SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELDS

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Last year at Christmas time, The Cloisters presented a small exhibition telling the story of the Wise Men from the East, who, led by a star, came from far-off lands to worship the Child who was God and King. This year the Christmas exhibition at The Cloisters is dedicated to the shepherds of Bethlehem who left their flocks in the fields to give homage to the Saviour, the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep.

The story was first told in the second chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.' And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. . . . And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen."

Travelers to the Holy Land in the Middle Ages loved to describe the beautiful countryside around Bethlehem, where the shepherds of the Christmas story were tending their flocks on the night when Christ was born. "Ye shall understand," wrote John of Hildesheim in the fourteenth century, "that the land about Bethlehem and all the land in the east is wonderfully planned and set with mountains for the most part. . . . By Bethlehem are many good fat pastures and hotter than in other places in so much that at Christmas barley beginneth to wax ripe. . . . And that time we call here Christmas it is called there the time of herbs. And betwixt Bethlehem and that place where the angel appeared, but a half mile and a little
more, there is no great cold thereabouts. Therefore the shepherds . . . night and day, now in one place and now in another, dwelled there with their sheep. And so they do unto this day. . . . And as the worshipful clerk Saint Bede said in his writing, it was full convenient that the shepherds were awake that night about their sheep for He was born that night that said: ‘I am the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep.’"

The field where the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of the Saviour was to be recognized, according to early pilgrims, by a shepherds' guard-tower called Ader, “that is to say, Tower of the Flocks.” Saint Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem for many years, wrote in the early fifth century of this tower: “It stands on the spot where Jacob at one time pastured his flocks and where the Shepherds who kept watch during the night well deserved to hear the celestial song ‘Gloria in Excelsis.’ While guarding their sheep, they found the Lamb of God . . . whose blood washed away the sins of the world.” Many centuries later than Saint Jerome, a mystery play of France provided as a setting for the Nativity “the field of the shepherds hard by the Ader Tower.”

And not far from the Ader Tower outside the town of Bethlehem medieval pilgrims saw also the church of the Three Shepherds, described as early as the seventh century by Arculf, a Gallican bishop: “In the Church of the Three Shepherds near the Tower of the Flocks,” he wrote, “I visited the three funerary monuments of the shepherds who, on the night when Our Lord was born, were surrounded by celestial light in that very place which now contains their sepulchers.” By the time of Peter the Deacon (twelfth century), the church was called “To the Shepherds,” and associated with it were a “large garden carefully surrounded by walls and fortifications and a brilliantly-lighted cave with a high altar on the very spot where the angel appeared to the shepherds . . . and announced to them the nativity of Christ.” According to Ludolph of Saxony, who wrote his travel story about 1350, “Near Bethlehem . . . a half a mile away . . . is the place where the angels announced to the shepherds that God was born as man. In this place there has been built an exceeding

**LEFT:** Enamel plaque. Mosan, xii century. As in many Romanesque scenes of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the angel has come to earth, following the old Latin text which literally says: “the angel of the Lord stood by them.” Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. **RIGHT:** Painting from a shrine. French, xiii century. The angel remains in the sky while giving his message to the amazed shepherds (one has a bagpipe). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917
born, and the cave was filled with a dazzling light.

The author of the later Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew attempted to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between the original account of Saint Luke, which implies that the Nativity took place in a stable in the town of Bethlehem, and the apocryphal statements, current in the East, that the Child was born in a grotto on the way to Bethlehem. He stated that on the third day after the Nativity, Mary left the cave and entered a stable where she put her child in a manger “and the ox and ass adored him.”

Justin explained quite reasonably that the Nativity occurred in a cave because Joseph could find no lodging in the village. And modern writers have stated that in Palestine grottoes were often used as stables.

In the thirteenth century, an Italian Franciscan friar known as Pseudo-Bonaventura described quite specifically the place of the manger in his Meditations on the Life of Christ.

Two interpretations of the Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds. Above: Wing of an ivory diptych. French, xiv century. The intimate and gay mood is characteristic of French art of this period. Rogers Fund, 1911. Below: Detail of an altarpiece from the workshop of Duccio. Italian, xiv century. Here the feeling is one of solemn dignity. As in Byzantine mosaics the Nativity takes place in a cave; behind a mountain angels praise the Child, and one announces the birth to the shepherds. Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941
Since he claimed that he had learned all the details of the Nativity from a friar who had learned them from the Blessed Virgin herself, his words necessarily carried weight. “When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem,” he wrote, “because of the great multitude that was there at the same time for the same cause, they could get no shelter in any house, but in a common place between two houses that was roofed over for men to stand there against the rain . . . In the which place Joseph that was a carpenter made him a closure and a manger for his beasts. . . .”

In the fourteenth century, John of Hildesheim gave an entirely different description of the place of the Nativity. “Bethlehem, never of great reputation, is but a castle but it is called a city because David was born there. . . . And in that very same house, Christ, God’s Son of Heaven, was born of our lady Saint Mary. . . . But at that time the house was all destroyed in so much that there was nothing left but broken walls on every side and a little cave under the earth and a little unthrifty house before the cave. . . . And asses and horses and other beasts come to the market were tied about this unthrifty house. . . . And in that house, before the cave of old time, was left a manger. . . . And to that same manger was an ox of a poor man that no one might nor would harbour and beside that ox Joseph tied his ass and in that same manger our lady Saint Mary wrapped her blessed son in clothes and laid him therein . . . for there was no other place.”

The mystery plays also included descriptions of the scene of the Nativity, sometimes in the
stage directions, sometimes in the dialogue. In a French play the setting was “a hut open to the winds containing only some hay and branches of broom which Joseph with Mary's help interwove for an enclosure while Joseph lamented: ‘Alas, where are those great castles, those beautiful towers with battlements built so pleasantly, and the Son of God is here so poorly lodged!’ And Mary replied: ‘It pleases God that it be so!’”

In an Italian play Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem met the shepherds and asked them if they knew of a place where they might lodge for the night, since it was late and the gates of Bethlehem were closed. The shepherds answered: “We cannot in this night point out to you either house or hut. But up yonder is a shed. In bad weather we have stayed there.”

All of these word pictures of the scene of the Nativity were reflected in one way or another by artists throughout the centuries who wished to depict the shepherds' story. As for representations of the shepherds themselves, the artists also drew upon the writings of mystics and poets and dramatists and the teachings of the Church. The Church in her liturgy gave to the lowly shepherds dignity and a high purpose. The Mass at dawn on Christmas day was in commemoration of the shepherds coming to the manger, and the Gloria in all masses throughout the year recalled the “Glory to God in the highest” which the angels sang on announcing to the shepherds the Saviour's birth. At matins on Christmas morning in many a candle-lit cathedral there was enacted a solemn Play of the Shepherds, where the clergy in liturgical garb carrying shepherds' crooks chanted the parts of the shepherds, and choir boys high up in the loft sang the angels' song. At the conclusion the shepherds would

LEFT: Detail from a miniature stone altarpiece. Flemish or French, xv century. The shepherds remain shyly in the background, one lifting his hat, one playing his pipe for the Child. Above the thatched-roofed hut the Magi approach, and a shepherd pipes his song. The Michael Friedsam Collection, 1931
Panel painting by a follower of Fiorenzo di Lorenzo. Italian, first half of the xvi century. The two scenes of shepherds on either side of the Nativity are set in an Italian landscape with an Italian hill town in the background. The angel, pointing to the cave of the Nativity, is gracious and serene, and the shepherds are gentle dwellers in Arcady. Rogers Fund, 1906

announce to the people: “Alleluia, Alleluia! Now we know truly that Christ is born.”

The recognition of Christ by the shepherds was considered important by the Church since it signified the recognition of Christ by the people of Israel just as the worship of the Magi symbolized the worship of all other nations of the world. The shepherds were important also as announcers, for they were the first to proclaim the Saviour’s birth.

The Church gave stature to the shepherds; the Church also gave the shepherds flutes. Ever since history began shepherds in every land had played their pipes while spending the long lonely hours watching over their flocks. And so it was to be expected that the shepherds of the Nativity, too, should play their flutes and sing. An early chant for Christmas Eve in the liturgy of the Eastern Church speaks of “the song of the shepherds’ flutes.” “A strange and sublime mystery is presented to my eyes,” said Pseudo-Chrysostom in a sermon; “the shepherds are heard in my ears; they do not accompany with their flute a foolish song, but they chant a celestial hymn. The angels sing, the archangels make their melodies, the cherubim their hymns, the seraphim their doxologies. . . .”

In the later medieval mystery plays, it must be admitted, the shepherds often did sing “foolish songs” to the delight of the audience, many of whom were probably shepherds themselves.

“As I out rode this enders night,
Of three jolly shepherds I saw a sight,
And all about their fold a star shone bright.
They sang terly terlow;
So merrily the shepherds their pipes do blow.”

This gay ditty is from an English “mystery.” In another English play, after the “Gloria” of the angel, the second shepherd said: “Did you hear how he cracked it? Three breves, one long.”

Third shepherd: “Yes and he surely smacked it. There was no crotchet wrong, and nothing lacked it.”

First shepherd: “I’d like us three to sing just as he knacked it.”

Second shepherd: “Let’s hear how you croon. Can you bark at the moon?”

Third shepherd: “Shut up and hark, you loon!” [The shepherds sing off tune.]

In the mystery plays it was almost forgotten that the shepherds were supposed to have religious significance. They were real people, peasants from the countryside who told tall
tales, sang off tune, and complained about the taxes and their wives. They discussed the weather, which was sometimes good and sometimes bad, and the lot of the shepherd, which was often bad but sometimes good.

“Lord but it’s cold and I’m wretchedly wrapped,
My wits are frozen, so long I have napped.
My legs are cramped, and every finger chapped.
All goes awry; in misery I’m trapped.”

So spoke the first shepherd in an English play. In a French “mystery” by Greban, on the other hand, the shepherds seemed more pleased with the weather: “This is now a pleasant season. . . . Who would stay at home indoors and miss such joyous weather! This is now a pleasant season for us shepherds, thank the Lord.”

The French shepherds were also happier about their vocation, singing:

“Fie on riches and on care!
The shepherd’s life is best of all.
With my belly full of bread,
By my beard, I too can shout

Woodcut from John of Hildesheim’s Der Heiligen drei Könige, Strassburg, about 1484. The shepherds’ dog almost always appears in these scenes and often seems aware of the unusual. Here he is running around, probably barking; the whole mood is one of excitement. The tower may be Ader Tower. Bequest of James Clark McGuire, 1931

Fie on riches and on care!
The shepherd’s life is best of all.”
“Isn’t it the sweetest joy
To look upon fair meadows
With the little lambs feeding
And gamboling in the pastures?”
“They speak of grand seigniories
With donjons and with palaces
Isn’t it a sweeter joy to look upon fair meadows?”

The life of the shepherd in England was more dour.

“We’re driven till we’re bowed,
We’re taxed until we’re cowed
By gentry rich and proud.”
“There comes a fellow, proud as a peacock now,
He’d carry off my wagon and my plow.
Before he’d leave, I must seem glad and bow.
A wretched life we lead you must allow.”

Yet even the grumpiest shepherds of England grew lighter of heart after the message of the angel:

“Right merry should we be that now’s the day
The lovely Lord is come who rules for aye.
I’d be the happiest man if I could say
That I had knelt before that child to pray.”

And so in the medieval plays the English shepherds and the French shepherds, the shepherds from the Italian hills and the shepherds from the German valleys went to the manger in Bethlehem and knelt before the Child to pray. And as the Magi brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Him who was King and God, the shepherds also brought their gifts to a Baby who laughed and cried, who might be cold in the winter weather and who was every bit as poor as they were. In an Umbrian play, the shepherds gave their cloaks because Mary had no clothes for the child and “Joseph cannot help since he is collapsed because of his great old age.” In an English play the shepherds gave mittens and a hat.
In the French play by Greban, the first shepherd would not give up his hat, for it was full of holes, nor his shepherd’s crook, for he doubted if the Child would want it and he himself had need of it, nor his dog, for who then would turn back his lambs? He would give instead his brand-new flageolet that he had paid two pennies for in the market and that was really worth fourpence. “Nevertheless I wish it were a finer gift,” he added. Other offerings were a rattle, marvelously made, that would go click-clack in the ear and comfort the baby when he cried, a little bell, a pretty top, a tennis ball, a new lamb, a tiny bird, a penny, apples and nuts, and a bunch of cherries.

“Lo, he merry is,
Lo, he laughs, my sweeting,
A welcome meeting!
Have a bob of cherries?”

Occasionally the shepherds would bring to the Christ Child only their worship and their songs. And Mary would graciously say:

“Thank you, herdsmen, heartily,
For your song and lowly bending
My Son shall repay you royally
And give you all a right good ending.”

So far as is known, no one in the Middle Ages followed up the life history of the shepherds after that first Christmas as many medieval writers did with the Wise Men from the East. It was believed that the Magi stopped and talked with the shepherds on their way to Bethlehem. John of Hildesheim wrote: “And these three kings did ride by the same place where the shepherds were and spake with them. And when the shepherds saw the star they did run together and said that in such a light and in such clearness an angel appeared to them and told them of the . . . birth of Christ. And furthermore all that the angel had spoken to them and all that they had seen and heard and all things that were done, they told everything to the three kings. Whereof the kings were right glad and of good cheer . . . and were greatly comforted. . . . And while the three kings spoke with the shepherds, the star more and more began to shine brighter and brighter. . . . And when the kings parted from the shepherds they gave to them great gifts.”

After this incident we hear no more of the shepherds. One must conclude that they continued to abide in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, and that with the blessing of the Virgin Mary and her Son, they came at last to “a right good ending.” And if medieval pilgrims are to be believed they were buried together in the church of the Three Shepherds on the very spot where they once had heard the angels sing.