

The History of Christmas

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In ancient pagan times, the last day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere was celebrated as the night that the Great Mother Goddess gives birth to the baby Sun God. It is also called Yule, the day a huge log is added to a bonfire, around which everyone would dance and sing to awaken the sun from its long winter sleep.

In Roman times, it became the celebrations honouring Saturnus (the harvest god) and Mithras (the ancient god of light), a form of sun worship that had come to Rome from Syria a century before with the cult of Sol Invictus. It announced that winter is not forever, that life continues, and an invitation to stay in good spirit.

The last day of winter in the Northern Hemisphere occurs between the 20th and 22 December. The Roman celebrated Saturnalia between 17 and 24 December.

The Early Christians

To avoid persecution during the Roman pagan festival, early Christians decked their homes with Saturnalia holly. As Christian numbers increased and their customs prevailed, the celebrations took on a Christian observance. But the early church actually did not celebrate the birth of Christ in December until Telesphorus, who was the second Bishop of Rome from 125 to 136AD, declared that Church services should be held during this time to celebrate "The Nativity of our Lord and Saviour." However, since no-one was quite sure in which month Christ was born, Nativity was often held in September, which was during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets (modern-day Rosh Hashanah). In fact, for more than 300 years, people observed the birth of Jesus on various dates.

In the year 274AD, solstice fell on 25th December. Roman Emperor Aurelian proclaimed the date as "Natalis Solis Invicti," the festival of the birth of the invincible sun. In 320 AD, Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Christmas official, but not generally observed

In 325AD, Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, introduced Christmas as an immovable feast on 25 December. He also introduced Sunday as a holy day in a new 7-day week, and introduced movable feasts (Easter). In 354AD, Bishop Liberius of Rome officially ordered his members to celebrate the birth of Jesus on 25 December.

However, even though Constantine officiated 25 December as the birthday of Christ, Christians, recognising the date as a pagan festival, did not share in the emperor's good meaning. **Christmas failed to gain universal recognition among Christians until quite recently.** In England, Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas festivities between 1649 and 1660 through the so-called Blue Laws, believing that Christmas should be a solemn day.

When many Protestants escaped persecution by fleeing to the colonies all over the world, interest in joyous Christmas celebrations was rekindled there. Still, Christmas was not

even a legal holiday until the 1800s. And, keep in mind, there was no Father Christmas (Santa Claus) figure at that time.

Christmas becomes popular

The popularity of Christmas was spurred on in 1820 by Washington Irving's book *The Keeping of Christmas at Bracebridge Hall*. In 1834, Britain's Queen Victoria brought her German husband, Prince Albert, into Windsor Castle, introducing the tradition of the Christmas tree and carols that were held in Europe to the British Empire. A week before Christmas in 1834, Charles Dickens published *A Christmas Carol* (in which he wrote that Scrooge required Cratchit to work, and that the US Congress met on Christmas Day). It was so popular that neither the churches nor the governments could not ignore the importance of Christmas celebrations. In 1836, Alabama became the first state in the US to declare Christmas a legal holiday. In 1837, T.H. Hervey's *The Book of Christmas* also became a best seller. In 1860, American illustrator Thomas Nast borrowed from the European stories about Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children, to create **Father Christmas (Santa Claus)**. In 1907, Oklahoma became the last US state to declare Christmas a legal holiday. Year by year, countries all over the world started to recognise Christmas as the day for celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Have a merry Christmas

Today, many of the pagan uses are reflected in Christmas. Jesus was born in March, yet his birth is celebrated on 25 December, the time of solstice. The Christmas celebrations end the 12th day of Christmas (6 January), the same amount of days that the return of the sun was celebrated by ancient and Roman pagans. It thus is no surprise that Christian puritans - or even conservative Christians - often are upset that Christmas *"is not as religious as it was meant to be,"* forgetting that Christmas was not celebrated at all until fairly recently.