

NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT / POST CHRISTMAS SEASON

Dreikönigsfest (der 6. Januar): Epiphany or Festival of 3 Kings

Dreikönigsfestsitte: Epiphany custom
drei Könige: 3 kings

Day of the Three Magi

This feast, whose full name is "Heilige Drei Könige," commemorates the journey of the Three Magi who came to bring gifts to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. In the 9th century, the legend of the Three Magi became the legend of the Oriental kings named Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In 1164 relics alleged to be derived from the Magi, and which had been kept in Milan for centuries, were brought to Cologne, where the golden shrine of the Three Kings (Dreikönigsschrein) has to this day remained the greatest treasure of the Cathedral. In fact it was the relics, sought out by innumerable pilgrims during the Middle Ages, which motivated the citizens of Cologne to build their great cathedral. The custom of celebrating "Three Kings Day" spread from Cologne to other Roman-Catholic areas of Germany. For the Church, January 6 actually is the feast of "Epiphany," celebrating the manifestation of the Savior to mankind. For the Catholic population, however, it is primarily the feast of the Three Kings.

In former times — and in some rural areas to this very day — a number of superstitious customs were practiced on the eve of January 6 to protect the house and home. Houses and stables were smoked out with branches consecrated in the church, and the initials of the Three Kings (C+M+B) plus the year were written on the door beam with consecrated chalk. In some regions, groups of children or grown-ups used to go from house to house, often made up as the Three Kings and carrying a star-shaped lantern on a stick — hence their name: "star singers." They would sing their traditional songs at peoples' doors and in return they would receive gifts such as eggs, bacon, sausage, bread or cake.

These "Heischegänge" (where people went "trick or treating") were customary in some regions on other occasions as well, for instance on New Year's Eve, during the carnival season, or at Easter. They had nothing to do with ordinary begging, of course. As a rule, they were based on some time-honored claims presented by the young (and in a few cases also by the poor) to collect food for a festive dinner.

Nowadays, such customs are hardly practiced anymore, because in their specific form they can only exist under rural conditions. They do survive in modified forms; for instance, Catholic youth now use the occasion of "star singing" to collect donations for Third World relief projects.

Heilige Drei Könige
/Epiphany

19C+M+B72



*Dreikönig, or
Commemorating
the Journey of the
Three Magi to Bethlehem*

On January 6, Germans celebrate Epiphany, a holiday that recalls the journey of the three wise men (Heilige Drei Könige) to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the infant Jesus. Children mark the day by dressing up as the three kings — Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar — and going door-to-door collecting candy or money for charities. The little "kings" wear long robes and golden cardboard crowns; one carries a cut-out star suspended from a pole, symbolizing the star that led the wise men to Jesus. They sing carols, sprinkle holy water and spread incense, and as a sign of protection, write in chalk the initials of the wise men and the year (i.e., 20 C+M+B 03) on the door of each home they visit.

Epiphany on January 6 traditionally marks the end of the Christmas season. According to the Bible, three Wise Men came to Bethlehem to praise the child in the manger and to present him with gifts. Their names were not mentioned in the Bible, but their story is well documented. They went to Jerusalem first to see King Herod and to inquire about the newborn King of the Jews. Then they continued their long journey and found the child in Bethlehem. Legend describes the Wise Men as kings. Over the centuries they have become quite popular in German folklore. As patron saints of restaurants and drugstores, their help continues to be enlisted for support and protection.

Celebrated as a religious holiday in Southern Germany, Epiphany has experienced a resurgence of popularity over the last 25 years. In 1959, the Catholic Church officially reintroduced the custom of the "Sternsinger" (star singers). On January 6, groups of young people and children dressed in colorful garments go from door to door and ask for donations for the poor. Several of them carry a star. The three kings are represented as well with crowns of cardboard and gold paper. Both boys and girls participate. They sing the traditional songs and inscribe the initials "CMB" surrounded by 1985 on the door frame. The three letters are generally thought to stand for the names of Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In reality they indicate "Christus Mansionem Benedicat" (Christ Bless this Home). The blessing is believed to ensure protection for the coming year.