



Santa Exposed

From Turkish saints to mushroom-tripping shaman

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Spoiler warning: Don't read any further if you believe in Santa Claus!

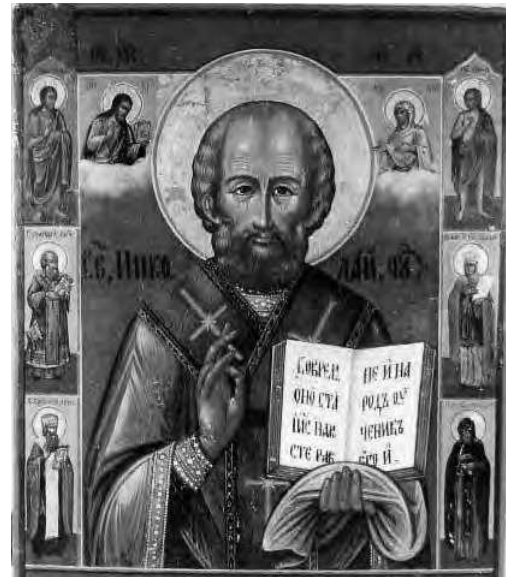
Yes, Eugene, there is a Santa Claus. And though many will tell you our modern image of the jolly red elf comes from a cross between "Twas the Night Before Christmas" and Coca-Cola advertisements, it's a little more than that. Turns out that Santa is a mixture of a Middle-Eastern saint, some Scandinavian elves and a little bit of mushroom-eating Sámi shamanism thrown in for good measure. Our modern celebration of Christmas is neither just a commercial enterprise nor a purely religious celebration; it's a melting pot of folklore from around the world.

*Frosty the Snowman
Knew the sun was hot that day
So he said "Let's run
And we'll have some fun
Now before I melt away."*

— "Frosty the Snowman," Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins

In the summer of 2000, visitors to the Arctic were shocked to see that for the first time in 50 million years, there was water rather than ice at the North Pole. The ice continues to melt at a "record pace," said scientists at November 2007 meeting of the American Geophysical Union. As most American kids know, the Arctic is home to polar bears and Santa's workshop, both of which are in danger of sliding off the melting ice into the sea due to global warming. Luckily the Bush administration recently agreed to many (but not all) of the stipulations towards reducing greenhouse gases at the international climate conference in Bali. After all, who wants to be known as the first American president to drown Santa Claus?

The original St. Nick would not have fared so well at the cold North Pole. According to legend, St. Nicholas was born around A.D. 245 in a much warmer place — what is now Turkey. As the story goes he was a rich and generous man who began giving away money to the poor and to children. He became the Catholic bishop of Myra and was later sainted after performing several miracles.



The original St. Nick

One of the miracles involved a poor man with three daughters. He had no dowry for marriage, and without dowries they were destined to become prostitutes. St. Nicholas tossed sacks of gold in through the windows of their house for the first two daughters, but the window was closed the night he tried to provide gold for the third girl. So he dropped the sack down the chimney. This, according to Dr. Roger Highfield, in his book *The Physics of Christmas*, is why people hang stockings by the fire — to catch the gold.

*His eyes-how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow.*

*The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!
— A Visit from St. Nicholas*

So how did a Turkish saint wind up a "jolly old elf" living at the North Pole? Santa Claus is the result of what folklorists call polygenesis. The roots of what became the guy in the red suit come from all over the world, but in particular they came from the Nordic regions.

As Christianity spread over the next several hundred years after St. Nicholas, it became traditional to give gifts to children on Dec. 6, St. Nicholas' Feast Day. Meanwhile in Scandinavia, prior to Christianization, it was believed that the Norse god Odin would have a hunting party at Yule (the time of the winter solstice). Children would leave tasty treats for Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir (hmmm eight legs, eight reindeer), and Odin would leave gifts or candy for the kids.

Santa's elves demand treats too. Elves come from Scandinavian folklore, where they are *nisse* in Denmark and Norway and *tomte* in Sweden. Norwegian tradition *nisse* "typically lived in barns and helped the farmers throughout the year, so long as they were rewarded each Christmas. So Norwegians put out a bowl of porridge for the *nisse*, rather than milk and cookies," says Ellen Rees, a professor in Scandinavian at the UO. If people were rude to a *nisse* or didn't give him his porridge, he would take revenge — breaking things or tying the cows' tails together, for instance.



Odin and his 8-legged horse

Norwegian *nisse* "have white beards, red stocking caps, a sweater and knickers with suspenders," says Rees. Their outfits haven't changed much over the years and coordinate nicely with Santa's red suit.

In the early 1800s, it was the *julenisse* (Christmas elves) who brought gifts to good