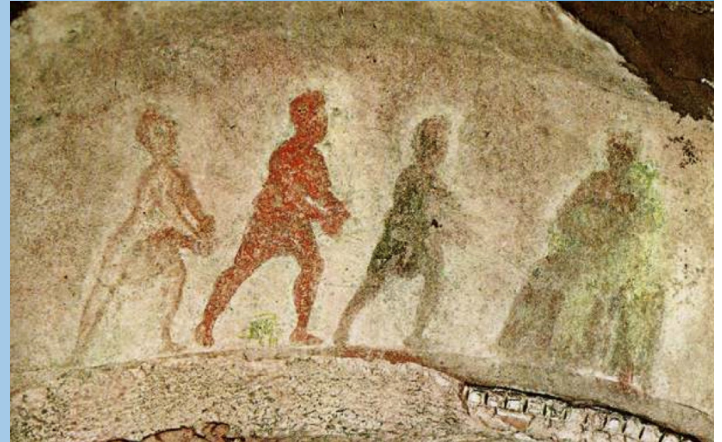


A Journey with the Magi



The magi as we find them in our nativity scenes are actually the result of centuries and centuries of artistic development. Everything from their posture to the style of their caps can be traced throughout the centuries. In "A Journey with the Magi," we look at the first 1000 years of Christian art to understand this evolution.



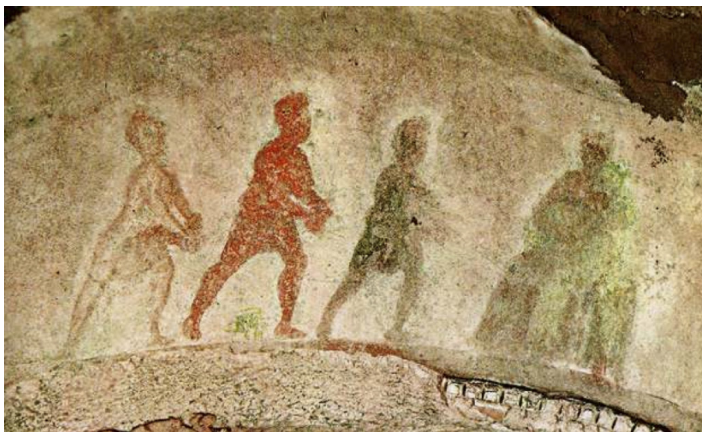
COMPLIMENTS OF THE
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Epiphany calls to mind images like Hans Memling's *Adoration of the Magi* – a solemn Mary holding or watching over an often naked infant Jesus as he is revered by richly clothed kings whose physical traits and varied dress suggest their origins in different parts of the known world. Produced between 1300 and 1750, such compelling images—and the crèches that they inspired—eclipse the frescoes and carvings of the magi that survive from the nascent and growing church of the 3rd through the 10th centuries. In these first depictions the magi are not kings, but starwatchers and companionable travellers who highlight many aspects of Matthew's account and who, read in context, provide rich glimpses into the life of the early and medieval Church.



The Adoration of the Magi, 1470
Hans Memling
oil on panel
Museo del Prado, Madrid
[Web Gallery of Art/Wikimedia Commons](#)

The earliest surviving depiction of the magi appears in a fresco that spans an arch in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome.



Fresco, 3rd century AD
Capella Graeca, Catcomb of Priscilla, Rome
italiamedievale.org

There are three now shadowy figures in short tunics, striding with gifts outstretched toward a seated mother and child. A parallel arch has an image of a meal of bread, fish, and wine spread before seven people. What defines the first as the magi and both as Christian is their context. The catacomb of Priscilla has many explicitly Christian burials, and, below these arches there are several frescoes that reinforce each other as Christian—Moses bringing forth water from a rock, three Hebrew youths in the furnace, Susannah oppressed by and then delivered from the elders, Jesus healing the paralytic, the raising of Lazarus. These are among the 20 images that recur in earliest Christian art and as a group suggest key tenets of 3rd century evangelism and its pastoral emphasis of baptism, faith, deliverance, Jesus as a miracle worker, and resurrection. The meal and magi seem to represent the context in which these come together. The meal evokes communal life, which included the dead, and the magi mark the foundation of the church in their witness to the incarnation and kingship of Jesus.

Another early image of the magi appears on a 4th century plaque that marked one of the thousands of recessed graves cut into the walls of the narrow passageways that run through the catacombs.



Etched gravestone, ca. 330 AD
Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome
Marble, red restored
[Museo Pio Chistiano, Vatican](#)

Severa, the deceased, appears at the left, next to the salutation, *in deo vivas*, "in God may you live." Note that she points to the right, directing attention to the image, which in most cases would have been a symbol—an anchor, ship, dove, palm or olive branch, fish, or sometimes a figure such as the good shepherd, a woman praying with upstretched arms, known as an "orant," or Jesus raising Lazarus. The elements—a mother and child, and a figure pointing to a star, and gift-bearers—constitute a sign that recalls Mt 2 and the prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:17-19. Even for people without detailed knowledge of those texts, it seems to suggest recognizing, interpreting, and following signs.

Though the image is but sketched, there is significant detail here. The visitors' short tunics, capes, and the caps are features associated in antiquity with peoples of the East. The caps are specifically recognizable as Phrygian caps that

in Greek and Roman art identify figures from myth, legend, and history as coming from Anatolia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia and that are used in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD to represent Mithras, whose cult drew soldiers and middle and lower classes across the Roman Empire. The image, then, provides details that associate Matthew's magi, not just with the east, but with an eastern religion associated in particular with astronomic wisdom. In a context in which reliefs and frescoes appear in cave-like sanctuaries throughout the Roman Empire, the magi may have evoked for some viewers the conversions from pagan religions like Mithraism to Christianity.



Mithras slaying the bull, 2nd or 3rd century AD
[The central image of the Roman cult of Mithras]
Bas relief, found at Fiano Romano, Italy
Musee du Louvre
Photo: Jastrow/ en.wikipedia.org

(previous column) Mithras slaying the bull, detail 2nd century AD
Fresco
Mithraic sanctuary, Marino, Italy
Luther Martin. mysterium.com

Note that in addition to the cap, the billowing capes of the figures etched in Severa's plaque are also a standard feature of Mithras' dress. This illustrates the borrowing of graphic forms from Roman art in the development of Christian art and reinforces the association with Mithras, but it also conveys the energy with which the magi seek and approach the child, who reaches with equal energy toward them. Indeed the salutation to the deceased Severa may serve as well as an epigraph for the image, in which the magi reach their destination.

As Christianity began to attract converts of means in the late 3rd and into the 4th century, artisans with significantly greater training than those who etched plaques or painted murals were commissioned to carve signal stories of the Old and New Testament on stone sarcophagi. The visit of the magi, identified by their eastern dress, gifts, and guiding star, occurs frequently among those episodes as a defining feature of the Nativity.



Detail, lid of the Adelfia Sarcophagus, mid 4th century AD
Rome
Relief, Marble
Museo Pio Cristiano

In this fragment of a coffin lid, the artist conflates Matthew's magi with Luke's manger and shepherds and adds the ox and the ass that appear in apocryphal infancy accounts, elements that combine in a lively moment in time. The leader and the shepherd to the right point to the star, here literally at hand, while the second turns to the third, both still in motion. Mary takes note of all, as the ox and the ass nuzzle the child or perhaps look for their feed.

The great majority of examples follow what a close reading of Matthew would suggest – that the Magi were late visitors to Bethlehem. The example below makes the distinction in stone. The accounts of both Luke and Matthew are evoked by juxtaposed scenes in which Jesus appears both as an infant visited by a shepherd and a toddler clasping a visitor's gift.





Detail, coffin lid, 4th century AD
Relief, Marble
Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican
KBC

The episode is repeated often in sarcophagi, sometimes as a dominant image and sometimes in reliefs crowded with figures from both Testaments, as in this in the Vatican Museum.



Dogmatic Sarcophagus, 4th century AD
Rome
Relief, marble
Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican
KBC

In the bottom left corner, the forward motion and outstretched gifts of the magi focus attention to the mother and child, as in the earliest representations. In this context, however, the leader of the magi points not at a star but toward the register above, where three identical figures oversee the creation of Eve as Adam sleeps, a bold depiction of the Trinity as three identical persons, as established by the Council of Nicaea in 325 just a few years before this sarcophagus was carved. The parallelism of the seated father and seated mother, moreover, affirms another element of the creed articulated at Nicaea—that Jesus was made flesh and became human. In the cluster to the right of the Trinity, a young Jesus appears between Adam and Eve, as the new

Adam, consoler and helper rather than judge. It is a role underscored by the miracles on both registers and by the figure of Peter on the lower right, moving from betrayal to martyrdom. Notably, there is no crucifixion or cross here, an absence that is typical of the art of the early Church. As in many other sarcophagi, the crucifixion is acknowledged by an image from the passion, here Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial. The figure of Daniel that appears in the bottom of the middle register would be understood by some as a foreshadow or "type" of the passion and resurrection. Within this complex of stories, the Nativity serves a still evangelizing church as the focus of theological and Christological elaborations of the incarnation in which the magi bear witness.

Perhaps the earliest surviving mosaic of the magi appears in the original nave arch of Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, dated to 440, 50 years after Christianity became the sole religion of the empire. The contrast with the Capella of only 200 years before is profound, but the Nativity and other episodes of the infancy narratives remain and become perhaps even more central than in the early church as Rome, in accepting the divinity of Christ, merges its history and power with that of the Church.



Top: The Annunciation (perhaps the first image, and unique);
Bottom: The Epiphany, 440 AD
"Triumphal Arch," Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome
Mosaic
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

In this vast basilica, mosaics along the walls of the nave depict key episodes in the lives of Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Joshua. The original arch at the front of the church has four registers on both sides that illustrate the infancy narratives that fulfill the promise of that history. In a central position on the left side of the arch the visit of the magi is depicted as a theophany, with the details of the story stripped away. Jesus sits as a child on a throne, surrounded as if by a court that includes Mary and Joseph and angels. A magus dressed in colorful oriental cape, cap, and trousers, points to the star above the child's head. Two who are similarly dressed look on from the right past a seated female figure. Robed in black and holding a scroll, she undoubtedly represents the Cumaean Sibyl, a figure in Greco-Roman religion who was believed by Christians to have predicted the coming of Christ. Together these figures declare the triumph of Christianity over eastern and western paganism, and, with the biblical stories that line the nave, mark the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of promises that reaches back to Abraham.

An ivory panel of the 6th century, perhaps one of two that formed a book cover, reflects the accommodation of the image to space on a functional object, but also to the formal frontal depiction of the mother and child emerging in Byzantine art as Mary and the child came to signal Jesus' dual nature.



Panel of a diptych (a pair of hinged panels), early 6th century
Eastern Mediterranean
Elephant ivory
British Museum
[Richardprins/WikimediaCommons](#)

The magi, along with an angel, frame Mary and Jesus closely, but they still convey the motion and attention associated with the magi from the 3rd century, and, though stylized, the depiction reflects an emerging convention of portraying one as bearded and older. On the other hand, there is no star, and the angel, which creates symmetry in the composition, may reflect a tradition that the magi were guided by an angel. Where we would expect to see a star there are crosses—one just out of the frame and the other on the angel's staff—reflecting its now common usage as a symbol. Note the linens that protect the gifts from human touch, a practice deeply rooted in pagan ritual as well as Roman court practice, and which, on close examination, appear in three of the previous six examples, suggesting that in these first centuries, magi were imagined as bringing offerings in keeping with the traditions from which they come. Below, an apocryphal tale contrasts with the orderly image above. To the left a disheveled Mary rests and on the right a woman with withered hand reaches toward the child, a clear reference to the apocryphal story of Salome, who insisted that she confirm Mary's virginity, suffered for it, and sought healing from the infant Jesus.

The magi of an early 8th century whalebone box known as the Franks or Autun Chest, probably carved in Anglo Saxon Northumbria, exemplify the distinctive stylistic traditions and interpretive contexts that took hold in the shattered empire as conquerors encountered Christianity.



Front, panel Franks Casket, 8th century
Left, tales of Weland the Smith; Right, the adoration of the Magi
Whalebone
British Museum
[John W. Schulze, Wikimedia Commons](#)

The visit of the magi appears on half of the front of the chest in a schematic rendering that suggests exposure to Byzantine models. It is framed in runes which spell out the lament of the beached whale that provided bone for the box. Of the scenes depicted on the sides and top, only this is Christian. At the left is a depiction of the horrific revenge of the Norse/Germanic god Weland the Smith against Nithad who had imprisoned and crippled him. The magi are still defined by their short tunics, a version of a Phrygian cap, and by gifts—two curious offering vessels and a scepter—as well as by

an identifying label, MAEGI, above. Two bow their heads and the leader rests on a bent knee, a posture surprisingly absent in the previous examples and their parallels. A flowerlike star appears above, and below a bird, thought by some to represent the Holy Spirit. Mary, enthroned, is depicted frontally with an embrace that forms a mandorla (or a mandorla that forms an embrace) around the head of an adult Christ, an image that isolates Jesus and Mary from the profane chaos of the adjacent story, but as well from the magi, whose connection is in the act of offering.

Far to the south and east, a 7th century altar commissioned by the king of the Lombards, the Germanic conquerors of northern Italy, includes an epiphany panel in which the magi are framed by Mary and Jesus on the right and a guiding angel above.

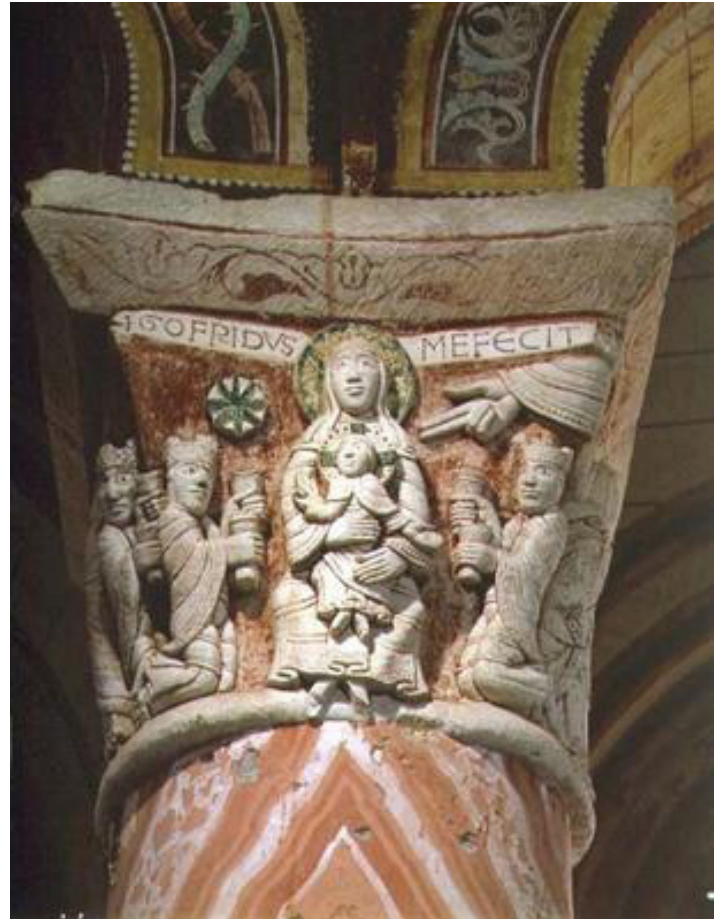


Detail from the Altar of Ratchis, 737-744 AD
Bas-relief
Christian Museum and Treasure of the Duomo,
Cividale del Friuli, Italy
Neil Christie/University of Leicester

In its rendering of the magi this highly abstract relief recalls the simplicity of earliest versions, and its appearance on the altar suggests the signal function that the image had in early centuries of the Church. The magi wear short tunics, capes, but the caps are now pannonian hats, worn by Roman soldiers in late Antiquity. Newer traditions appear in the beards of the first and third, the bowed head of the leader, frontal gaze of the mother and child, who sit on an arched, throne. Notable is the prominence of the angel with hand outstretched, which reflects a tradition that conflates the baptism of Jesus with the epiphany. The effect is to emphasize the divinity of Christ and the special status of Mary as mother of God, but it is distinguished from the ivory

diptych panel and the Franks Chest by the child's reaching toward the visitor as he and his mother gaze at the viewer.

By the 11th century the magi have become kings. This transformation is perhaps attributable to the fading in cultural memory of the meaning of the magi's dress, but ambivalence toward astrology and Islam's dominance in the East may also have influence on the way the story was interpreted and in turn depicted. The struggle between the Church and secular rulers may also figure into the magi's new look.



Carved capital, 11th century
Signed Gofridus me fecit (Gofridus made me)
Saint-Pierre de Chauvigny

Though it signaled divine agency in the art of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the hand of God is new to the story of the magi. Here, the hand and the guiding star in balance above the child strongly suggest the Trinity, with the star as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Note the way in which the grain of the column highlights the triangle formed by the child, star, and hand. In a freedom characteristic of the Romanesque, the figures are a counterpoint to such symmetry. The child stretches out his hands as if in glee as two visitors contentedly gaze and the third peers in anticipation around the corner. Even as the image has begun its evolution to the more somber and sumptuous adorations of the Renaissance

and Baroque, the kings recall the magi of the early church, starwatchers, travellers, and very human witnesses to the mystery of the Incarnation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Karen Bowden Cooper is the curator of the Seminary's Kelso Museum of Near Eastern Archaeology. She is also a lecturer in Hebrew in the master's programs. In teaching exegesis she has developed an interest in art as form of biblical exegesis grounded in the life of the Church and the larger culture.

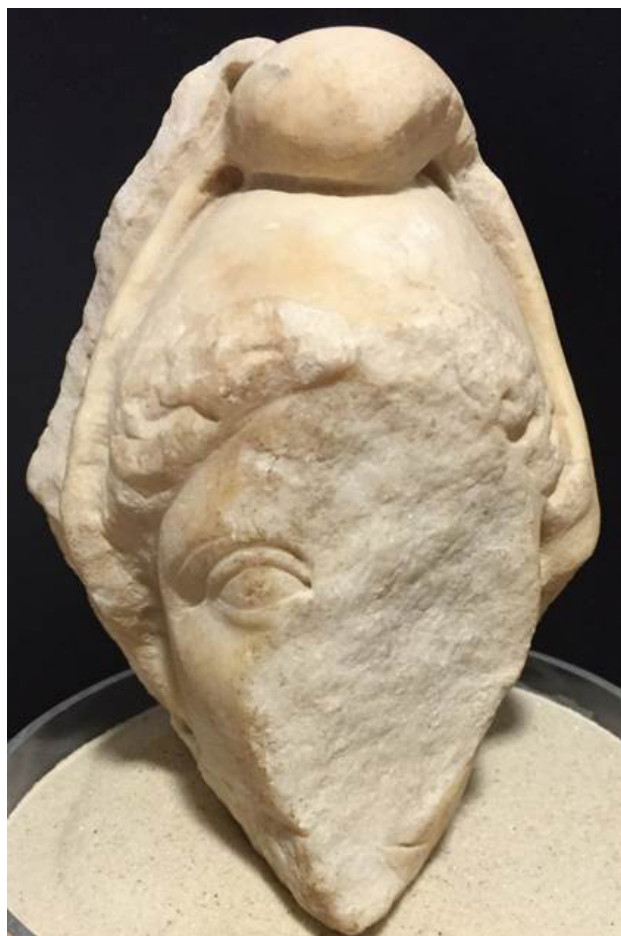
KELSO MUSEUM OF NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY AT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The Kelso Museum is fortunate to know where a large proportion of its artifacts come from. As archaeologists would say, they are fully provenienced. Their findspots in archaeological excavation are fully documented, which means that they can be interpreted in relation to each other, in context, and contribute to an understanding of daily life and change over time in the sites and regions where it they are found.

Some artifacts, however, have come through other means. Some have been donated by travellers who bought pottery examples—often for teaching—in the days when artifacts were sold on the antiquities market without question. These include small collections from Egypt and Mesopotamia, and a scattering of objects acquired by M.G. Kyle and James Kelso for the Museum from British Mandate Palestine and Jordan.

Among the unprovenienced, this marble fragment, long buried in storage, is one of the least documented pieces in the collection. We have only the thing itself to go on. There are angles that we will explore in the future including the marble itself, the specific sculptural style, and its defacing. The most striking feature—the cap (once we rejected the idea of a curious hairstyle)—has focused our study on a way that Greek and Roman art represents people from the East like Paris of Troy, Orpheus the singer, Ganymede the favorite of Zeus and cupbearer of the gods, Attis, the priest of the Great Mother cult, and Mithras the Persian god whose Roman cult spread throughout the empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (see page 3 and image right).

The cap lived on into the 9th century in depictions of the magi in Christian art, and the in this Christmas season we were inspired to follow that story which is rich in insights into the art and life of the Church as it moved from the shadows of the catacombs to the basilicas of Rome and Constantinople and beyond into the world of the Norse and Germanic tribes who shattered the empire.



On display at the Kelso Museum is a marble fragment believed to be Mithras, the Persian god whose Roman cult spread throughout the empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

Upcoming: Look for more resources and links on these topics in the future.

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The Museum is open to the public Wednesday-Saturday 10:00 a.m.- 4:00 p.m. (except the week between Christmas and New Year's as well as major holidays). Call 412-924-1395 to schedule a tour. Visits and tours are free, but donations are appreciated.

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