

Merry Saturnalia

A little history on the holidays.

Evergreen trees sparkle with decorations and candy. Smiling people are out and about, visiting friends and relatives, exchanging presents. You wave at your neighbors in their bright togas as they pass in front of bold Corinthian columns supported by graceful statues. Yes, it's Christmas time again.

Huh?

Well, this is Christmas as it was a thousand years before Jesus was born. Our present celebrations, complete with trees, food and gift giving, are an exact replica of the great Roman festival of Saturnalia. This festival honored the god Saturn, the god of agriculture. In fact, they bundled up the birthdays of a whole crowd of gods and called the season *Dies Natalis Invicto Solis* (the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun).

The Romans weren't the first people to want a few days off of work around Christmas-time. The ancient Egyptians got into the act, too. They ate, drank and made merry to celebrate the birth of the son of Isis and Osiris. Have you noticed how the word "son" and "sun" keep cropping up? The Egyptians believed that King Osiris, who had been chopped to pieces, turned into a tree overnight, and so their celebrations even included a Christmas tree (well, palm).

In northern Europe, this solstice was commemorated by the ancient Celtic fire festival of Alban Arthuan (the Light of Arthur). This is also known as the yule season, from the Anglo-Saxon word *hweol* meaning wheel, which was the symbol of the sun-god. To help bring on the sun, giant yule fires were lit on the hills at night, and the young men would show their prowess by jumping over them. Evergreens were revered in most cultures because they didn't appear to die in the winter. People would cut sprigs and branches and place them in their homes for good luck. The Druids even hung golden apples (Christmas tree ornaments) from the boughs of live trees.

So what has all this got to do with Jesus and holy lights? Nothing much, really. Dec. 24th wasn't a Christian holiday until the year 350, when Pope Julius I (or Emperor Constantine) finally thought that if you can't beat them, join them, and tacked Christ's birthday onto the date that everyone was celebrating anyway.

What about the other Man of the Hour? The man with the plan with the presents in his hand? Kriss Kringle, Santa Claus, Father Christmas — Saint Nick! St. Nikolaus was a real person, a fourth century bishop in Asia Minor. He's most famous for helping out the daughters of a local man, who, through bad investments, lost his

money. In those days, no money meant no marriage, and probably having to go into the world's oldest profession for a living. And so the kindly saint tossed money down their chimney when the family was sleeping to help them out, which landed in the stockings they had hanging by the fire.

Aside from helping unmarried women, Nikolaus was also the patron saint of all sea-faring men, and Belgium happened to have a lot of them. Legend has it that they were the first northerners to bring the story of Saint Nikolaus (or *Sinter Klass* in Dutch) back to their homelands. Their Father Christmas developed European characteristics — rather well-fed, wearing short breeches and smoking a pipe.

He didn't exhibit all of his familiar features until he was described in 1822 by Clement

Clarke Moore in *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, and it wasn't until the 1850s that an illustration of the Santa we know today first appeared in print, drawn by Thomas Nast, and another century after that when the Coca Cola company commissioned the thoroughly American Santa we all recognize now. Notice how his color themes of red and white match those of Coke?

Other Christmas

traditions with ancient pasts include mistletoe, which was revered by the Celts for its supposed power to heal, render poison harmless, bring protection from witchcraft and give fertility.

Holly has long been associated with religious practices, going back once again to ancient Rome (where it was associated with Saturn) and also the Druids, who revered it because it remained green all winter. In some pagan households, it was considered a kindly gesture to place leaves and branches from the plant around the home so that fairies and other magical beings would be enticed to enter the dwellings and use the holly as shelter.

Much of the entire Christmas tradition (along with Easter) comes from the ancient past. The traditions resurfaced in the 18th and 19th centuries, when families longed to recapture the innocence of bygone times, just as we try to today.

So, this Christmas, look around. See the sparkling lights, the trees, the gifts and food. Feel the spirit of celebration. This winter festival is just one thread in a string that goes back thousands of years to when the first farmers looked up at the sun and knew that the days would start to get longer. This was a day to feast, and be merry.

This was Christmas.

EW

Kent Goodman, aka Laird Camster, is EW's calendar editor, and is the author of several books on ancient English history that he wrote while living in the UK.



smile

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