

## Origins of Christmas Traditions

### A look at some popular Christmas customs and their surprising beginnings

When you think of Christmas, no doubt certain images come to mind, for example: The birth of Jesus Christ, Fir Trees, Holly and Mistletoe, Santa Claus, and New Year celebrations.

Would it surprise you to know that many of these traditions date back to pre-Christian times to festivals celebrated by other religions? Others date from the Middle Ages up to what is considered the beginning of the modern commercial era during Victorian times. This article will take a look at some of these popular customs

#### **The Fir Tree / Evergreen Trees**

*Encyclopædia Britannica* states regarding the Christmas tree: "Tree worship was common among the pagan Europeans and survived their conversion to Christianity." It did so in various rites and customs, including "the custom of placing a Yule tree at an entrance or inside the house during the midwinter holidays." During the festival of the Saturnalia evergreen branches were brought in to decorate homes.



In more modern times the custom of bringing a tree indoors hails from Germany and Martin Luther. It is said that he brought a fir tree indoors and lit it with candles to show his children how beautiful the stars looked as he walked through the forest at night. Prince Albert popularised this custom when he moved from Germany to Britain after marrying Queen Victoria in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **Holly and Mistletoe:**

According to a New York Times report, "evergreens of many sorts were used throughout much of Europe long before the Christian era in midwinter pagan rites intended to insure the return of spring." The Teutons and the Celts of medieval Germany and England regarded holly as a symbol of eternal life because it stayed green when other trees faded away in winter.



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The Teutons and the Celts of medieval Germany and England regarded holly as a symbol of eternal life because it stayed green when other trees faded away in winter. Mistletoe was sacred to the Druids of ancient Britain, who ascribed to it magical power over demons, witchcraft, poisons, diseases and infertility. In Scandinavia, mistletoe was so sacred that enemies meeting under it would lay down their weapons and give each other a kiss of peace. Fantastic legends developed to link these plants with Jesus. One legend holds that holly was originally leafless in winter. But when Mary put the baby Jesus under a holly bush to hide him from Herod's soldiers during the flight to Egypt, the plant immediately put out thick green leaves complete with prickly points to hide and protect the infant.

Some of these customs are believed to have started with the first Christians, but in fact, many date to pagan times, some even belonging to the Druids, especially their ritualistic cutting of the mistletoe. This ceremony was dramatized by Bellini in the opening scene of his opera "Norma."



Druids believed that mistletoe, the golden bough, was sacred, particularly when found growing on oak trees, and it was used to cure many diseases.

Scandinavians also have traditions about mistletoe and believe that it must be suspended if the plant is to serve as an instrument for good.

But the tradition of hanging mistletoe, often with cut stems of holly, is a part of holiday decorations that can be traced to England.

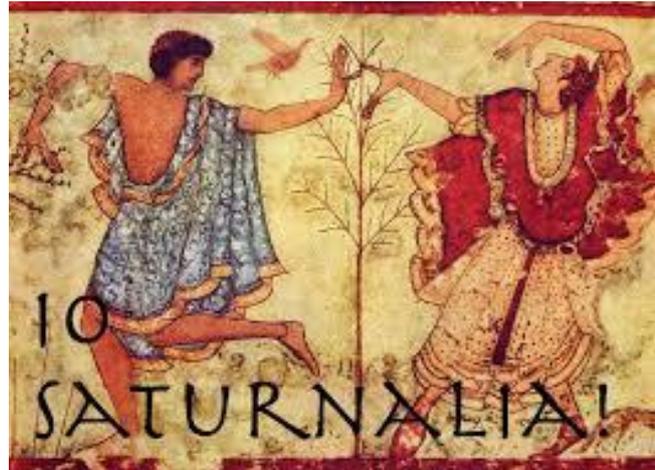
One source says that the English were given to kissing unselfconsciously at Christmastime. And so a custom grew that maidens who stood under mistletoe could not be refused a kiss; each time a kiss was stolen the lad had to remove a berry.

When the berries were gone, so were the kisses or, as some said, the mistletoe lost its spell.



## **The Saturnalia:**

The ancient Romans had a winter festival called the Saturnalia which commenced on December 17th and lasted until the 24th. In his book *Ancient Italy and Modern Religion*, Dr. Conway gives this description of that festival: "Ordinary life was by common consent turned topsy-turvy; people gave up serious occupations, and when they were not feasting at one another's houses, they roamed about the streets calling to one another 'Io Saturnalia' just as we say 'Merry Christmas'



You were expected at this festival to make some present to all your friends: you were thought to be a quite unsociable person if you were sober all through the Saturnalia' All work and business were suspended, slaves were given temporary freedom to say and do as they pleased and certain moral restrictions were eased.

In about 85 C.E., the poet Martial published *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*, two books made up of 350 short verses. These poems were designed to be copied and sent with Saturnalia gifts to add, as Dr. Conway explains, "a pleasant literary flavour." Does that not sound like today's cards at Christmastime?

"In the middle of this period of general gaiety," explains *The Story of Christmas*, "there was a day set aside for special reverence to the sun whose apparent rebirth on the Winter Solstice had originally provided the excuse for all these widespread pagan jollifications. This day was known as *Dies Solis Invicti Nati*, the Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun, and it fell on what corresponds to 25 December in our calendar." The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century chose this day to help people accept the 'New Religion', making the transition from worship of the sun-god to the son-of-God.

## **Santa Claus:**

Santa Claus is for many the quintessential figure that comes to mind when we think of Christmas. The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St Nicholas. It is believed that Nicholas was born sometime around 280 A.D. in Patara, near Myra in modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and travelled the countryside helping the poor and sick.



The name Santa Claus evolved from his Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas). What is even more interesting is the link between the modern day jolly giftbringer and the ancient legends of the god Odin from Norse mythology

Some fascinating comparisons between the two are the following:



**Odin was known for taking on many forms** and had many names. But one of his favourite forms was that of an old, white-bearded traveller clad in a cloak and broad-brimmed hat or hood.

**Odin crosses the skies during the nights of Yule**, rewarding the good and punishing the bad

**Odin was known for having a flying eight legged horse.** Odin's 8-legged flying horse is named Sleipnir.

The original Santa rode on a horse as seen in these vintage post cards.





Gift making elves were referred to as 'Odin's men'

**Santa lives in the North Pole** Odin is said to live in a supernatural world called Asgard, a realm removed from our reality. The early people of Scandinavia naturally equated those Northern mountainous, inhospitable regions of the midnight sun and the northern lights as a place of magic and the 'land of the gods and giants.'



**Santa was originally called Father Christmas.** One of Odin's most popular titles is that of the word Allfather. He is also called Jólfaðr (Yule Father).

<https://sonsofvikings.com/blogs/history/viking-origins-of-christmas-yule-traditions>

## St Stephens Day:

**Wren Day**, also known as **Wren's Day**, **Day of the Wren**, or **Hunt the Wren Day** (*Lá an Dreoilín*), is celebrated on 26 December, St Stephens Day in a number of countries across Europe. The tradition consists of "hunting" a fake wren and putting it on top of a decorated pole. Then the crowds of mummers celebrate the wren by dressing up in masks, straw suits, and colourful motley clothing.



They form music bands and parade through towns and villages. These crowds are sometimes called **wrenboys**.

Well, the history of the Wren predates Christmas; its origins are in Irish mythology where birds held great prominence. They were believed to be a link between this world and the next.



One folk theory relates to a time during the Viking Age when the Norsemen were occupying a number of strongholds in Ireland. A legend tells how an ambush of a Viking settlement was thwarted when a wren beat its wings on their drums alerting the enemy to the Irish warriors who had surrounded them and lay secretly in waiting for their moment to strike.

<https://www.brehonlawacademy.ie/single-post/2017/12/26/Day-of-the-Wren-and-the-Wren-Boys>

The poor wren is also blamed for betraying St. Stephen the first Christian martyr. This is probably why the wren was once hunted on this day. In former times it was hunted and then nailed to a pole at the head of the procession. Thankfully some traditions have died out but you can still hear people saying this poem on the 26th December.

*The wren the wren the king of all birds  
St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze  
Her clothes were all torn- her shoes were all worn  
Up with the kettle and down with the pan  
Give us a penny to bury the "wren"  
If you haven't a penny a halfpenny will do  
If you haven't a halfpenny God bless you!*

## **New Year Celebrations:**

The earliest known record of celebrating the New Year dates from about 2000BCE in Mesopotamia. It was observed after the 1<sup>st</sup> New moon of the Spring Equinox (roughly mid-March/ Easter time) in Babylon



Nowadays many western cultures celebrate the New Year on the 1<sup>st</sup> January. This dates back to Roman times where the ancient Romans celebrated it as a festival to the god Janus, known as the god of new beginnings. The month of January is named after him. He was pictured as having two faces, one looking backward and one looking forward. The custom of making a New Year resolution, looking to the future stems from this.

Interestingly, the term *calendar* is taken from *calendae*, the term for the first day of the month in the Roman calendar, related to the verb *calare* "to call out", which refers to the "calling" of the new moon when it was first seen

Symbolic foods are often part of the festivities. Many Europeans eat cabbage or other greens to ensure prosperity in the coming year, while people in the America South favour black-eyed peas for good luck. In Asia, special foods such as dumplings, noodles and rice cakes are eaten and elaborate dishes feature ingredients whose names or appearance symbolize long life, happiness, wealth and good fortunes. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)



In Ireland an interesting tradition is known as "Óíche na Coda Móire,"- 'the night of the big portion' since people would eat a larger than normal meal to ensure food in plenty for the coming year. Another way of ensuring plenty was to make a cake which was then pounded against the door of the house three times while a prayer was said by the housewife. This would chase the bad luck out of the house and invite the good spirits in. In other areas the man of the house would take three bites out of the cake and then throw it against the front door, in the name of the Trinity and banish hunger from the house. After this the family would then gather up the fragments of the cake and eat it. <https://thewildgeese.irish/profiles/blogs/irish-new-year-traditions>