's film 'Solomon and the Queen of Sheba', starring Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida.

³ Cf. I Kings 10:1-10,13: '(1) The queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame and came to test him with difficult questions. (2) She arrived in Jerusalem with a very large retinue, with camels laden with spices and an immense quantity of gold and precious stones. Having reached Solomon, she discussed with him everything that she had in mind, (3) and Solomon had an answer for all her questions; not one of them was too obscure for the king to answer for her... (10) And she presented the king with a hundred and twenty talents of gold and great quantities of spices and precious stones; no such wealth of spices ever came again as those which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon... (13) And King Solomon, in his turn, presented the queen of Sheba with everything that she expressed a wish for, besides those presents which he gave her with a munificence worthy of King Solomon. After which, she went home to her own country, she and her servants' (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, London 1985). See

ments⁴ are informed by the most irenic universalism. In the first Book of Kings and in Chronicles she is described as an intelligent, wise, generous woman, with not the least hint at the fact that she belonged to a nation of idolatrous Gentiles. Indeed, in the Gospels the tale of the Queen of Sheba who 'came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon' is offered as proof of God's predilection for those pagans who have abandoned idol-worship. Together with the Ninivites whom Jonah converted, the 'Queen of the South', as she is called, at the end of time will judge and condemn the generation of Jesus for failing to accept a message of salvation of far greater importance than Solomon's.

In contrast, in the Koran (xxvii, 16-44)⁵ the tale of the Queen of Sheba is presented within a framework of fable as an example of the vain erudition of the polytheists. Despite her wit and learning, she cannot hold out against the 'true Knowledge' (v. 42) which God grants to his faithful. The whole passage, in the Koran, is thus pervaded by a spirit of vengefulness and condemnation of the presumptuousness and arrogance of the idolaters. The Queen of Sheba, however, is converted.

A further difference to be noted in the accounts given of the Queen of Sheba in the sacred texts of the three religions is the way each presents the protagonist. In the Old Testament and in the Koran she is a proud woman of outstanding intelligence; but whereas, in the Jewish text, it is she who puts Solomon's wisdom to the test with her abstruse riddles, in the Koran it is Solomon who uses two marvels to test the Queen's powers of judgment.

There is nothing of this in the Gospels, where the Queen of Sheba is a deeply religious woman, thirsty for knowledge and ready to confront any difficulty in the pursuit of her ideal of perfection. No least indication is given of her supposed love of riddles or occult sciences.

These are the premises from which we may begin our examination of how, with notable divergences, repeated points of contact and surprising additions, the narrative threads may be disentangled in the various accounts, in Jewish, Christian and Islamic literatures, of the meeting of the Queen of Sheba with Solomon.

also the parallel text in II Chronicles 9:1-9,12.

⁴ Cf. Matthew 12:42: 'On Judgment Day the Queen of the South will appear against this generation and they will be its condemnation, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and look, there is something greater than Solomon here' (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, London 1985). See also the parallel text in Luke 9:31. The Queen of Sheba is called 'Queen of the South' as in the *Testament of Solomon*, cf. MCCOWN 1922:64* xxi, 1: ἡ βασίλισσα νότου.

⁵ Cf. Koran xxvii 'The *shra* of the Ant': '(42) So, when [the Queen] came, it was said unto her: "Is thy throne like this?" She answered: "It is as though it were the very one." And Solomon said, "We were given the knowledge before her, and we had surrendered to Allah." (43) And all that she was wont to worship instead of Allah hindered her, for she came of disbelieving folk. (44) It was said unto her: "Enter the hall." And when she saw it she deemed it a pool and bared her legs. Solomon said: "Lo! it is a hall, made smooth of glass." She said: "My Lord! Lo! I have wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds." ' (*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, translated by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, New York, undated; cf. BAUSANI 1955:275-277).

2. *Under the sign of the hoopoe*

Strange as it may seem, apart from the Old Testament and Gospel data already mentioned, the legend of the Queen of Sheba does not appear in Jewish and Christian contexts until the 10th century, at the height of the Middle Ages. It would appear that for almost a thousand years the official literatures of Judaism and Christianity remained firmly and obstinately silent in the face of popular traditions surrounding the meeting of Solomon with this queen.

It is, however, reasonable to suppose that stories and legends about the power and wisdom of King David's successor were circulating in Palestine in the first millennium BC, together with tales of the Queen of Sheba's riddles and the supposed marriage of these two extraordinary sovereigns. There were probably details in some of these legends which in later ages, when religious sensibilities had changed, might conflict with the popular image of Solomon as the highest representation of human wisdom.⁶ The fact remains that there is no mention of his relationship with the Queen of Sheba in the Jerusalem Talmud, nor in the Babylonian Talmud, nor in the oldest *Midrashîm*,⁷ nor in any other kind of rabbinical literature.

Christian literature, despite its greater breadth and detail, is in this respect no different from Jewish sources. There was an unwritten law forbidding public treatment of a subject which was regarded as taboo. It is, however, worth recollecting that the first mention of the Queen of Sheba in mediaeval Latin literature goes back to the middle of the 9th century. John of Seville, in a letter to Álvaro Paulo (d. 861), a prominent representative of the church in the Caliphate of Cordova, explains to him that Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, composed 'psalms' in which animals appeared. The protagonists of one of these 'psalms' are the frog (*rana*) and the hoopoe. *Rana* is clearly an erroneous copying of *regina*, 'queen'.⁸

In these circumstances, there is obviously great value in the evidence of those verses of the Koran which relate to the Queen of Sheba, and in the comments and sermons of early Islam which touch on this subject. Furthermore, the oldest Islamic tradition offers confirmation of the quality and great antiquity of those versions of the legend passed down in mediaeval Jewish manuscripts.

It is a legend which must already have been firmly rooted in the collective imagination of the Arab peoples in the time of Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam.

⁶ Cf. I Kings 5:9-14: '(9) God gave Solomon immense wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sand on the sea-shore. (10) The wisdom of Solomon surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. (11) He was wiser than anyone else... (13) He could discourse on plants from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing on the wall; and he could discourse on animals and birds and reptiles and fish. (14) Men from all nations came to hear Solomon's wisdom, and he received gifts from all the kings in the world.'

⁷ Homiletic commentaries on the Scriptures.

⁸ Cf. D'ALVERNY 1965:588-599. I am grateful to Alessandro Vitale Brovarone for indicating this text.

Many settlers in the Arabian peninsula, especially in the Yemen, were Israelites, and in the northern fringes of the desert, in Syria and Mesopotamia, various nomadic tribes had embraced Christianity. Hence the Koran text has no need to expatiate on details, but simply describes the essence of the situation with flashes of allusion, bringing it to life in the hearers' minds. Far more space is dedicated, in the same passage, to eulogies and declarations of submission to the One God. From Jewish tradition and from the first commentaries on the Koran, the plot may be reconstructed as follows:

Solomon, who loved banquets and feasts, presented an extraordinary spectacle one day to the kings of the Orient: a parade of devils, spirits and animals from heaven and earth. The only creature missing was the hoopoe, which arrived late, explaining by way of excuse that it had just discovered, at the end of the earth, a very wealthy country governed by a woman. The bird promised to bring her to Solomon's feet in chains, if the king wished.

Solomon was delighted and gave the hoopoe a letter ordering the queen to come and pay him homage; otherwise the birds, the spirits and the demons would conquer her country at his command. In reply the queen sent a letter and costly gifts, and set out at once on the journey.

When after seven years' travelling she reached Jerusalem, Solomon welcomed her at the royal baths (according to Jewish sources) or in a pavilion with a glass floor (according to the Koran). This unusual welcome disconcerted the queen, who mistook the floor of the foyer for an expanse of water. So, as she crossed the threshold, she raised the hem of her dress just enough to prevent it from getting wet.⁹

This momentary confusion on the part of the queen allowed Solomon to admire her legs, but also to realise that they were much too hairy. Disappointed, he provoked her with a far from courteous remark: 'Madam, your beauty is feminine, but the hair on your legs is masculine. Well, hairy legs are fine for a man but revolting on a woman'.¹⁰ The queen's pride was hurt, and she reacted by putting a long series of riddles to Solomon, only to discover, to her astonishment, that he was cleverer than she, for he solved them without difficulty. And so she praised and worshipped the One God, and after receiving all she most desired from Solomon she took her leave.

This, in short, is the plot of the story in the *Targûm Shenî*, a collection of homilies, in Aramaic, on the book of Esther, which is thought to have been composed at the end of the 7th or the beginning of the 8th century, though it is unrecorded until the 11th century.

What distinguishes this version from every other, Jewish or Islamic, is a detail which would confirm its antiquity. In the Jewish version, Solomon receives the Queen in his private baths, whereas in the Islamic version they are in a glass building¹¹ or in a palace with a glass floor.¹² The difference is not without signifi-

⁹ On the gesture of raising the hem of a garment when crossing a stretch of water, see Isaiah 47:2.

¹⁰ Cf. GROSSFELD 1991, 115-116.

¹¹ Cf. GINZBERG 1968, IV, 145.

¹² Koran xxvii, 44. The Solomonic theme of the glass floor is found in the *lambda* edition of the *Romance of Alexander* (early eighth century), cf. TRUMPF 1966. In this Byzantine text Alexander de-

cance, though the result is identical: irrespective of the exact setting, the Queen in any case mistakenly believes that she is standing before a stretch of water. I believe, however, that it is more likely that the shiny floor of a bath is transformed into the glass or crystal paving of an enchanted palace, rather than vice versa.

3. *The Jewish and Islamic versions: an etiological account*

All the versions, whether Jewish or Islamic, share a dominant characteristic in the transposition of the figure of Solomon from the dimension of myth attributed to him in the Bible¹³ to that of the wonderful and esoteric.¹⁴ This is why the slight figure of the hoopoe¹⁵ appears in the tale with remarkable duties. This bird, whose delicacy is counterbalanced by the brilliance of its tall erectile tuft, symbolises that subtle universe where anything is possible.¹⁶ It is a member of the numberless hosts of creatures of heaven and earth, of demons and spirits, which obey the orders of the King, build him magnificent palaces and travel to the ends of the earth to bring him whatever he wants. Solomon knows their language and has a sovereign familiarity with them. And in any case, the hoopoe has always been regarded as creature of peculiar authority: this is the bird which, in Aristophanes, guards the heavenly gates of the 'City of the Birds',¹⁷ and which leads the other birds to their mystical encounter with the Phoenix.¹⁸

Balancing the exaltation of the supernatural powers granted by God to the King of Judah, the figure of the Queen of Sheba has been somewhat demonised¹⁹ and in the best cases presented ambiguously. Direct Jewish tradition considers her neither

scribes to his mother Olympia how he was welcomed in the palace of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia. He too believed at first that he was going into a covered pool.

¹³ Cf. I Kings 5:9-14; Matthew 6:28-29; Luke 12:27.

¹⁴ Solomon is supposed to have received from the archangel Michael a magic ring which gave him power over devils, cf. SCHÖRER 1997, 490-495; Koran xxxviii, 36-38: '(36) So We made subservient to him... - (37) the devils, every builder and diver, - (38) and others linked together in chains' (*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, undated).

¹⁵ The hoopoe, whose name imitates the call ('po-po-po') it gives during the mating season, is in Hebrew called *dūkifut*, in Jewish and Syriac Aramaic *ṣarnāgōl barrā* (literally 'wild cockerel'), in Arabic *hudhud*, in north-eastern Neo-Aramaic *hāpūpkā*, *hudhud* and also *ṣēra d-malkā Slēmūn*, 'King Solomon's bird', and in Kurdish *pepūsilemanke*, 'Solomon's owl'.

¹⁶ Cf. BAUSANI 1955, 612; VENZLAFF 1994, 83-121. The hoopoe is in a sense an ambiguous creature: apart from its call, which is often mistaken for the hooting of an owl or the barking of a dog, it is also known to the classical Arab writers by its repulsive smell, cf. VENZLAFF 1994:64-67; 113-117. This may be why the Torah (Leviticus 11:19) counts it among the impure animals which may not be eaten.

¹⁷ It is probable that in popular Greek etymology ἔκρω 'hoopoe' was connected with ἐπόπτης 'supervisor, inspector', cf. RIBEZZO 1930:108. Ἐπόπτης, in the sense 'contemplator', also designated the initiate to the highest level of the Eleusinian mysteries.

¹⁸ This is the subject of the wisdom poem *Manṭiq at-tayr* 'The logic of the birds' by the Persian mystic Farīd ad-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (1119-1220?), see Carlo SACCONI, 1986.

¹⁹ Cf. LASSNER 1993.

more nor less than a witch,²⁰ while for the commentators of the Koran, she is a hybrid creature, part human and part djinn.²¹ This is why they see her as distinguished by certain carefully hidden androgynous features, such as excessively hairy legs.

On this subject the Koranic exegetes have taken up the rumour which relates that the demons who were subjugated by Solomon made him believe that, under her clothes, the Queen was concealing the hooves of a donkey.²² This being so, it is understandable that the king should have prepared one of his most brilliant tricks to check the veracity of this suggestion: the illusion of the stretch of water in his baths or in the crystal floor of his palace.

The sequel to this story may be of interest. When he discovered the truth, Solomon was angry with the demons for lying to him, and by way of reparation ordered them to invent a depilatory that should be as drastic as it was effective. They duly produced a compound of arsenic and quicklime,²³ and thanks to their ointment the Queen of Sheba's attractiveness became proverbial.²⁴ Mohammed is supposed to have said that the queen was 'one of the women with the most gorgeous legs' and that she was 'among the brides of Solomon in Paradise'. This enthusiasm on the Prophet's part did not please his young wife, 'A'isha, in the least, and she insisted on knowing whether the queen's legs were better than her own. Her prudent husband willingly acknowledged that his wife's legs were even more gorgeous.²⁵

3.1 *Two discourteous epithets*

3.1.1 *'The hairy woman'*

The whole narrative structure of the Jewish and Islamic versions turns, in effect, on the trick Solomon arranges to establish whether the queen is a human being or a devil. It is as though the only really important aspect of the meeting of the two

²⁰ Cf. GINZBERG 1968, IV, 152; DULING 1983, 983, ch. xxi, 1-4.

²¹ She was said to be the daughter of a human prince and of a princess of the djinns, cf. GRÜNBAUM 1893, 219; CANOVA 1987-88, 107-113. The Arabic term *ginn* designates a specific kind of spirits: fire genies (Koran xv, 27), invisible creatures who are sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile towards humans.

²² Cf. HERTZ 1883, 10; GRÜNBAUM 1893, 219; CANOVA 1987-88, 113.

²³ Cf. GINZBERG 1968, VI, 289, note 41; CANOVA 1987-88, 113-114.

²⁴ Cf. HERR 1914:9. According to an *exemplum* written in the thirteenth century by a French Dominican, the Queen of Sheba was moved by her unhappy experience with the mirrored floor of the royal hall (*pavimentum aulae regiae plenum speculis*) to set the fashion for long skirts (*advenit vestes longas mulieribus*): n° 888 of the *Compilacio singularis exemplorum*, MS C. 523 of the University Library, Uppsala. I am grateful to Jacques Berlioz of Lyons for indicating this remarkable datum.

²⁵ Cf. CANOVA 1987-88, 113-114. The subject of the Queen of Sheba in Islamic tradition is thoroughly dealt with in Giovanni Canova's book *La storia di Bilqis, regina di Saba*, Venice 2000: Marsilio.

sovereigns in Jerusalem were the rumours of the queen's excessively hairy legs.

In the Near East, as in the rest of the world, there is a rooted belief that witches or female devils are hirsute. However, St John (Abdullah) Philby²⁶ suggests that interest in the supposed hairiness of the Queen of Sheba is due to entirely incidental external interference: confusion of the Queen of Sheba with a famous Arabian queen about whose physical appearance unkind rumours abound. Philby identifies this latter queen with Zenobia, Queen of Tadmor, that is, Palmyra.²⁷

There are at least three reasons for giving serious consideration to the British scholar's hypothesis, for three points may link the Queen of Sheba and Solomon on the one hand, with this queen of the 3rd century AD on the other.

a) In both the Old Testament and Josephus, the belief is recorded that it was Solomon who built Palmyra;²⁸ this belief is repeated in later Jewish tradition.²⁹

b) Both Jewish and Islamic texts maintain that the Queen of Sheba was buried at Palmyra.³⁰

c) Queen Zenobia is known to Arab tradition by the nickname *az-Zabba*, 'the hairy woman'.³¹

Now, thanks to the evidence of inscriptions, we know that this is a misunderstanding. Zenobia was never called 'the hairy woman' in Aramaic or in Greek. In the language of Palmyra her name was *Bat-Zabbay*,³² and this leads me to believe that, with time, oral tradition changed, to the point of unrecognisability, a name whose meaning was no longer clear. In the Jewish legend in which Xenobia is

²⁶ Cf. PHILBY, 1981, 83-88, quoted in CANOVA 1987-88, 115.

²⁷ Zenobia, Arabian Queen of Palmyra (262-272) and *Augusta* of the Roman Empire (171) was the widow of Septimius Odenatus (Udaynat) and mother of Vaballathus (Wahballât), *dux Romanorum* and *imperator*, who shared the throne of Palmira with her. After her defeat at the hands of Aurelianus, she was taken to Italy. She died at an advanced age near Tivoli, cf. PAULY 1972, 1-8.

²⁸ Cf. I Kings 9:18 (*tāmār ba-mmīdbar* 'Tamar in the desert') and II Chronicles 8:4 (*tadmor ba-mmīdbar* 'Palmyra in the desert'), and *Jewish Antiquities* viii, 2, cf. NIESE 1955, 210, § 154, ll. 9-11. In the Massoretic text the place name *tāmār* ('palm') of I Kings 9:18 is read as *tadmor*, which is the original Semitic name of Palmyra.

²⁹ Cf. GINZBERG 1968, IV, 149.

³⁰ Cf. GINZBERG 1968, VI, 291, note 53; CANOVA 1987-88, 115; her tomb is said to have been discovered in Palmyra during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Walīd I (705-707), cf. HERTZ 1883, 10.

³¹ Arab tradition is unaware of both the Greek and the Semitic names of Zenobia (later translated as *Zaynab*). In the Arabic dictionary *Tağ al-'Arūs* ('The bride's crown'), compiled towards the end of the eighteenth century, there is mention of the hypothetical names *Bārī'a*, *Nābila* and *Maysūn* (Cairo 1306/1889, Vol. I, p. 284).

³² See the bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscriptions CIS 3947 and 3971 (part II, Vol III, pp. 119-120, 151-153), where the queen is called, in Greek, Σεπτίμια Ζηνοβία ἡ λαμπροτάτη βασιλίσσα and in Aramaic SPTMY' BTZBY NHYRT' MLKT' [*Septimya Bat-Zabbay nabhīrtā malektā*], or 'Septimia Zenobia /Bat-Zabbay illustrious queen'. *Bat-Zabbay* is a personal name meaning 'daughter of Zabbay', i.e. descendant of Zabbay, Ζαββαίος transcribed in Greek, probably the first forefather of the tribe to which the queen belonged; cf. STARK 1971, 12, 41, 80.

mentioned, she is called Zamzamay;³³ elsewhere a new etymology has been invented, linking the element Zabbay³⁴ to the Aramaic and Arabic root *ZBB*, which means 'to be hairy'. Hence the Arab nickname az-Zabbā'³⁵ and the corresponding Aramaic epithet, which probably preceded it.

Once this physical imperfection of the Queen of Palmira had been transferred to the figure of the Queen of Sheba, the etiological tale would naturally arise. How did Solomon realise that the Queen of Sheba had hairy legs?

3.1.2 'The donkey-legged woman'

Philby's hypothesis that the Queen of Sheba is to be identified with Xenobia can be contested along lines which I believe have not previously been considered.

In his *Jewish Antiquities* Josephus Flavius (38 - c. 102 AD) calls the Queen of Sheba *Nikaule* or *Nikaulis*³⁶ and identifies her, quoting Herodotus, with an Egyptian queen who lived perhaps at the end of the sixth dynasty: Herodotus calls her *Nikotris*.³⁷ This is why critics unanimously consider the name *Nikaule/Nikaulis* a copying error already present in the manuscript of Herodotus' *Histories* was consulted by Josephus.³⁸

The Greek proper nouns *Nikaule* and *Nikaulis*,³⁹ not recorded elsewhere, might represent a reinterpretation of, respectively, *NQWLH and *NQWLYS. This is how I reconstruct the rendering in Hebrew or Aramaic script of two nicknames which the Greeks habitually gave to Empusa, the female demon famous for having the legs of a donkey:⁴⁰ these nicknames were *Onokole* and *Onokolis*,⁴¹ 'the donkey-legged woman'.⁴²

³³ GINZBERG 1968, VI, 404, note 45.

³⁴ The name Zabbay <ZBY> is explained by STARK 1971, 86 as a hypocorism or abbreviation of a theophoric name written <ZBDBWL> 'gift of Bol'.

³⁵ It is probable that the Arabic feminine adjective *zabbā'* was an echo of an analogous Aramaic adjective which the sedentary peoples of Syria used to refer to Zenobia. It can be imagined that this adjective was *zabbā'* 'hairy', from the same Semitic root *ZBB* 'to be hirsute' (as in Syriac). More chivalrously, Muhammad Murtaḍa (1732-1791), author of the *Tāḡ al-'Arān*, interprets the term az-Zabbā' as 'long-haired woman', since it is related that when the queen let down her hair, it covered her completely (Cairo 1306/1888, Vol. I, p. 284).

³⁶ *Jewish Antiquities* VIII, 2: Νικαύλη or Νίκαυλις cf. NIESE 1955, 211, § 158, l.13.

³⁷ Νικότρις, cf. HERODOTUS, *Histories*, II, 100.

³⁸ Cf. HERTZ 1883,25.

³⁹ The names Νικαύλη and Νίκαυλις are compounded respectively from νίκη 'victory' and αύλη 'courtyard, entrance; residence' and αύλις 'dwelling; camp': 'home of victory'.

⁴⁰ In Greek tradition Empusa is given the epithets 'Ονοκώλη, 'Ονόκωλις, 'Ονοσκελις, 'Ονοσκελής, 'Ονόσκελος and 'Ονοπόλη, all of which mean '(woman) with donkey legs', cf. DELATTE 1927:99, 122, 233, 244, 444, 617, and ETIENNE 1954, col. 2025 and 2039.

⁴¹ 'Ονοκώλη and 'Ονόκωλις from όνος 'donkey' and κώλον 'limb, extremity'.

⁴² The phenomenon of omission of initial vowel in the transcription of a term of Greek origin (*NQWLH/*NQWLYS for 'Ονοκώλη/'Ονόκωλις) can be found in Syriac, e.g. *pr̥p̥r̥ā*, in Greek επίτροπος 'prefect', *pr̥selimōn*, Greek άφροσέληνον, 'selenite', *ql̥is̥is*, Greek έκκλησία, 'churches',

What has this terrifyingly ambiguous figure to do with the Queen of Sheba and Solomon? We may well ask – yet the *Testament of Solomon*, a Judaeo-Christian work⁴³ dated between the first and third centuries AD, mentions this very Empusa in connection with our two distinguished personages.⁴⁴ The name given her in the *Testament* is not, it is true, either Empusa or *Onokole/Onokolis*, but *Onoskelis*; but this is of very little account, since this nickname too means ‘donkey-legged woman’.

The same Judaeo-Christian text tells us that *Onoskelis* (= *Onokolis* = *Nikaulis*) took an active part in the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem,⁴⁵ and that the Queen of Sheba was among the first visitors to the site.⁴⁶ We also know that the demon *Onoskelis* had a very close relationship with Solomon. In fact, when the King asked her which angel had the power to ‘withhold’ her, she answered that it was the King’s own guardian angel.⁴⁷

We may understand, then, why the Koranic commentators regard the rumours spread by the demons as essential in the economy of the tale – those rumours which related that the Queen of Sheba was hiding the hooves of a donkey under her clothes. The demons were afraid that Solomon might become infatuated with this woman, whom they saw as a dangerous rival, and that he might end by telling her his hidden secrets. Hence the King’s curiosity and the cunning stratagem he used to ascertain the true nature of the Queen.

In addition, Islamic tradition has always called the Queen of Sheba *Bilqîs*, a name which both Silvestre de Sacy in 1827 and J. Halévy in 1905⁴⁸ linked to Josephus’ *Nikaulis*. Now that we can trace this back to *Onokolis*, ‘the donkey-legged woman’, we are in a position to make a more plausible hypothesis regarding the possible chain of transformations undergone by the nickname in a written form of Arabic which as yet lacked diacritics:

[Onokolis] *NQWLYS [Nikaulis] > *BQWLYS > *BQLYS > BLQYS [Bilqîs]

Thus Arab tradition too may preserve the memory of an ancient overlapping

cf. BROCKELMANN 1928:565b, 602a, 669a.

⁴³ On Judaeo-Christianity see MANNIS 1996.

⁴⁴ Cf. DULING 1983:964-965, ch. iv. Between 366 and 384 the so-called Ambrosiaster, in his *Comment on the Letter of Titus* (PL 17, 503), repudiates the reliability of the *Testament of Solomon*, which is truly an encyclopaedia of demonology.

⁴⁵ The female devil contributed to the building of the Temple by producing hempen ropes.

⁴⁶ Cf. DULING 1983:983, ch. xxi.

⁴⁷ In Palestinian amulets of the Roman era Solomon is shown as a knight piercing a supine female devil with a spear, cf. SCHÜRER 1997:491-492. This is the prototype of the iconography of St George. It may be that the female figure in question represents *Onoskelis* or *Onokolis*, cf. BAGATTI 1971:332.

⁴⁸ Cf. STIEGNER 1979:118-119, 123-124; CANOVA 1987-88:109.

and confusion of the Queen of Sheba, now demonised, with the mythological figure of Empusa.⁴⁹

In the light of this hypothesis the Jewish and Islamic versions of the legend of the Queen of Sheba emerge afresh as an aetiological tale, designed to confirm or invalidate the assimilation of the queen into a female demon with the hooves of a donkey.

It seems, moreover, that the *Testament of Solomon*, with the epithet *Onokolis*, and the witness of Josephus, with the name *Nikaulis*, offer evidence of a much earlier period of formation of the legend. It may have arisen in Palestine as early as the first century AD, if not even before, in a popular, largely Hellenised environment.

Consequently, to return to Zenobia, I think it more probable that it was not she, with her supposed hairiness, who inspired our legend, but on the contrary, our legend is likely to have made a substantial contribution to the spread in Near-East folklore of the insulting nickname given by posterity to the Queen of Palmyra.

One more point should be made about the Queen of Sheba's presumed donkey hooves. This motif reappeared unexpectedly in Central Europe in the twelfth century, but in a strangely modified form: the Queen is said to have been notable for her *pedes anserinos et oculos lucentes ut stellae* (feet of a goose and eyes that shone like stars).⁵⁰ This can easily be explained as scribal error (*asininos* ⇒ *ūserinos*). It is in any case a fact that, in 15th and 16th century paintings in Central European countries, the Queen of Sheba is sometimes shown with the webbed feet of a goose as she crosses the stream that separates her from Solomon.⁵¹ As late as the 18th century, according to Herr, there were in France four statues of the Queen of Sheba with the feet of a goose: the so-called 'reine Pédauque'.⁵²

4. *The Christian legend: a prophetic tale*

In the Christian context two strongly contrasting orientations of the legend are recorded, broadly corresponding, on the one hand, to Asiatic and Greek Christianity; on the other to African and Latin Christianity.

4.1 In the Greek-Byzantine area there is no documentation of the legend of the Queen of Sheba until the second half of the ninth century. Its distinguishing characteristic is its identification of the queen with Sabbe or Sambethe,⁵³ the so-called *Sibylla Hebraea*, who is supposed to have foretold the coming of Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ In

⁴⁹ In an Islamic context the first portrayals of the Queen of Sheba with devils are Persian, from the Timurid period (1387-1469), cf. NORDIO 1980:85-86, figs. 4 and 5.

⁵⁰ Cf. HERTZ 1883:23-24; LAROUSSE, *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle*, Vol. XII, Paris, undated, p. 490.

⁵¹ Cf. HERR 1914:17.

⁵² Cf. HERR 1914:31: in the Priory of Saint-Pourçain (Auvergne) and in the churches of Saint-Bénigne, Dijon, Sainte-Marie, Nesles (Champagne) and Saint-Pierre, Nevers.

⁵³ Σάββη / Σαμβήθη, Cf. PAULY-WISSOWA 1920. cols. 2119-2121, s.v. 'Sambethe'.

⁵⁴ She is the first of ten sibyls, also known as the *Sibylla Chaldaea* or *Sibylla Persica*, cf. Suidas,

this context the scriptural motif of the riddles which the queen posed to Solomon is still important,⁵⁵ whereas the Jewish and Islamic motif of the host of demons who build the temple on behalf of the King of Israel⁵⁶ is entirely set aside. In contrast, the version which is established among Christians in the African zone and subsequently in Latin Christianity omits both the riddles and the devils; it is firmly grafted on to what may be called the pearl of Christian legends, the so-called 'Story of the wood of the Cross'.⁵⁷

The oldest phase of the African and, later, Latin version of the legend seems to me to be reflected in a Coptic Egyptian tale printed in Arabic.⁵⁸ Briefly, the story is this:

When it was planned to build the temple in Jerusalem, it proved impossible to find tools strong enough to cut the necessary huge blocks of stone out of the rock. So Solomon ordered the capture of a chick of the *rukḥ*, a fabulous bird of enormous size. The vast chick was promptly caught and put under an upturned copper cauldron in the courtyard of the royal palace. The mother *rukḥ*, flying over Jerusalem, quickly identified her baby's prison and, determined to set him free, took charge of a huge tree trunk which seemed to have been rolled into position at the bottom of the Garden of Eden for her especial benefit. Making an immense effort, she flew with it over the city and dropped it on to the cauldron, which split in two, releasing the chick unharmed. At this point Solomon ordered the stonebreakers to use this mysterious tree trunk to break the rock and hew the stones. From that moment on, they had no further difficulty. It was sufficient simply to touch the rocky mass with the trunk and it obligingly fell into squares of the required size.⁵⁹

Meanwhile Solomon had been told that the Queen of Sheba, whose imminent arrival in the city had been announced, had one monstrous leg like the hoof of a goat. This was why she had decided to remain a spinster. So the king had the whole esplanade of the temple flooded, and after putting his throne in a dry spot he waited for the queen to dismount and walk barefoot across the sacred esplanade. Thus the queen was unable to conceal her goatish leg but, as she was wading through the water, she was touched by the mysterious tree trunk, which had floated up to the surface. This touch produced a miracle: the goat's hoof was turned into a human leg, as lovely as the other. When the esplanade was drained, the miraculous trunk was placed in the temple and the queen adorned it with a silver armlet. With the passing of time, a further 29 silver armlets

PG 117, 1343. As a result of this identification the Byzantines called the Queen of Sheba by the name of Sibyl, cf. NESTLE 1904:492-493.

⁵⁵ Cf. HERTZ 1883:18-19.

⁵⁶ According to one of the precepts of the 'Law of the Covenant' (Exodus 20:25), the altar, and by extension the temple, could not be built of stone hewn with a metal blade. This, according to the legend, is why Solomon turned for help to the demons, the only intelligent beings, after the angels, capable of building without making use of metal tools.

⁵⁷ Cf. MUSSAFIA 1869; MEYER 1882; GRAF 1882-1883.

⁵⁸ Cf. BEZOLD 1905:xlii-lx: ms Supplément 92, Saint-Germain 350, Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, folios 70v-81v.

⁵⁹ By introducing into the tale the motif of the heavenly tree brought by the *rukḥ*, the Coptic narrator brilliantly did away with the embarrassing presence of the stone-breaking demon builders.

were laid at the foot of the holy trunk. Later, at the time of the Passion of Jesus, they were all fused together to produce the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas for his betrayal, while out of the trunk itself was carved the Cross of Christ.

4.2 I believe that this Christian version from Egypt is the foundation for the well-known Ethiopian variant of the legend of the Queen of Sheba,⁶⁰ which forms the nucleus and the opening of the 'Glory of the Kings' (*Kebra Nagast*), an early-14th-century work which the Ethiopians still regard as fundamental, the cornerstone of their national identity. Here the tale has been stripped of all that is wonderful and fantastic, even to the riddles. For example, the function – originally the hoopoe's – of describing the glories of the King of Jerusalem to the queen is now fulfilled by a merchant named Tamrin, which serves to give the tale an appearance of historical validity; and this is important, since it is offered as an account of the origin of the Ethiopian dynasty of the Solomonids, a dynasty which was to end, as we know, with the comparatively recent death of the Emperor Haile Selassie.

Of course, the favourite theme is the seduction of the Queen of Sheba by Solomon. On her journey home she is delivered of a child named David, destined to be the founder of the Solomonid dynasty. When he grows up he goes back to Jerusalem to visit his father, takes the Ark of the Covenant from the temple by the exercise of cunning and takes it back to Ethiopia, thus transferring the very legitimacy of the Davidic monarchy to that country.⁶¹ And in fact, shortly afterwards the kingdom of Israel was to be divided into the two kingdoms of Judah and Samaria.

4.3 In Europe the narrative cycle known as the 'Story of the wood of the Cross' is first recorded in written form in France towards the end of the second third of the 12th century; the first to expound it were Peter Comestor and John Beleth.⁶² However, the cycle refers back to apocryphal and parabiblical works from the first centuries of the Christian era,⁶³ tracing the sacred wood all the way back to the seed Seth planted on the grave of his father Adam. The legend concludes with the triumphal return of the Cross to Jerusalem on 14 September 629, after fourteen years' captivity in Persia, where it had been confiscated by the Sasanian King Khosrow II Parvîz.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bezold (1905:xlII and lx) holds exactly the opposite opinion, maintaining that the Egyptian tale is directly dependent on the Ethiopian version of the same legend.

⁶¹ Cf. BEZOLD 1905; CERULLI 1968:36-42; CERULLI 1969:91.

⁶² Cf. Petrus Comestor seu Manducator, *Historia scolastica. Liber III regum*, ch. 26, in *PL* 198, 1370; Joannes Belethus, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, ch. 151, *De exaltatione sanctae crucis*, in *PL* 202, 152-153. Thus far, the critics have held that the association of the Queen of Sheba with the legend of the Cross was the fruit of the creative imagination of the mediaeval west, cf. HERR 1914:20.

⁶³ Cf. ROSSO UBIGLI 1989(a):421, 423-424, *Apocalisse di Mosè* and *eadem* 1989(b):462-463, *La Vita di Adamo ed Eva*.

⁶⁴ From 614 to 628 the Cross was kept by the Zoroastrian clergy in the holy city of Shîz in Iranian Azerbaijan, cf. RINGBOM 1958:387-392.

In this vast range of events, Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba is re-established as a self-contained episode, after further elaboration and adaptation. The best description is that of Jacopo da Varazze,⁶⁵ in the 13th-century *Legenda Aurea*.⁶⁶ Briefly, the story as he tells it is this:

When the Queen of Sheba arrived in Jerusalem, she hastened to Solomon's palace. On the way she had to cross a stretch of still water, from bank to bank of which a cedar trunk had been laid as an improvised bridge: this huge tree would otherwise have found no other employment. It had been cut down shortly before by order of King Solomon, and for all the carpenter's care in cutting it to the right length it was always either too long or too short for his purpose. It was the tree Seth had planted.

When she found herself before this uncooperative length of wood the Queen was moved by an impulse to kneel down and worship it. An inner voice told her that on that very tree the Saviour of the world would hang. As soon as she told the King of this prophecy, Solomon had it removed to the most unexpected place: he had it buried at the bottom of the pool.

Shortly before the Passion of Christ, the tree emerged unexpectedly from the bottom of this pool, which had meanwhile become the Sheep Pool.⁶⁷ Seeing it floating there and thinking that it would make a suitable upright for a cross, the High Priest's servants pulled it out of the water and delivered it to their master.

5. *The Queen as seen by Piero della Francesca*

The most famous pictorial representation of the tale is certainly the cycle of frescoes painted from 1452 to 1459 by Piero della Francesca in the church of St Francis, Arezzo, on the walls of the apse.⁶⁸ The Queen of Sheba is shown in middle register, in two scenes within the same panel on the right-hand wall.

Halfway along on the left the Queen is seen kneeling in adoration before a huge tree trunk which lies across a stream in open country. Around her, in silent aston-

⁶⁵ Jacopo da Varazze, who was born between 1228 and 1230, and died in 1298, was a Genoan Dominican who was Superior General of the Order of Preachers from 1283 to 1285 and Bishop of Genoa from 1292 to the year of his death.

⁶⁶ Ch. LXVIII, *De inventione sanctae crucis*. See the Italian translation by VITALE BROVARONE 1995, pp. 380-381.

⁶⁷ The name Probatia, given to the pool by Latin and, in general, western tradition, is the result of a punctuation error in John 5:2: 'Est autem Hierosolymis, super Probatia, piscina, quae cognominatur Hebraice Bethsatha.' 'Probatia' refers here not to the pool, but to the Temple gate known in Greek as προβατικὴ, 'of the sheep', near which the pool of Bethsatha or Bethesda was situated.

⁶⁸ In point of fact, like his predecessors Agnolo Gaddi (1304) on the walls of the apse of Santa Croce in Florence, and his pupil and imitator Cenni di Francesco Cenni (1410) in the Oratory of the *Compagnia della Croce di Giorno* adjoining the church of San Francesco in Viterbo, Piero della Francesca (c.1420-1492) brought together in a single cycle the various stages of the Invention and Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The latter ends with the victory of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius over Khosrow II and the return of the Cross to Jerusalem. On the fortunes of the story of Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba in figurative art from the 14th to the 16th century, see HERR 1914.

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ishment, stand her ladies-in-waiting, while the grooms wait with the horses in the background to one side. Halfway along the right-hand section is shown the meeting of the two sovereigns in Solomon's magnificent palace.

It is clear that both Piero della Francesca and his predecessors chose not to follow the account of the *Legenda Aurea* as regards the water bridged by the beam. The *Legenda Aurea* explicitly states that the beam was laid across a stretch of water⁶⁹ in the city of Jerusalem, and that in that very place,⁷⁰ at a later date, the miraculous pool was situated.

In the same middle section, but on the back wall of the choir, to the right of the narrow Gothic window, is the scene of the 'transportation of the sacred wood'. Three workers are laboriously moving the heavy beam, which they have just taken out of the pool.

There is no image of the trunk floating,⁷¹ nor of the Queen wading across the stream because she will not set foot on the walkway.⁷²

6. *The floating tree trunk*

It is my view that the Latin version of the story of the Queen of Sheba merges and mutually integrates three distinct motifs: (a) one which is common to the Jewish and Islamic traditions; (b) one which is inferred from the Byzantine tradition, and (c) one which is found only in the Jewish tradition.

The first, shared by all the Jewish and Islamic versions and taken over by the Coptic and Latin Christian versions, is the idea of a stretch of water which must be crossed so that the Queen and Solomon may meet, though close enough to recognise each other. It is true that in the Jewish and Islamic versions the stretch of water is really an illusion, but this circumstance is of negligible significance.

It is the Byzantine tradition that offers the cue to presenting the Queen of Sheba as an inspired woman with the gift of prophecy: like the sibyl Sabbe, she foresees the Passion and death of Jesus, 'son of David'. It is no mere chance that John Beleth calls the queen "Saba", exactly as in the *Testament of Solomon*.⁷³

What is exclusively Christian, in that it is missing from the other versions, is

⁶⁹ Iacopo da Varagine writes 'super quendam lacum' (cf. MAGGIONI 1998:460), which in 14th-century translations was rendered 'in su 'n' aquicella', i.e. 'on a stream'. To this stream the name of Siloam is sometimes given, thus permitting the pool where the man born blind was healed (John 9:7, 11) to sneak into the story too.

⁷⁰ 'Postea probatica piscina ibidem facta est', cf. MAGGIONI 1998:460.

⁷¹ The scene of the workers pulling the trunk out of the miraculous pool was painted by Agnolo Gaddi in Santa Croce in Florence, and by Cenni di Francesco Cenni in San Francesco, Volterra.

⁷² A representation of the queen wading through the stream alongside the footbridge was found in a wood print made by Boec van den Houte, published in 1483 (HERR 1914:12, Fig. 7) and in a fresco from the same century in the church of St Barbara in Hora-Kuttana, formerly Kuttenberg, in Bohemia (ibid.:16, Fig.10).

⁷³ Cf. BELETH in *PL* 202, 153: 'regina Saba'; MCCOWN 1922:64*, xxi, 1: καὶ Σάβα ἡ βασιλίσσα Νότου.

the motif of the 'floating tree trunk'. In the Coptic legend it is represented by the heavenly, miraculous tree which is dropped on Jerusalem by the *rukḥ* and is floating on the esplanade of the temple when the queen arrives, whereas in the Latin legend it is the cedarwood beam which on the eve of the Crucifixion suddenly emerged from the bottom of the Sheep Pool, breaking the surface of the water with a burst of waves, foam and splashes. This is what Jacopo da Varazze says; in contrast, Beleth holds that the pool *tempora passionis Christi desiccata fuit*, so the wood of the tree appears on the dry bed of the pool.⁷⁴ The evocative image of the trunk suddenly appearing in the middle of a stretch of water may have been prompted by the nineteenth riddle which one Jewish text puts into the mouth of the Queen of Sheba.⁷⁵ I refer to the trunk which is thrown into a pool of water, sinks and re-emerges, one end protruding from the water:

XIX. The Queen then ordered a trunk sawn from a cedar to be brought to her and asked Solomon to show her which end had borne the roots and which the branches. He told her to throw it into the water, whereupon one end sank but the other remained on the surface. The part which sank corresponded to the roots and the part which stayed up corresponded to the branches...⁷⁶

The nineteenth riddle may have sparked the imagination of an unknown Latin writer from the late ancient or mediaeval period, giving him the idea for a further episode to enrich the fascinating story of the legend of the wood of the Cross. How this motif reached the Latin west remains a mystery.

There is a sense in which the Queen of Sheba became the precursor of another famous queen, St Helena. Just as the mother of Constantine the Great found the wood of the Cross some centuries after the death of Christ, so the Queen of Sheba is supposed to have found it almost 1000 years before. This would in part bridge the enormous temporal gap between the death of Adam, on whose grave the first shoots of the holy Tree sprang up, and the Crucifixion of Christ, the heart of salvation history. The 'invention' of the Cross, its recovery from the hands of the Persians and its restitution to the Holy Sepulchre thus represent the final chapters of a very wide-ranging tale.

7. Solomon's grotto and the hoopoe devil

From the Gospel of St John, 5:1-18, in the episode of the paralysed man miraculously healed by Jesus, we learn that in Jerusalem, close to the gate of the

⁷⁴ Cf. VITALE BROVARONE 1995:381; BELETH *ibid.*

⁷⁵ The Queen of Sheba's nineteenth riddle is the last of a series of riddles recorded in the *Midraš ha-hšefet*, a Yemenite work which seems to reflect very ancient rabbinic sources. The setting of the riddle suggests that the first meeting of the Queen of Sheba with Solomon and the lively exchange of questions and answers between them took place at the edge of a pool near the palace or annexed to it.

⁷⁶ Cf. SCHECHTER 1890:355-356.

Temple known as the Sheep Gate, there was a pool with five porticos.⁷⁷ Indeed, in 1914 an archaeological dig brought to light an immense reservoir filled with earth, divided into two basins by a stone dam running east to west.⁷⁸ As to the name of this pool, the Greek manuscripts show uncertainty, transcribing in various ways a single Judaeo-Aramaic name. It was probably called the pool of Besa'ta ('cleft, fissure') or Bet Hesda (Bethesda: 'house of mercy').

In the first case, the name would refer to the rocky ridge marking the eastern limit of the pool, and characterised by natural caves.⁷⁹ In the second case, the name would allude to a sort of therapeutic sanctuary alongside the most important⁸⁰ of these natural caves, and reached by crossing the dam.⁸¹ Here there was a circular reservoir of modest size, surrounded by small pools with steps leading into them.⁸² It seems to have been a public establishment for hydrotherapeutic practices, and was used in three stages: a Jewish phase, a first Judaeo-Christian phase; a pagan phase linked to the healing god Asclepius or Serapis; and finally a second Judaeo-Christian phase (III-IV sec.).

In addition, St John's Gospel tells us that in Jesus' time sick people of all kinds would crowd under the porticos of this building⁸³ waiting to be healed by means of specific immersion rituals. It was in fact believed that from time to time an angel of the Lord came down into the pool and disturbed its waters: the first sick person to plunge into the water at that moment would be healed of any disease.⁸⁴

Furthermore, the anonymous pilgrim from Bordeaux who visited Jerusalem in

⁷⁷ John 5:2-3: '(2) Now in Jerusalem next to the Sheep Gate there is a pool called Bethesda in Hebrew, which has five porticos; (3) and under these were crowds of sick people, blind, lame, paralysed.'

⁷⁸ The two basins, carved out of the rock, are in the form of trapezoidal rectangles measuring north to south 4,650 m² (93 x 35/65 m), more than four times as large as an Olympic pool (50 x 21 m). See the chart in ALLIATA 1988:31 and COHN 1987: map C2. The dam separating the basins is approximately 40 m long and 6.5 m wide. The pool, of a depth greater than 8 m, received the water destined to the Temple. It appears to have been built by the high priest Simon II the Just, son of Onias II (220-195 BC), as stated in Ecclesiasticus 50:3. It may be, however, that King Hezekiah (716-687 BC) excavated the so-called 'upper pool' in the same area, see 2 Kings 20:20; Isaiah 7:3; 36:2. As to the five porticos, no trace has been found of them, apart from the bases of a few pillars in the area east of the pool, cf. DEL VERME 1976:111-112.

⁷⁹ Josephus Flavius (*Bell. Iud.* ii, 328, 530; v, 148, 151, 246; Βεζεθού) says that the entire hill and its village bore the same name, cf. COHN 1987:32, 125.

⁸⁰ Cf. DEL VERME 1976:112-113.

⁸¹ Cf. COHN 1987:30-32, 125.

⁸² Cf. TESTA 1984:2.

⁸³ Eusebius of Caesarea maintained that by 330 AD the porticos of Bethesda no longer existed, cf. DEL VERME 1976:115. However, the Bordeaux pilgrim claimed to have seen them in 333-334; see *infra* note 86.

⁸⁴ John 5:4: 'for at intervals the angel of the Lord came down into the pool, and the water was disturbed, and the first person to enter the water after this disturbance was cured of any ailment from which he was suffering'. This verse, which refers to a popular rumour confirmed by v. 7, is found in some secondary manuscripts of the Gospel of John, cf. DEL VERME 1976.

333-334 AD tells us that the water in this public pool was reddish in colour and that this was also the site of the cave where Solomon had tormented the devils.⁸⁵ This is why popular tradition related that it was in one of the natural caves of Bethesda that Solomon had subjugated the dark powers to whom he entrusted the building of the Temple. The *Testament of Solomon* recounts the capture and enslavement of these devils at some length.

With the Edict of Milan (313) and the building of the magnificent complex of the Holy Sepulchre⁸⁶ by Constantine (d. 337), Jerusalem became the official spiritual centre of an ecumenical Church which by that time consisted for the most part of believers of Gentile origin. As a result the space set aside for the therapeutic practices of the Jewish Christians – practices viewed with suspicion and haughty disdain by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the time⁸⁷ – was progressively reduced until the Solomonic 'crypt' was closed and the objects venerated there, first and foremost 'King Solomon's ring', were transferred to the recently built Holy Sepulchre. The pilgrim Etheria, who visited Jerusalem about the year 383, recounts that the magic ring was still being presented every Good Friday to be kissed by the crowd.⁸⁸ In the fifth century the Church of the Paralytic was built on the site of the healing baths.⁸⁹

For a long time, then – certainly from the period of the Maccabees⁹⁰ until the second half of the fourth century AD – there was beside the pool of Bethesda the site of a therapeutic cult linked to the figure of Solomon and to his power over those devils who brought disease. This is confirmed by the many Solomonic amulets from the Roman period found in Jerusalem and in various parts of Palestine.⁹¹ The connection between the Solomonic cult and the healings related in John 5:2-

⁸⁵ GEYER 1898:21: 'interius vero civitati sunt piscinae gemellares, quinque porticos habentes, quae appellantur Betsaida. Ibi aegri multorum annorum sanabantur. Aqua(m) autem habent hae piscinae in modum coccini turbatam. Est ibi et crepta, ubi Solomon daemones torquebat.' The mention of reddish water suggests that in ancient times there was a spring of iron-tasting mineral water in the cave.

⁸⁶ Cf. CORBO 1981. The Constantinian constructions comprised, from east to west, a porch, a basilica with five naves called the *Martyrion*, a paved courtyard with three porticos and the round church known as the *Anastasis*, its drum having a conic dome, in the centre of which rose the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. This group of buildings covered the whole area of the sacred enclosure of the *Capitolium* of Aelia Capitolina (135 AD).

⁸⁷ Cf. TESTA 1984:16.

⁸⁸ Cf. BAGATTI 1971:341-342; TESTA 1984:17, note 63. The veneration of Solomon's ring on Good Friday was one way of affirming that Christ had defeated the powers of evil with his death, cf. MANNIS 1996:161.

⁸⁹ Cf. TESTA 1984:17-20. The church of the Nativity of Mary was just next to the crypt of the present church of St Anne, built by the Crusaders.

⁹⁰ Judging by the coins and ceramics found in the excavations, cf. TESTA 1984:2. The Solomonic 'crypt' may, however, have accommodated a popular cult even before the great pool was dug out at the beginning of the second century BC.

⁹¹ Cf. BAGATTI 1971:331; NORDIO 1976.

4,7 seems clear.

That said, it is not surprising that in all the versions – Jewish, Islamic and Christian – of the legend of the Queen of Sheba there should be the motif of the real or supposed stretch of water which the queen had to cross in order to reach the king. According to the *Targūm Shenī* it is the wet, sparkling surface of Solomon's baths; according to the Koran it is a shiny glass floor; according to the Arabic-language Coptic tale it is the temple esplanade flooded by Solomon; finally, according to the *Legenda Aurea* it is the stretch of water (*lacus*) crossed by a small bridge where the miraculous pool was later located (*postea probatica piscina ibidem facta est*), and from which the wood of the Cross was to emerge. What seems to me to underlie all these representations is the indistinct memory of the rocky bathing sanctuary of the 'House of Mercy' with its five porticos and, in front of it, the pool crossed by a dam. This is where Solomon's victory over Onokolis 'the donkey-legged' was celebrated. It is, moreover, in the nature of things that such an outstanding woman as the Queen of Sheba should be confused with this evil female figure.

7.2. We turn now to the hoopoe mentioned in the Jewish and Islamic versions of the legend. It is a mysterious creature, which can fly in the wink of an eye all the way across Arabia as far as the outer limit of the kingdom of Sheba, scanning everything as it goes.⁹² I consider it useful to consult the *Testament of Solomon* in order to understand what it signifies:⁹³ in fact, this bird may be a metamorphosis of the devil of an Arabian wind referred to in the Judaeo-Christian text.

Here the story is that Solomon, acting on behalf of a king of Arabia, calmed a violent wind which was ruining his kingdom. Solomon sent men to capture the devil which controlled this wind, and had it enclosed and 'sealed' in a leather flask. When it was brought to him in Jerusalem by camel, the king freed it from the flask and commanded it to move a huge cornerstone and place it in the Temple, for the stone could be moved by no other means.⁹⁴

Now, the Greek text of the *Testament of Solomon* calls this devil *Ephippas*,⁹⁵ a personal name otherwise known as *Éphippos*, which means 'horseman'. My impression, however, is that *Ephippas* is simply an old adaptation of *Épopos*, a name which in Greek means 'hoopoe';⁹⁶ or, if the name *Ephippas* was the original form,

⁹² Cf. Koran xxvii, 22: 'I have found out a thing that thou, Solomon, apprehendest not, and I come unto thee from Sheba with sure tidings.' *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, undated.

⁹³ An esoteric-cabbalistic interpretation of the Koranic pericope regarding the hoopoe was proposed by SCHEDL (1981), who saw in it links with the Iranian myth of King Yima and the bird Varagan.

⁹⁴ Cf. DULING 1983:983-985, chs. xxii-xxiv.

⁹⁵ Cf. MCCOWN 1922, p. 26*, vi, 5; p. 68*, xii, 19; p. 70*, xxiv, 1; variants 'Εφίππας, 'Εφιππάς, 'Εφιππᾶς, 'Εφιππας, 'Εφιππος, 'Εφίπτας.

⁹⁶ Greek ἔποπος, genitive of ἔποψ, 'hoopoe'.

it may have been confused with *Épopos*, a word not unknown in Aramaic-speaking communities.⁹⁷ In addition, three passages in the Koran⁹⁸ confirm that Solomon had power over a specific, particularly violent wind.

I maintain, therefore, that the oral tradition transformed the terrible Arabian wind (complete with its devil), called *Épops* or *Épopos*, into the hoopoe-messenger mentioned in texts in Hebrew, in Judaeo-Aramaic and in Arabic.

When Solomon asked *Éphippas* what angel had the power to resist him, the devil replied, 'He who will be born of a virgin and crucified...'.⁹⁹ Here, then, is another prophecy, like the Queen of Sheba's and the sibyl Sambethe's, one of the many heterogeneous motifs that interweave and intersect, involving Solomon in the history of the sacred wood of the Cross.

Moreover, there is a still earlier reference to the hoopoe as Solomon's messenger in the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* (lxxvii, 25), an apocryphal work dating almost certainly from about 100 AD.¹⁰⁰

8. Before and after Constantine

The name *Nikaulis* (< *Onokolis*) which Josephus attributes to the Queen of Sheba and the allusion in the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* to the hoopoe's role of herald and messenger on Solomon's behalf lead to the probable conclusion that in the first century AD the legend of the Queen of Sheba was substantially similar to that reflected by the *Targûm Shenî* on the book of Esther.

Even the obvious differences between the two great narrative lines of the legend – the Jewish and Islamic on one hand, the Christian on the other – seem to lead back to the first centuries of the Christian era. It is my belief that the Jewish and Islamic versions, conforming as they do to the ideology and content of the *Testament of Solomon* (first-third century AD) reflect the cultural and doctrinal climate dominant in Jerusalem before the Edict of Milan (313), in a period when it was the Judaeo-Christian current that prevailed in the Holy City.

In contrast, the Christian versions, both the Coptic and the Latin, which found its most complete expression only in the thirteenth century in Jacopo da Varazze's *Legenda Aurea*, seem to reflect the new spiritual and institutional orientation of

⁹⁷ Cf. Syriac 'PWPWS 'hoopoe' < ἔποπος (BROCKELMANN 1928:42b) and north-eastern Neo-Aramaic *hāpāpka* 'hoopoe', with the diminutive ending of Kurdish origin *-ka* (MACLEAN 1901:78b).

⁹⁸ Koran 21:81: 'And unto Solomon (We subdued) the wind in its raging...'; xxxiv, 12: 'And unto Solomon We gave the wind, whereof the morning course was a month's journey and the evening course a month's journey...'; Kor. xxxviii, 36: 'So We made the wind subservient to him, setting fair by his command, whithersoever he intended' (*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, New York, undated).

⁹⁹ Cf. DULING 1983:284, ch. xxii, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. BETTILOLO 1989:226: 'Solomon too, during his reign, if he wanted to send (letters) somewhere or asked for something, gave orders to a bird and it obeyed him, according to his command.' This was indicated for the first time by SCHEDL (1981:324).

Christianity in Jerusalem, leading to such memorable undertakings as the rebuilding of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by Constantine and the 'invention' of the Cross by his mother, St Helena. In this new cultural context it is easy to explain the insertion of the legend of the Queen of Sheba, as a prophetic tale, within the overall picture of the 'Story of the wood of the Cross'. This is why, in cycles of mediaeval paintings, the queen appears not far from Constantine and Helena.

But, despite the renewals promoted by Christian Gentiles obedient to the Emperor, the local Semitic element, both Jewish and Judaeo-Christian, continued undeterred to invent fables on the subject of the plot which demons are said to have contrived at the expense of a hirsute queen in the heterogeneous, colourful court of King Solomon. Echoes of this fabulous legend were in the end taken up and propagated *ad infinitum* in the sacred pages of the Book of Islam. Archaeologists have discovered that Hārūn ar-Rašīd, in imitation of Solomon, built a palace with glass floors.¹⁰¹ Was he expecting the return of the Queen?

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¹⁰¹ Cf. GRABAR 1965:848, note 2. This is the Abbassid palace of ar-Raqqa, in Syria on the banks of the Euphrates (8th-9th century). I am grateful to Alessandro Vitale Brovarone for pointing this out to me.

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Riassunto

L'autore indaga i vari filoni narrativi legati al personaggio biblico della regina di Saba, nella tradizione giudaica, cristiana e islamica.

Le versioni giudaiche e islamiche della leggenda riflettono, secondo l'autore, il clima culturale e dottrinale che dominava a Gerusalemme prima dell'Editto di Milano (313), in un periodo in cui nella Città Santa era ancora prevalente la corrente giudeo-cristiana.

Al contrario, la versione cristiana, che ha trovato la sua più compiuta espressione nel XIII secolo nella Legenda Aurea di Iacopo da Varazze, sembra rispecchiare il nuovo orientamento spirituale e la sostanziale riorganizzazione della chiesa di Gerusalemme, legata ad iniziative memorabili come la riedificazione della basilica del Santo Sepolcro a opera di Costantino, e l'"invenzione" del legno della Croce da parte di sua madre Elena. Questo nuovo quadro culturale porta anche all'inserimento della leggenda della regina di Saba nella storia del legno della Croce.

La tradizione islamica riprenderà poi gli echi favolistici delle leggende su demoni, spiriti e regine che animavano la corte di Salomone, facendo della regina di Saba un personaggio del Corano.