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Spengler’s “Magian” Classification Applied to an Unrecognized Ecumene: The Near East, 1500 to 0 BCE

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My aim in the following discussion was to determine from the historical evidence that small group of ideas, metaphysical assumptions, and attitudes which made up the core of the Magian I psychological world-outlook. The latter two-thirds of the essay is devoted to this problem, while the first third is concerned with the evidence for the very existence in the first millennium B.C. of a Near Eastern worldview of the same order as that of Greece, Europe, China, and India.

My goal, therefore, has not been to make a sketch, à la Condorcet, of a universal history of the Pre-Christian Levant, but in the light of a widely shared skepticism among historians, philosophers, and civilizationalists about the Spenglerian Magian “style” of the early Christian era, I have seen no alternative but to trace the historical evidence for the homogeneity of a metaphysical worldview among the Near Eastern peoples in the fifteen hundred years preceding the birth of Christ.

If the reality of Spengler’s Magian worldview is still generally doubted by experts today, the experts are more likely to doubt my contention that a similar worldview existed a thousand years earlier.

Archeological evidence is being unearthed at the present day—as through the whole past century—and in all probability, the more evidence archeologists, linguists, and philologists will uncover about ancient Near Eastern peoples, the more clearly will appear the presence of the Magian I world-style throughout the area.

My approach cannot help but be “Spenglerian” because my historical paradigm, like Herder’s, Danilevsky’s, Dilthey’s, and Spengler’s is: world-styles of historical civilizations. I shall not, therefore, be dealing purely and simply with the pre-Christian Levantine Ecumene as my object of analysis.
To attempt to define absolutely such a vast complex of cultures would be as helpless a task as for a botanist to attempt to define in detail some huge phylum of plant life.

Spengler evidently was unaware of the juxtaposition of the two types of investigation he was undertaking in *The Decline of the West*: one which is narrow, manageable, and susceptible of meaningful analysis, namely the study of world-styles, or “Destinies”; the second, less manageable and less susceptible of rational analysis, namely, the morphological descriptions of higher cultures, or ecumenical complexes composed of diverse civilizations and sub-cultures.

Thus, he investigated not only the Magian worldview of the Christian era, but he also treated as a meaningful object of detailed analysis the Magian culture—that is, the enormously complex Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples to whom the worldview extended.

It would, however, be scientifically unsound for an investigator of civilizations from a comparative standpoint to think only of the small class which he is studying, because this would become unreal. His classification is abstract, but only historical peoples, their deeds, and their works, have really existed. I have not confined my attention only to the world-outlook; and to avoid such an abstract approach I have constantly used such terms as “Near East,” “Levant,” “Magian I Culture,” “Near Eastern Peoples,” and the like. Sometimes I have referred to these societies in such terms as the following: “insofar as they shared the Magian I metaphysical worldview,” or I have used similar terms.

Once I wrote in the following vein: “the emergent culture or ecumene, insofar as it was influenced by the new (Magian) psychological *Weltanschauung*.” The qualification in the foregoing phrase (“insofar as”) enables me to treat of a relatively small classification and still to keep in mind the historical world civilization.

**The Magian Civilizational Style in World History**

Spengler’s names for the civilizational worldview of the Near Eastern civilization of the early Christian era are “Magian” and “Arabian,” and these are approximate, although they should not be used in their basic meaning.

Originally, “Magian” refers to the Magi cult; i.e., the followers of the Magi priests were Magians. It was a world well known to the Greeks, e.g., in Aristotle’s book about the Magi, entitled *Magicus*.¹
But I shall stipulate a technical definition for “Magian” which will denominate a civilizational worldview held in common by many diverse peoples in the ancient Levant, e.g., the Hebrews, the Zoroastrians, the Magians, the Syrians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, etc. And the ideologies of these people were in conflict.

For example, though the prophet Zoroaster (who lived as a Mede and subsequently as a Persian, c. 500 BCE) belonged originally to the tribe of the Magi, he developed Iranian religion in what might be called a “Hebrew” direction. The Persian Magians were not Zoroastrians, but Iranian polytheists; Zoroaster, however, taught that there was only one Supreme Good, Divine Being (Ahura Mazda), and he reduced the native Iranian divinities to the status of demons or angels.

Spengler’s term “Arabian,” as a synonym for “Magian,” had the same meaning, though the actual Arabians (i.e., the nomads of the Arabian steppe) shared only partly in the Near Eastern worldview in ancient times.

A vivid twofold way of envisioning all reality – a duality in two respects: the world vs. the transcendent, and evil vs. good – was a characteristic of the Near East at the beginning of the Christian era. This dual vision had already been in existence for well over a thousand years in that region. In the old ritual of the Babylonian New Year festival, for example, Baal, “without equal in his anger,” is prayed to in his transcendence: “Merciful king…with whose glance he dost give the law…”

Of the various ideologies and religions in the Near Orient, sharing in the Magian worldview, the following are of particular interest. Judaism, from the date of the return from Babylon to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, was affected more by the spread of Zoroastrian Persism than by any other external religious impulse; and the duality between the material and the unseen worlds, the physical and the spiritual, was greatly intensified among the Jews by the Zoroastrian doctrines.

In India and China, religion, however, as produced by the creative members of society, has been much more philosophical than in the West; and the Oriental philosophical quality is dramatically opposite to Magian dualism. The dualism is a division between philosophy and religion.

The Magian Predecessor to Spengler’s Magian II World-Style

In interpreting the emergence of the “Arabian” (that is, Magian) Culture, Spengler distinguished between the civilization, which he held to have been “born” in the year 1, and its world-outlook —the latter having been developing many centuries earlier. There was a strong, unbroken continuous passage from the predecessor phase of the civilization to the Magian [II] epoch.
That is, there was no break from the long “gestation” period of the Magian II culture to its swift “birth” at the beginning of the Christian era.

Spengler could have, but did not, trace out all those Magian qualities which existed in the civilization five hundred years earlier in the time of Xerxes, or even nine hundred years earlier in the Magian I culture’s “springtime,” in the time of Solomon. But then, he would have left in ambiguity the distinct reality of the new Magian II Civilization of the year 1.

The Magian I and Magian II outlooks, however, had so much in common that it is fair also to say that they really constituted two phases of one worldview. They were ingredients in a Near Eastern ecumene which also contained Near Eastern religious, economic, and political configurations, as well as a civilizational Weltanschauung.

Apparently perplexed by the overlapping of various Near Eastern civilizations during the first millennium before Christ, Spengler could not discern the earlier Magian world-outlook which still predominated in the Levant during the two hundred-year gestation period leading to the emergence of the new phases in the Christian era. He saw the first millennium BCE as the pre-cultural period of the “Arabian” culture, taking place in Syrian, Assyrian, Persian, and Jewish territories and in the area of the old Babylonian Empire.\(^6\)

But more recently, Toynbee and Quigley have traced out cultural components of the earlier Near East. This ecumene encompassed Toynbee’s Syriac and Sumero-Akkadian and Quigley’s Canaanite and Mesopotamian civilizations, and also Christopher Dawson’s “Judeo-Aramean” culture\(^7\) – roughly speaking, the whole Fertile Crescent.

That the influence of the Magian I world-style was great in the centuries just preceding the Christian era is implicit in the influence of the Phoenicians on the Greeks by way of a Phoenician code of ethics (Stoicism) and system of cosmology. “The Phoenicians,” wrote Toynbee, “had a Weltanschauung that was akin to that of the prophets of Israel and Judah.”

Toynbee has not used Spengler’s paradigm for examining civilizations, but here he departs, for just a moment, from the religious and political models that he customarily uses. The new Magian II worldview (just before the Christian era) was taking form in the Eastern territory\(^8\) of the Graeco-Roman civilization, under the influence of the Magian I worldview.
Their Geographical and Environmental Paradigms Critically Examined

I shall describe as “Magian I” the metaphysical worldview which prevailed in the Near East approximately 1200-100 BCE, a name which cannot be entirely appropriate for that which it signifies.

Spengler used the name of the Persian priesthood and that of Arabia (with some license) to denote the worldview in early Christian times of the Mediterranean civilization: “Magian.” But, for that matter, consider the personage Faust. His name, as a symbol of the medieval-modern Western worldview, is appropriate – a name which Goethe, Spengler, and many others used to depict “Faustian” man.

The Magian I ecumene was roughly coterminous with that society which Christopher Dawson termed the “Aramaic-Babylonian” civilization; it is Toynbee’s post-1200 BCE “Babylonian” and “Syriac” civilizations taken together; and it is congruent with C. Quigley’s “Canaanite” and “Mesopotamian” civilizations.

It is, moreover, an earlier appearance of the Magian II culture of Christian times. This region, whose peoples were greatly disturbed in the preceding two thousand years by the conflicts of several societies, extended from the mouth of the Euphrates to the Nile. We must expect a variety of usages in depicting the civilizations of the Near East during the extremely turbulent years, 1200 to 100 BCE, in view of the variety of perspectives of historians; for there is no simple indisputable theory about the prevailing higher cultures of that time.

One can speak more particularly and accurately of Hittite, Assyrian, Chaldean, Phoenician, and Persian civilizations. Yet Quigley has picked out for special attention two higher cultures – the Mesopotamian and the Canaanite Civilizations – which rose and fell in the area outlined by the Fertile Crescent. He traces the former from its birth approximately 4500 BCE to its final demise in 332 BCE and the latter from its birth approximately 1400 BCE to its final demise in 146 BCE.

The paradigm according to which he and Toynbee have defined the two civilizations are not religious, and they have a political quality. Both civilizations, as historical facts, are traceable today in the historical vestiges of their econo-political regimes.

But I propose (in addition to the non-psychological and non-metaphysical structures) that a civilizational worldview came into being and prevailed during the war-filled centuries from 1400 to 146 BCE, a worldview which straddled the economic and political line of demarcation between the two civilizations; and this Weltanschauung articulated itself universally throughout the various societies of the entire Near Eastern region: the Chaldean, Phoenician, Assyrian, Aramaic, Jewish, Persian, etc.
A similar style of temple architecture prevailed throughout the civilization in the time of Solomon —in Babylonia, Assyria, and Palestine, in particular. The great temple of Marduk, tutelary god of Babylon, resembled Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem, as described in the Bible.¹²

Some disagreement, however, follows from the following question: Were the Canaanite (Toynbee’s Syriac) and Mesopotamian civilizations each an integral whole and in possession of the requisite degree of self-identity genuinely enough to be, unto itself, a self-contained civilization? Did they each have an econo-political unity?

Both “civilizations” underwent conquest by other civilizations (sometimes both at once, as in the suzerainty of the Assyrians), and both were composed of numerous cities and states, whose inter-political ties were often so weak that the basic unity of the higher society is difficult to see.

I propose these problems in order to suggest that, if the unity of these econo-political societies can be seen despite the extreme turbulence of history which occurred in that region of the world at such a time, then is it unreasonable to look for a single civilizational world-outlook emerging in the midst of these civilizations?

The difficulty is that such a psychological world-style is characteristically the world-outlook of the people of a single international society, instead of two societies which are independent of each other. Yet the latter may sometimes seem to have been the case.

But I am encouraged to see that the difficulty of multiple sovereignties is ignored in Toynbee’s description of the “Medieval Cosmos of City-States,” a European “higher civilization” based on city-states which grew and declined.

The civilization of medieval city-states shared most of the cultural values of the encompassing Western Civilization. The citizens of the medieval city of Danzig, for example, were at the same time citizens of the European community of nations. And (in Spenglerian language) both “civilizations” shared the same Faustian civilizational world-outlook.

If Toynbee’s theory of a city-oriented medieval civilization is correct, then this instance verifies the generalization that two civilizations, contemporary to one another, each differentiated in virtue of the econo-political continuity of its central region, can also share in common a psychological world-outlook. The total society, moreover, will be an ecumene, an approximation to a civilization, part of whose meaning is a shared world-style; and this ecumene is a whole which is more than the mere sum of its parts.
The Magian I Metaphysical Worldview: Its Complex Origins – Environmental, Cultural, and Geographical

Environmental Influences
The physical and cultural conditions which evoked the Magian I Weltanschauung in the era from 1500 to 1100 BCE were considerably complicated by the interrelationships of the civilizations in the area during this interval, themselves having varying degrees of complexity in their modes of civilized life. In the following I shall sketch out these civilizational encounters in the context of several environmental and geographical factors.

From 3000 to 1000 BCE periods of drought and diminution of food supply, together with an over-population in the Arabian peninsula, caused several tribes to migrate from the Arabian Steppe to regions in or near the Fertile Crescent. These included:

- the Assyrians (2900 BCE),
- the Canaanites (2500 BCE),
- the Akkadians (2500 BCE),
- the Amorite “Babylonians” (2500 BCE),
- the Chaldeans and the Amorites (2000 BCE),
- the Phoenicians (Arameans) and Syrians (1500 BCE), and
- the Habirus (Hebrews) (1200 BCE).

The possibility of development of a single metaphysical Weltanschauung throughout the region of these Near Eastern migrations was enhanced by the fact that the nomads who lived on the Arabian Steppe remained virtually the same throughout all their known history. As a consequence of the inroads of these dynamic peoples, the Fertile Crescent became unalterably the scene of Semitic civilizations.

More specifically, in the nomadic tribes entering the civilized Levant out of the harsh desert, there were certain personal characteristics which, in varying degrees, continued to develop in the diverse areas of the Near East after 2000 BCE. These included:

- a capacity for deep religiousness (though unfulfilled in the pre-civilized nomadic Arabs),
- vivid imagination,
- pronounced individuality, and
- marked ferocity.

The powerful presence of Egypt was gentle in comparison.
Certain pastoral peoples from the north, of Indo-European origin, were also immensely important in the history of the Magian II Civilization. The Hittites entered the Anatolian area sometime prior to 1500 BCE and, during the disintegration of the Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia, established the Hittite Civilization. The members of this civilization challenged Egypt’s claim of suzerainty over the Middle East during a series of wars from 1352 BCE until the establishment of peace in 1278.23

But at that time new migrations of Aryan invaders from the north (the Lydians and the Phrygians) were overwhelming the Hittite culture.24 In addition, Egypt had been invaded by the Hyksos around 1600 BCE.

Cultural and Social Ties of the Levant at the Time of Birth of the Magian I Culture

Just as the national groupings of modern Europe are closely tied by countless cross-currents of business, art, diplomacy, politics, and military relations—so much so, that the continent has a civilizational unit—so, too, the ancient Near East was comparable in this respect.25 The emphasis of morality on law was thoroughly accepted by the Near Eastern peoples, from Palestine to the Sumero-Akkadian Empire of Babylon, at least as early as 2400 BCE. The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1700), in fact, was only the continuation of Sumero-Akkadian law codes with the same formulation and point of view.26

The Semites from the desert, with their stern justice, had been infiltrating into the irrigation culture of Mesopotamia before 3000 BCE.27 During the period 2000 to 1000 BCE, there were many law codes throughout the Levant, and they all show the same basic structure as the Biblical Book of the Covenant.

However, Moses used considerable originality in choosing and organizing earlier Northwest-Semitic ideas and prescriptions. The description of the Covenant between Yahweh and Israel, in Joshua 24, was similar in many definite ways to Syro-Anatolian diplomatic treaties (that is covenants) of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE.

The idea of legal treaties became widespread through the Near East28 and it figured in numerous references to the Divine Covenant in the Hebrew Bible.

Art, and particularly poetry, had been unifying the imaginations of the Near Eastern peoples since before 1500 BCE. During the suzerainty of Egypt in Palestine and Syria from c. 1550 to 1225,29 the Egyptians were corresponding (in clay tablets) with Babylonians, Assyrians, Mitannians, Hittites, and other Anatolians, and using the lingua franca, Akkadian.
J. H. Breasted saw in this age the “First Internationalization” in human history, and indeed the surviving international correspondence reveals the great extent of mutual influences exerted by Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria in these centuries.

“Many literary works were translated from Akkadian into Hurrian and Hittite, as well as from Hurrian into Hittite”; Egyptian poems were translated into Akkadian; a Canaanite myth was put into Egyptian; there is extant a Hittite version of an Akkadian (i.e., Babylonian) epic. The Song of Miriam in Exodus 15 and the Oracles of Balaam in Numbers 23 – 24 almost certainly derive from Palestinian poetry of the thirteenth/twelfth centuries BCE, to mention but a bit of the poetry of the Bible of pre-Biblical derivation.30

Egyptian and Babylonian scholars were highly valued in other Near Eastern states in c. 1300. The cultural internationalism had a tremendous impact on the religion of Western Asia, to be seen in the wholesale adaptations of the names of gods and goddesses all over the region of the Fertile Crescent, from Sumero-Akkadia to Egypt. Indeed, as early as Hammurabi (c. 1700) this process was going on, so great was the homogeneity of worldview in Mesopotamia, Syria, and the eastern Levant.31 Thus, in all probability a civilizational world-style pre-dated the Magian I outlook.

The universalistic tendencies of the “First International Age” were consummated in the thirteenth century BCE, when the gods of Egypt were severally identified with the leading deities of the western Levant, and the patron god of the Pharaoh was also the main god of the Canaanites, Hittites, and Mesopotamians.32

This is but a slight sketch of the rich amalgamation of culture which was going on in the epoch of the thirteenth-twelfth centuries. There had been a Dark Age between the time of Hammurabi and 1500 BCE in the Near Eastern Civilization, when non-Semitic barbarians had entered into the Fertile Crescent both from the Armenian sector and from the grasslands of Central Asia. (In the eighteenth-century BCE, for example, a variety of non-Semitic peoples flooded Palestine.) As a consequence, these lands were thoroughly internationalized before the Egyptian conquest of Palestine and Syria began about 1560 BCE, and both art and international trade had an excellent development.33

Geographical Diversity of the Pre-Magian Societies

Finally, in 1194 BCE, at the approximate time of the birth of the Magian I Civilization, Egypt and its Near Eastern allies and client states were invaded by the Aryan Peoples of the Sea (the Achaeans). And, four years later, in 1190, seafaring Philistines settled on the southern Palestinian coastal area.
In this same century, during the 1200s, the Arameans had erupted with great vehemence and violence out of the desert and moved into Palestine \(^{34}\) (but particularly into Damascus).\(^ {35}\) In the same century, too, the Chaldeans had emerged out of the desert with similar ferocity and invaded the Tigris-Euphrates Valley.\(^ {36}\) Also during this same century of the Egyptian New Empire’s decline, the Hebrews came from the desert, whence Moses led them, and invaded the Canaanite farm and town society in Palestine.\(^ {37}\)

Here I have sketched out the events over many centuries, while the Magian I metaphysical worldview was taking form in the minds of creative members of Near Eastern societies. This preceded the emergence (c. 1300 to 1100 BCE) of the civilization, the members of which (notably, the artists and leaders) -- ranging from the militaristic Assyrians to the God-intoxicated Israelites and the relatively gentle Persians (albeit they were descendants of marauding Aryan barbarians) -- were to give material realization to a single metaphysical world-outlook.

Five civilizations,\(^ {38}\) through lifestyles, politics, or worldviews, had influence over the Near East during these centuries (1500 – 1100 BCE):

- The Sumerian culture, which had been preserved under the rule of the Babylonians, was destined to heavily influence the conquerors, the Chaldeans.
- The Egyptian kingship, which brought the Levant under direct Egyptian rule, was in constant contact with the Levantine societies before and after the decline of Egyptian suzerainty in the thirteenth century BCE.
- The “Aegean” Civilization (comprising the Minoan, Helladic, and Mycenean civilizations)\(^ {39}\), which had been disintegrating since 1400 BCE, had exposed the sea-going Phoenicians to a highly developed cultural influence.
- The Hittites, moreover, had assimilated the civilizing influences of the Sumero-Akkadians (it was largely through the mediation of another non-Semitic people, the Hurrians, that the Sumero-Akkadian culture reached the Hittites and other Anatolian peoples).\(^ {40}\)
- In its turn, at the time of its dissolution, the Hittite society, in 1190 BCE, provided a civilizational influence on Semitic peoples, particularly the Assyrians.

The territory encompassed by the Magian I worldview revealed itself in works and deeds approximately the thirteenth century BCE, 600 years before Zoroaster was born (c. 565 BCE).\(^ {41}\) It was destined to share large parts of its area with other civilizations, with pastoral tribal peoples, with the Hebrew Confederacy of the People of the Covenant, and with the sea-going Phoenicians.
The emergent ecumene, insofar as it was influenced by the new civilizational Weltanschauung, comes to light in historical retrospect, similarly as an image appears among many images on a palimpsest painting. The most meaningful “layers” of the Magian I “palimpsest” were the Canaanite Civilization and the Mesopotamian (both highly organized societies).

I shall not attempt to trace out the very limited extent to which the Magian I “Civilization” achieved actual political reality or approximation to social unity, except to observe that it was an ecumene participated in by several civilizations and cultures.

Yet I could conclude, in passing, that any higher culture, to the extent that it may be designated or denominated by the name of its worldview, then, by the same token it approximates – at least in some sporadic or partial degree – to a social-economic or political unity. By definition, to be political pertains to the very nature of a culture or a civilization.

The extremely dynamic and diversified history of the ancient Near East from 1200 to 100 BCE was one of an area never unified in that time except by military conquest in the form of empires. Although the unity of the Magian I peoples was far from a consummated unification of a higher society, nevertheless, I find that it was an ecumene which tended to approximate to a single higher civilization.

Quigley’s description of the Canaanite Civilization existing in the Levant (and, in less degree, his sketch of the continuous existence of the Mesopotamian Civilization until its termination in the lifetime of Alexander) has suggested to me that a Magian worldview must have existed in those regions in the first millennium before Christ; and, in fact, many centuries prior to the civilization I call “Magian I.”

I shall date the Magian civilizational worldview as taking shape in the minds of creative individuals at least as early as the eighteenth-century BCE Amorite lawmaker and patron of astronomy, Hammurabi (c. 1728-1686).
Footnotes

1. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Prologue, 1, 2, 8.
10. Ibid., p. 143.
11. Ibid., p. 152, 156.
13. If we turn to East Asian societies, how simple, in comparison, were the physical and psychological provocative factors which elicited from the Chinese and the Indians their respective psychological Weltanschauungen.
22. Ibid., p. 10.
23. A. J. Toynbee, A Study of History, Somervell’s Abridgement (Oxford Univ., 1946), Vol. 1, Append, Table V.
26. Ibid., p. 198.
27. Ibid., p. 149.
28. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
29. Ibid., p. 206.
31. Ibid., pp. 209-213.
32. Ibid., p. 224.
33. Ibid., pp. 204-206.
35. Breasted, op. cit., p. 239.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 559.
39. Ibid., p. 560n.
41. Toynbee, op. cit., p. 435.