

Who were those ‘wise men from the East’ bearing gifts?

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By Benedicta Cipolla

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—They came. They saw. They gifted. That’s about all we know of the foreign visitors who traveled to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus.

The scene ingrained in the public imagination—a stately procession of three kings in turbans, crowns, elaborate capes and fancy slippers, with an entourage of servants and camels trailing behind—isn’t from Scripture.

Stefan Kalipha
(Gaspar),
Nadim
Sawalha
(Melchior) and
Eriq Ebouaney
(Balthasar)
portray the
Magi in *The
Nativity Story*,
now out on
DVD. Most of
what's
believed about
the Magi is
drawn from
tradition
rather than the
Bible, experts
agree. (RNS
photo/Jaimie
Trueblood/New
Line Cinema)

In fact, the Gospels offer no evidence the wise men from the East were kings, or even that there were three of them—much less that they sidled up to a manger on dromedaries exactly 12 days after Jesus' birth.

“Legends pop up when people begin to look closely at historical events,” said Christopher Bellitto, assistant professor of history at New Jersey’s Kean University. “They want to fill in the blanks.”

Only the Gospel of Matthew mentions “wise men from the East” who follow a star to Bethlehem. In the original Greek, they were called magoi (in Latin, magi), from the same root that gives us the word “magic.” It’s been posited they were astrologers or members of a Persian priestly caste.

But what matters more than their exact number and status, historians and Bible scholars agree, is that they were not Jews.



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“For Matthew, the magic star leading the wise men to the place of Jesus’ birth is his way of saying what happened in Jesus is for the Gentile world as well,” said Marcus Borg, professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University and co-author of the new book, *The First Christmas*.

While Matthew doesn’t say they converted to Christianity, popular legend holds they were baptized by St. Thomas and died in Armenia in 55 A.D.

The first artistic depictions of the Magi are found in second-century Roman catacombs, but it wasn’t until the early third century, when Christian writer Tertullian referred to them as “almost kings,” that they began to cultivate a royal air.

Their kingly designation also echoes biblical passages in Isaiah and the Psalms. Prophecies foretold gifts of gold and frankincense, two of the three gifts the Magi brought. The third, myrrh, was a burial spice, which some believe foreshadowed Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Around the same time as Tertullian, Origen—a theologian in Alexandria, Egypt—set their number at three, likely because they carried three gifts, said Teresa Berger, a professor at Yale Divinity School.

Later, the wise men were portrayed as representatives of the three races of man as descended from Noah’s sons—Semitic, Indo-European and African.

Fast forward to the sixth century, when a Latin document recorded their names as Gaspar (or Caspar), Melchior and Balthazar, although the source is unknown, and different names exist in other languages.

By the time their relics arrived at the Cologne cathedral in 1164, after stops in Constantinople and Milan, the faithful venerated the Magi as saints, and festivals sprang up to honor them. A 14th-century report of an Epiphany play described costumed “kings” riding through Milan on horseback with a large retinue, similar to contemporary three kings

parades in Latin America.

Today, Roman Catholics and some Protestants commemorate the Magi's visit on Jan. 6 with the Feast of the Epiphany.

In Europe and Latin America, where Jan. 6 remains a holiday in some places, Epiphany folk customs abound. The elderly Befana and Babushka bring gifts to Italian and Russian children, while in Puerto Rico, the "tres reyes" are said to deposit presents in children's shoes, often in exchange for oatmeal or hay left out overnight for their camels.

In Germany, children dress up as kings and process from house to house, collecting money for the poor, while French bakeries serve galette des rois, or kings' cake.

In a handful of countries, people still mark their homes in chalk with the initials of the three wise men, CMB, which also stands for "Christus Mansionem Benedicat," or "May Christ bless this house."

The Magi may get short shrift in the United States compared to other countries, but they play an integral part in the Christmas story, cropping up in songs and often stealing the show in pageants.

William Studwell, a retired professor at Northern Illinois University and an expert on Christ-mas carols, chose "We Three Kings of Orient Are" as one of two 'Carols of the Year' for 2007 to mark its 150th anniversary.

He recalls his own Magi days fondly.

"It's one of the only things I remember about third grade—being one of the kings," he said.

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