

The winter solstice and the original meaning of Christmas

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In current times, the Solstice is resolutely linked with Christmas, but this was not always so. We often muse on the reasons for the tree, the mistletoe and the identity of Santa, but the answers get lost in the hustle of activity. The myths of the celebration are known deep within us and even though we sing about the 12 days of Christmas, we know little of their beginnings.

The Universality of Solstice

We have celebrated this festival for nearly 2 millennia, absorbing the changes of the times and cultures it has touched, yet at its heart is an older, simpler message that resonates in our souls if we take time to listen – the message of rebirth. Long before the establishment of Christianity, the Winter Solstice in the season of Yuletide (from the Norse "lul" meaning Wheel) had been honored as the dying of the old year and bringing in the new light, the promise of new beginnings and remolding of old ways. All over the world, the rising of the sun was celebrated with fire, greenery, restoration of deity images. The movement of the earth around the sun creates the solstices, when the 2 hemispheres of the globe stand at opposite extremes in relation to the solar body. The word Solstice comes from the Latin "sol stetit" sun stands still – they divide the year into 2 halves of light and dark, waxing and waning. Throughout Europe and the US, a number of ancient sites are oriented to catch the sun's rays as the Solstices; Stonehenge and New Grange being the most famous, and at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico where the shape of 2 daggers of light are created across a spiral carved high on a cliff face.

Santa and St. Nick

The Christmas spirit known as Santa (meaning spirit) was once the Pagan god of Yule; to the Scandinavians, he was known as "Christ on the Wheel", an ancient Norse title for the Sun God reborn at the Solstice. In Russia, he wears a coat of dark fur, in France as Perre Noel his coat is white, and as Father Christmas in England, it is red. In Germany, he is called Weihnachtsmann and his coat is often patched. He usually is depicted with a sprig of holly in his hat which identifies him with the Holly King of the old year, and in his hand, he carries a bundle of birch twigs as does St. Nick. In much of Europe and particularly in Holland, a holiday takes place on



St. Nicholas' Eve, December 6. St. Nicholas of Patara, a 3rd century bishop who was known for giving to the poor, comes each year on a magical ship, mounts a white horse and visits each child. To those who are good, he gives a gift and to those who are not, he delivers a light smack with a bundle of birch twigs. Children set out a clog or a shoe beside the fireplace containing some hay, bread and a carrot to reward his horse, in the hope that a present will be left. Presents are made rather than bought, and disguised in well-wrapped parcels each containing a poem or riddle about the sender and signed "St. Nicholas". The recipient has to guess who sent what. The idea of Santa coming from the North Pole is connected with the early shams of Lapland and Siberia who also wore bells on their costumes and climbed the central poles of their tents above the fires to return with gifts of prophecy and wisdom. Red was an important color in the shamans' costume – it represented the life blood of the tribe and fire, the eternal light and warmth that was the gift of the shaman to the people in those cold lands. The reindeer of our modern Santa were also important to those original peoples, as a source of food and clothing; it takes little imagination to see how the character who descends our chimneys, evolved.

The Holly and the Ivy
Evergreens represent the continuation of life during winter and the bringing in of the boughs and trees ensure that some of the life of the household through the coldest and barren times. "A Bayberry candle burned tot he socket, brings food to the larder and gold tot he pocket".
The waxy, dark leaves of the holly

are the symbol of the Holly King in his waning from midsummer to Yule, at which time he is replaced by the Oak King, the Sun God of the waxing year. The words of "The Holly and the Ivy" are very old in theme and compares the various features of the ancient, sacred tree to symbols of Jesus in an attempt to replace the gods of the Old Religion with that of the new.

Decorating the Christmas tree

The tradition of decorating the tree – a miniature version of the World Tree – is a custom which evolved from the pine groves associated with the Great Mother Goddess. The lights and ornaments hung on the tree as decorations are symbols of the sun, moon and stars as they appear in the Cosmic Tree of Life. Sacred presents - which evolved into whole evergreen is found all over the world and was made popular in England again, by Queen Victoria's husband Albert in 1841.

The earliest reports come from Mesopotamia in 2000 B.C., where beribboned branches were carried in procession in honor of the gods and goddesses of fertility and life. In Rome, green branches were hung


with masks and flowers in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine. The first written record of a fir tree being decorated comes from Riga, Latvia in the year 1510. It was adorned with paper flowers and a dance was performed about it just before the merchants set it ablaze.

The fairy at the top of the tree, just life Mary in the crib scene, is a Holy Mother recognized in all customs which also honor the Son. She offers the greatest gift of all, life everlasting in the sacrificial offering of him. The star, or course, has a deep connection with paganism, representing a unity of all elements plus Spirit. Pine cones were symbols of the Faeries of the wild pine forests of Germanic countries and perhaps it is for this reason that the first made molded-glass tree ornament in village of Lauscha, was in the

Pagan symbolism. It was considered very magical by the Druids who called it the "Golden Bough". They believed it possessed great healing powers and gave mortal men access to the Underworld. In Old Norse, the name for mistletoe is Mestel-tein; the suffix teinn links it to German, Irish and Cornish words that all mean sacred tree and Hlauat-tein means a piece of wood upon which sacred runes have been inscribed. The Green Branch of mixed evergreens was hung over the lintel of the door outside, indicating hospitality and was one of the oldest signs of an inn. Candles upon the boughs, in the windows and on the tables would focus attention upon the symbolism of the decorations and Jewish households,

(Please see 'X-mas' page 8)





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