

NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT / POST CHRISTMAS SEASON

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

**Dreikönigsfestsitte: Epiphany custom
drei Könige: 3 kings**

The Three Kings and Their Star

*Cologne Cather-
dral and the*

*Shrine of the
Three Kings*

This festival became of great significance for Germany when in the year 1164 Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa gave permission to Rainald von Dassel to take the remains of the Three Wise Men as spoils of war from Milan, newly captured, back to his cathedral city of Cologne. Cologne thus came into possession of one of the most venerable graves in Christianity. No grave existed of the Mother of God, and the location of St. Joseph's was unknown. The masters of Cologne Cathedral decided to extend the building into what became a world-famous edifice, and they called in the most skilled of goldsmiths to create the Shrine of the Three Kings. Throughout the Middle Ages, a pilgrimage to Cologne was one of Christianity's great experiences, almost as important as a journey to the Holy Land or to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Veneration of these saints spread from Cologne to Flanders and the Netherlands, to Hildesheim and Westphalia, to Silesia, to East Prussia and Poland, to the Danube area, Hungary and Romania, and also to Switzerland through which the precious relic had been transported from Milan. This veneration left traces everywhere, particularly in the form of popular plays about the Three Kings based on biblical sources as embellished over the centuries.

These plays were probably performed wherever the Three Kings were venerated. There must have been many such plays, none of which have survived to the present day. One element has, however, been preserved or revived. This is known as Star-Singing, and consists of three people, embodying Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and their retinue, going from house to house through villages and towns during Epiphany. They receive a gift at each house. In earlier times these gifts were divided between the Three Kings, which is why this Star-Singing was frowned on and condemned by the Church and the authorities in the 19th century. There are tales about how these groups sang their way around without any sign of the original religious significance. The proud procession of Kings, retinue, and presents for Jesus thus degenerated into a group of scroungers, and that is why the custom gradually faded away in Germany except for Danzig and Upper Silesia (till the 1930s) and isolated areas of the Rhineland, Belgium, and Luxemburg. Carl Hauptmann, Gerhart's less-celebrated brother, provides vivid descriptions in his work of the great impression made by this Star-Singing during his youth in the Riesengebirge around 1870.