Christian feast celebrated on January 6. It originated in the Eastern Church as an observance of the baptism of Jesus. In the West, it became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles and more particularly it has come to celebrate the coming of the Magi (Three Wise Men).

Summary Article: Epiphany
From The Christmas Encyclopedia

(From the Greek Epiphaneia, “appearance, manifestation”). Feast observed on January 6 by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox churches. It commemorates the three-part manifestation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God: (1) His physical manifestation to the Gentiles through the Magi at Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12); (2) His spiritual manifestation at His baptism in the River Jordan when the Holy Ghost descended as a dove (Luke 3:21-22); (3) His miraculous nature manifested at the marriage in Cana of Galilee when Jesus performed His first miracle by turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). The last day in the period known as the Twelve Days of Christmas, Epiphany ends the Christmas season in many parts of the world and is sometimes called “Little Christmas.” In the Roman Catholic Church, however, the Christmas season ends with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, observed on the first Sunday after Epiphany (the Monday following if Epiphany falls on a Sunday) (see The Vatican).

Epiphany Eve is often called “Twelfth Night” and Epiphany itself “Twelfth Day,” if one considers Christmas Night as the first night and December 26 as the first day in this period. Custom dictates that all Christmas decorations be stored away at this time and that holiday greenery be burned; according to superstition, anyone failing to adhere to this tradition invites bad luck. Other designations include “Feast of Lights,” for the early Christians celebrated with lighted torches; “Feast of Jordan”; and “Three Kings Day” or “Day of the Kings” in honor of the Magi.

The fixing of January 6 remains largely traditional in Roman Catholic circles. One theory, however, proposes reckoning backward from April 6, Easter as kept by the Phrygian Montanists, who followed the second-century heretical prophet Montanus. Assuming that Jesus lived exactly 33 years, Epiphany would have fallen on January 6. On the other hand, an Internet article about “The Feast of Lights” by the Rev. George Mastrantonis of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America implies that Epiphany Christianized the birthday of Aeon, patron god of Alexandria, Egypt.

Epiphany was first celebrated in the East by the second century, with emphasis placed primarily on Christ’s baptism and secondarily on His Nativity. This rationale stemmed from two concepts: one, that Christ’s baptism constituted His true, or spiritual, Nativity; two, by tradition, His baptism occurred exactly 30 years from His physical Nativity; thus the two events were celebrated together. Saint Clement of Alexandria (150?—215?), a Greek theologian and church father, wrote that although the followers of Basilides (a second-century Alexandrian teacher who founded a Gnostic sect) commemorated the baptism and Nativity on January 6, the Church at that time had not embraced Epiphany as an ecclesiastical feast. While Epiphanius (315?—403), a father of the Greek Church and a

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theologian of Jewish birth, also referred to January 6 as the Epiphany, the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus provided the first definite evidence of church involvement by mentioning that in 361, the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate (331?—363) attended an Epiphany feast in Vienne of Gaul. Thus the Western (Roman) Church did not observe Epiphany until the fourth century, when it is believed that the theologian St. Athanasius (ca. 293-373) of Alexandria first introduced it to Gaul.

The new feast came to Western knowledge about the same time that the Western Church established December 25 as the Feast of the Nativity, which Christianized the birthday of Mithras, the Persian sun god. With two established dates for the Nativity, the East eventually adopted December 25 as the Nativity of Christ and retained January 6 as the anniversary of Christ’s baptism; the West, while also embracing Epiphany, placed far more emphasis on the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem on that date. Regarding the miracle at Cana, Epiphanius asserted that water, even rivers and probably the Nile itself, had turned to wine on January 6, a “miracle” that has never been noted in the literature of the Western Church.

Because Epiphany also Christianized certain pagan spring festivals, which honored the gods of running water, rivers, and streams through water purification rituals, it became commonplace to hold baptisms on this date with a special “Blessing [or Sanctification] of the Waters” ceremony. Whereas Epiphany baptisms survived in the African Christian Church, the sanctification of water has remained in the Eastern Orthodox churches, for example, the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox faiths. In some countries, the blessing often involves a priest tossing a cross into a nearby body of water, after which men compete to retrieve it. Believing that the holy water will cure sickness and yield bountiful crops, worshippers return home with some of the water. The priest may also make personal visits to anoint homes and fields with the blessed water.

TWELFTH NIGHT.

Beginning in the Middle ages, Twelfth Night in Europe was spent in revelry with music, singing, dancing, masques and masquerades, bonfires, pageants portraying the Magi, and feasting, with a mood much akin to that of the Roman Saturnalia. Throughout European courts, it was initially customary to elect a mock king, the Lord of Misrule, to supervise a series of festivities held all during the Christmas season, in which those in attendance were subject to this mock king’s ludicrous fancies. By the time of Edward II of England (1284-1327), the mock king had become known as “King of the Bean” from the manner in which he was elected. A large plum cake was served with a bean hidden inside. Each participant took a slice of cake, and whoever found the bean was dubbed King of the Bean. If a woman found the bean, she became Queen and chose a King. Following the festivities, a portion of the cake was donated to the poor. The cake itself, called a “Kings’ Cake” in honor of the Three Kings or Magi, originated in France during the twelfth century as a means of choosing the mock king for Christmas court festivities. The hidden object at that time was a bean or perhaps a pea, nut, or a coin, and the one finding the object was either dubbed King for a Day or would receive good luck in the coming year. During the Renaissance, the custom of choosing a King of the Bean had become more associated with Twelfth Night rather than the entire Christmas season as before, and the Kings’ Cakes appeared as works of art, often of enormous sizes.

The seventeenth century saw increasing popularity for the innovative custom of drawing slips of paper that contained the names of fictitious, ridiculous characters for revelers to impersonate. This practice gained preference over the King of the Bean game, and by the eighteenth century, the Twelfth Night
mock king had become virtually obsolete. The paper slips evolved into sets of professionally printed cards with names and illustrations.

A somewhat related custom, the so-called Urn of Fate, is found in Italy and Spain. On Christmas Day, Italians fill a large urn with wrapped boxes containing either gifts or nothing at all, and each guest has one chance to draw either a prize or a dud. Instead of gifts, the Spanish urn contains paper slips, each with the name of a guest, and the slips are drawn out in pairs. The pairs are encouraged to become good friends during the new year, and “fate” may encourage matrimony for some pairs of unmarried men and women.

By the nineteenth century, the boisterous mood of Twelfth Night had considerably waned, yet a number of countries retain vestiges of this festival. For example, the Kings’ Cakes found in the Gulf Coast regions of the United States today are rounded to symbolize the supposedly circuitous route the Magi took to evade King Herod and are decorated in purple, green, and gold (traditional colors of Mardi Gras), respectively symbolic of justice, faith, and power. These cakes are also fashioned to resemble jeweled crowns of the Magi, and the hidden object often consists of a tiny plastic doll, symbolic of the Christ Child. In Southern culture, the person finding the doll provides the next Kings’ Cake or hosts the next Mardi Gras party. Twelfth Night initiates the Carnival season in Louisiana, which terminates with Mardi Gras, and the objects once hidden in the Kings’ Cakes of England have found a new home in plum puddings. On Twelfth Night in London, the current company performing at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, gathers there in the Green Room in full eighteenth-century costume to partake of the “Baddeley Cake,” a confection annually served in honor of the English actor Robert Baddeley (1733-1794). Baddeley bequeathed the sum of £100 to provide wine and cake for his fellow actors on Twelfth Night. The ceremony of the Baddeley Cake remains extant.

See also Christmas Day; Great Britain; Nativity; Saturnalia.
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