

Johannes de Hildesheim, *Historia trium regum*  
In Latin, manuscript on parchment  
England, c. 1400-1450

*i* (unnumbered paper) + *iv* (paper, numbered *i-iv*) + 44 folios + *i* (unnumbered paper) on parchment (rather scrappy, with original imperfections), modern foliation in pencil top outer corner recto, text is complete, but this was evidently once part of a longer volume as shown by the earlier seventeenth-century (?) foliation in ink, 1[31]-174 (collation *i-v<sup>s</sup> vi<sup>i</sup>*), horizontal catchwords bottom inner margin, ruling usually indiscernible, but apparently frame ruled in ink (e.g. f. 1v) or hardpoint (e.g., f. 28) (justification 204-198 x 132-120 mm.), copied by several scribes in current *anglicana* scripts influenced by secretary script in thirty-two to thirty-five long lines, no rubrics, blanks for two- to three-line initials, guide letters for initials, occasional marginalia, lower margin of f. 40 cut away, edges darkened, some stains and last six leaves rodent damaged (with small amount of losses to edge of text), but overall in good condition. Bound in eighteenth-century reversed calf over pasteboard, tooled in blind (exposing the darker front side of the leather) with three fillets and scalloped borders forming a large rectangular center panel with two rows of small stamps, and large floral stamps at each corner, rebounded, spine with five raised bands, substantial wear to front and back covers and along the joints, fitted case. Dimensions 260 x 165 mm.

The most widely read account of the journey of the three Magi, this text still awaits a modern critical edition (as well as a complete census of the numerous surviving manuscripts). Most copies are in German and Austrian collections (only one copy listed in the United States in De Ricci et al.); it appears rarely on the market, with only five manuscripts listed as sold in the twentieth century in the Schoenberg Database, some in multiple transactions. The text of this copy is related to the version found in another English manuscript and deserves careful study.

## PROVENANCE

1. Evidence of the script supports an origin in England in the first half of the fifteenth century. The manuscript was copied by several scribes, with varying degrees of formality and variations in the forms of individual letters. Nonetheless, the general characteristics of all the scripts found here, with *anglicana* letter forms mixed with those from secretary script, suggest an origin in the first half of the fifteenth century (especially note the use of sharp, broken strokes, scribes using both double-looped "a" and single compartment "a," long forked "r," and a short "r," and so forth). Early (seventeenth-century?) foliation starts with f. 1[31], and this was most likely the last forty-four leaves of a longer manuscript, rebound in the eighteenth century to include just this one text.

Evidence for use include subject headings added in a contemporary hand in the margin, for example, f. 1, "de Balaam," "de Iob," f. 1v, "Nota ubi Paulus fuit prostratus" (Where Paul was struck down [i.e. on the road to Damascus]); f. 2, "de diademate melchior" (about Melchior's crown), and so forth. Some of the chapters are numbered by the scribe in the same ink as the text, but many were left unnumbered, and then numbered later in the margins, probably in the sixteenth century. This same hand added short guide notes to the contents of the text in the margins, including some which point out geographic information in the text, for example f. 7, "De tribus insulis Indiae" (On the

three islands of India), and f. 10, "Galilea," as well as general comments, including names and other comments such as "custom" added alongside two passages on f. 14, and "superstition" added on f. 31.

2. By 1580 in the library of Thomas Leventhorp (d.1588; his name, in ink, dated 1580, f. 44v) of Aldbury, Herts., the Tudor nobleman and brother-in-law of King Henry VIII (Leventhorp's first marriage was to Dorothy Seymour, sister of Queen Jane Seymour; see Kerr, 1935, p. 140), who also owned British Library, Royal MSS 5 B.xi and 5 C.x, xi (works of St Augustine) and Inner Temple MS 511 (Guido de Colonna, *Historia Troiana*).
3. Outer margin f. 1, "R. K," possibly initials of an early owner?
4. Belonged to William Herbert (1718-1795), bibliographer and book collector, his ex libris, dated 1770, front flyleaf, f. ii, with notes on the text and a Latin epigram related to the three Kings; his sale, 21 November 1798, lot 951.
5. Unidentified armorial bookplate inside front cover, with "W2-F3-7," in pencil above.
6. Henry Dobson, signature dated 1838, front flyleaf, f. iii.
7. Belonged to the Law Society, Mendham Collection, London; armorial bookplate, front flyleaf; in pencil, "Mendham MS 4; round library stamp ff. 1 and 43v; described in Ker, 1969, p. 119, no. 4 (105.g).

## TEXT

ff. 1-43v, [Added heading; *Historia trium Regnum*], incipit, "Cum venerandorum trium magorum immo verius trium Regnum gloriosissimorum vniuersus mundus ab ortu solis ... et clamabat iam natus est puer de virgine qui omnium est salvator qui xxxiii annis regnabat et in cuius signum xxxiii diebus uiuam et tunc moriar. Quod et factum est," *Explicit* [f. 44rv, blank].

Printed in Horstmann, 1886, pp. 206-312; Horstmann printed the abbreviated Latin version found in Berlin, SB Preuss. Kulturbes., cod. Theol. Fol. 565 (formerly Brandenburg, Ritter Akademie, MS I,1.176), dated 1409, and Berlin, MS Theol. fol. 47, dated 1413, with readings from the longer version found in British Library, Cotton MS Cleop. D.VII, and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 275 included in the notes. Modern scholars now agree that the longer version is in fact the original version of the text (see Schaer, 2000, p. 18, and note 13 discussing the shorter and longer versions and concluding that the longer is primary).

The text in this manuscript is clearly related to the longer version, and it shares the variant ending found in the Corpus Christi manuscript, printed by Horstmann, pp. 311-312, note 5. The variations found among the manuscripts of this important text make the lack of a modern critical edition even more urgent. The work enjoyed great popularity in the late medieval period and was also translated into German (at least independent six versions), Dutch, Flemish, French, and three independent translations into English. Although a complete census of the manuscripts is still to be done, it survives in around seventy-seven manuscripts of the Latin text (Monneret de Villard, 1952, p. 182, n. 1; Behland, 1968, pp. 11-12; Ellissagary, 1965, p. 77), with the vast majority (fifty-three) in German and Austrian collections, three in Switzerland, two in the Netherlands, one in Denmark, two in Rome, four in Poland, eight in France, one in the United States (De Ricci, 1935-1940, p. 1009), and four in England. The very few extant copies from England makes the manuscript described here, which was not known to these scholars, even

more important. The work was printed first in Cologne in 1477, and in four additional fifteenth-century additions as well as four times in the early sixteenth century; see also *Bibliotheca bibliographica latina*, no. 5137.

This text, the *Historia trium regum* (The History of the Three Kings), the best-known and most detailed medieval account of the legendary travels of the three Magi, was written around 1370 by the Carmelite scholar John of Hildesheim. Some manuscripts of the text include a dedication to Florencius of Wevelinghoven, bishop of Münster, allowing it to be dated after 1364, and before 1375, the date of John of Hildesheim's death. It has been suggested that the text was written to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the translation of the relics to Cologne in 1364. The earliest German translation, dedicated to Elisabeth of Katzenelnbogen, dates from 1389.

It is based on the Gospel account of the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, but adds a large amount of material from apocryphal and legendary sources tracing the return of the three kings to the East. Following an account of the prophecy of Balaam, "A star shall arise of Jacob ..." (Numbers 24.17), and other prophecies, John tells the story of the Magi in great detail, telling how the three kings, guided by the star, set forth from their separate kingdoms, miraculously completing their journey in thirteen days without need of food or rest. Meeting in Jerusalem, they then continued together to Bethlehem, where they presented their gifts by the light of the star.

The text then continues the story, saying that their return journey took two years and ended with their building of a chapel on Mount Vaus in honor of the Holy Child. When St Thomas was sent to convert the East, he met the kings there and consecrated them as the first archbishops of the region. After their death their remains were lost and scattered, only to be rediscovered later by St Helena, who transported them to St. Sofia in Constantinople, where they remained until they were presented by Emperor Maurice to Milan. John then tells how the bodies of the three kings were brought to the cathedral in Cologne by Rainald of Dassel in 1164 after the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa's siege of Milan. The text concludes with several chapters describing how the Kings were honored throughout the East by schismatic and heretical sects of Christians, Saracens, Jews and Persians, including the people of India, who the text states would come to Cologne to see the relics, but for the unbearable cold in northern Europe.

John's account is an entertaining one, rich in detail that makes this beloved story come to life (Goethe discovered the text in a manuscript in 1818, and raved about its style and accessibility in a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée). Its popularity in the Middle Ages, however, certainly went beyond its value as entertainment. The three Magi were beloved and popular saints, and Cologne became an important pilgrimage site, drawing visitors from across Europe to venerate their relics, preserved in the splendid reliquary by Nicholas of Verdun. The numerous details about the Holy Land and other countries of the East, moreover, place this text in the company of other popular travelers' tales, such as Ludolph of Sudheim's *Reise ins heilige Land* (found in another manuscript described on this site, TM 625). Texts such as these were valued for their religious content, enabling readers to visualize the Holy Land and the sites of Christ's life, as well as for their informational value and knowledge of history and geography of countries beyond Europe. Research potential for the contents of this text is considerable, since it is also important for the study of Saints' lives and biblical apocrypha. Its relationship to vernacular translations – as well as a source of iconography – is also of special note.

John of Hildesheim was born, almost certainly in Hildesheim, around 1310-1320. He entered the Carmelite Convent at Marienau at an early age, and from 1351 he studied at the Carmelite

*Studium generale* in Avignon, and then in Paris in 1358-1361. From 1361-1364 he was Prior and lector in Kassel, and later in Strasburg, Speyer, and then finally returning to Marienau. He died in 1375. In addition to the *Story of the Three Kings*, he was the author of more than one hundred letters, a philosophical work entitled the *Fons Vitae*, and a treatise in defense of the Carmelite order, as well as a number of other works that apparently do not survive in manuscripts or print. The attribution of the *Story of the Three Kings* to John of Hildesheim, found in one manuscript of the text, Munich, SB clm 14186, is largely based on later writers including Trithemius (1462-1512), and other sources. It has been questioned by the modern editor of his letters (since stylistically these are the sophisticated products of a scholar with humanist interests), but most modern scholars accept him as the author.

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### ONLINE RESOURCES

The Wise Men in History and Tradition

[http://www.staff.science.uu.nl/~gent0113/stellamagorum/stellamagorum\\_magi.htm](http://www.staff.science.uu.nl/~gent0113/stellamagorum/stellamagorum_magi.htm)

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