

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 76 (2010)
Heft: [10]

Artikel: Where did the three kings go?
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944251>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Three Gifts

The three gifts are explicitly identified in Matthew: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been brought forward. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh are much more obscure.

One theory is that all three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king, myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable.

Another theory says that the three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense, an incense, as a symbol of priesthood, and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of death. Sometimes this is described more generally as gold symbolizing virtue, frankincense symbolizing prayer, and myrrh symbolizing suffering.



The three wise men bearing gifts

It was these three gifts, it is thought, which were the chief cause for the number of the Magi becoming fixed eventually at three. They can also be linked to Isaiah where it is said that gifts will be given by kings; this has played a central role in the perception of the Magi as kings, rather than as astronomer-priests.

What subsequently happened to these gifts is never mentioned in the scripture, but several traditions have developed. One story says that the gold had been stolen by the two thieves who were later crucified alongside Jesus. Another tale says it was entrusted to and then misappropriated by Judas.

In the Monastery of St. Paul of Mount Athos there is a 15th century golden case containing purportedly the gifts of the Magi. It was donated to the monastery in the 15th century by Mara Branković, daughter of the King of Serbia, wife to the Ottoman Sultan Murat II. Apparently they were part of the relics of the Holy Palace of Constantinople and it is claimed they were displayed there since the 4th century AD.

Myrrh

Myrrh was used as an embalming ointment and as a penitential incense in funerals and cremations until the 15th century. The "holy oil" traditionally used by the Eastern Orthodox Church is traditionally scented with myrrh. It has been suggested by scholars that the "gifts" were medicinal rather than precious material for tribute.

Myrrh is the dried oleo gum resin of a number of Commiphora species of trees. Like frankincense, it is produced by the tree as a reaction to a purposeful wound through the bark and into the sapwood. The trees are bled in this way on a regular basis.

Since ancient times, myrrh has been valued for its fragrance, its medicinal qualities as a wound dressing and for the ancient Egyptians as the principal ingredient used in the embalming of mummies.

Where did the three kings go?

Marco Polo claimed that he was shown the three tombs of the Magi at Saveh south of Tehran around 1270.



Altarpiece with the three kings

A Shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne Cathedral, according to tradition, contains the bones of the Three Wise Men. Reputedly they were first discovered by Saint Helena on her famous pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She took the remains to the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople; they were later moved to Milan, before being sent to their current resting place in AD 1164.