

The evolution of Christmas: The ancient roots of our modern rituals

Christmas has traveled a long and winding road

Dec 6

Writer, artist, naturalist, free thinker. I believe we all have an obligation to nurture our living earth in all the ways we can. Tryin' my best to do my part.



Image by Markus Spiske

Our Nation is a colorful patchwork society sewn together with bits and pieces of various cultures and histories. As such, many of our holiday celebrations offer a glimpse into the past, and a look at the evolution of a variety of ancient customs from across the world.

Our present day Christmas is one of these — a collage of ancient ways of life and traditions assimilated through time that have come to represent

different things for many people. Legends, myths and rituals that pre-date written history, and a marriage of ideas from many primordial civilizations, fathered our Christmas.

Just like everything that lasts, Christmas tradition has traveled long and winding roads, picking up hitchhikers, as well as dropping some off, along the way.

Long, long ago, before Christmas was born, there were other peoples that lived across the lands. Some of these groups were called Vikings, Druids, Maya, Inca, Saxons, Romans, Greeks, Cherokee, Hopi, Celts, Babylonians, Egyptians and such.

From as far back as history can take us, there have been celebrations and holidays commemorating blessings and thanksgivings to the Earth and to the Creator. One of the oldest and longest lived celebrations is that of the natural holiday, the [Winter Solstice](#).

This yearly celestial alignment happens between the 21st and 23rd of December and marks the end of the short, cold days of winter, and the beginning of the longer, warmer days on the horizon — the celebration of the coming of the sun. Most all ancient winter celebrations relate back to these dates, and throughout history were honored as one of the most spiritual events of the year.

Each pre-Christian culture has a different name for the event, but the timeframe and underlying celebrations were very similar. During the Winter Solstice, at year's end when the sun shines the least daylight hours on the Earth, and awakens the next day with lengthening light, humans have always feasted and celebrated and offered gifts to each other and to the Heavens.



Image by Lionello DelPiccolo

Here's a glimpse back into some of this history:

Romans held [Saturnalia](#) on the Winter Solstice and celebrated to honor Saturn, the god of agriculture. They decorated with evergreen boughs and lights and exchanged symbolic gifts representing happiness, prosperity, fertility and the gifts of life's journey.

Vikings celebrated [Yule](#) and decorated evergreen trees with pretty things to entice the tree spirits to come back quickly in the spring.

Ancient Germanic people attached candles, fruits and gifts to evergreen branches. These trees represented eternal life, and this tradition was to honor their god, whom they called [Woden](#) (the deity that Wednesday is named after).

Many Native American civilizations celebrated the Great Earth Mother during [Winter Solstice](#) as a time of looking forward to new beginnings when their lands would again be green and fruitful.

Ancient Hindu people celebrated [Lohri](#), a five-day festival to acknowledge the end of the winter season.

The mid-winter celebrations of the Druids date back for many thousands of

years and some of the largest and most spiritual gatherings took place at a site called [Stonehenge](#). These started around the 21st of December, when the sun entered Capricorn, and continued until around the 24th when the sun was at its lowest point in the horizon. With deep reverence, the Druid peoples came from many miles away to pay homage to the Sun and looked forward to its rebirth with the longer days to come — the site is still used in this manner today.



Stonehenge (Wiki Commons)

Andean people still celebrate the Solstice, or the [Festival of the Sun](#), in Quechua — the ancient land of the Incas. This celebration was banned by the Catholic Church in the 16th century but secretly continued and has withstood the prejudices of time.

The [Slavic cultures](#) celebrate this time of the year by gathering together and walking through the villages singing songs of the season.

The Jewish celebrate the festival of lights, or [Hanukkah](#), also timed with the Winter Solstice — the birth of the sun and everlasting light.

Ancient [Arab cultures](#) believed that the moon was born on December 24th and thus celebrated her life during this time.

The Egyptians of the past rejoiced over the birth of the Son of [Isis](#), their

goddess of Nature and fertility, on the 25th of December. They celebrated with the Feast of the Burning Lamps to honor the occasion.

[Babylonians](#) celebrated the birth of the Son of the Queen of Heaven on December 25th.

For thousands of years, the Persians have celebrated [Yalda](#) during the Winter Solstice. This commemorates the victory of light and goodness over darkness and evil. 'Shabe yalda' means 'birthday eve.' Ancient Persian mythology tells us that, Mithra, the sun god, was born at dawn on the 22nd of December to a virgin mother. He also had 12 disciples, performed miracles and arose from the dead after three days. His life symbolizes light, truth, goodness and strength.



Image by Aaron Burden

The above mentioned celebrations are only a partial list, and offer only a glimpse at the ancient winter festivities that we have borrowed pieces of. These all pre-date Christianity, some by thousands of years.

After the advent of the Christian faith, and more than 200 years after Jesus Christ was crucified, the Church of Rome set out to banish all Earth-based spiritual celebrations of the ancient tribes and cultures. A Christian significance was imposed on the Solstice by correlating this time of year with the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

This was the beginning of the evolution of Christmas. The ancient winter celebrations that were held to honor the rebirth of the *Sun God*, instead were being adapted to honor the birth of the *Son of God* (though the best guesses, based on biblical translations, point to Jesus Christ's actual birthday being in the Spring time).

The Church, which was the core of political control at the time, was focused on converting the Pagan tribes into a life of obedience of the Christian law — thus the absorption of the Winter Solstice into Christmas began.



The Romans did a very good job, because although there is no mention of the celebration of Christmas in the Bible, today we're told that "Jesus is the Reason for the Season". Nativity scenes highlight today's Christmas scenes, visions of a babe in swaddling clothes nestled in a cozy manger — complete with gifts of gold from wise traveling men.

Although this rendition has become a common belief for Americans over the last 130 years, we also still deck our halls with ancient ritual symbolism — boughs of holly and wreaths adorn our homes and we all enjoy receiving kisses under the mistletoe.

Where did these customs come from, and what do they have to do with baby Jesus? How do these practices fit in to our modern Christmas celebrations? Was Santa Clause a Biblical character? Read on:

Yule logs, Mistletoe & the other stuff



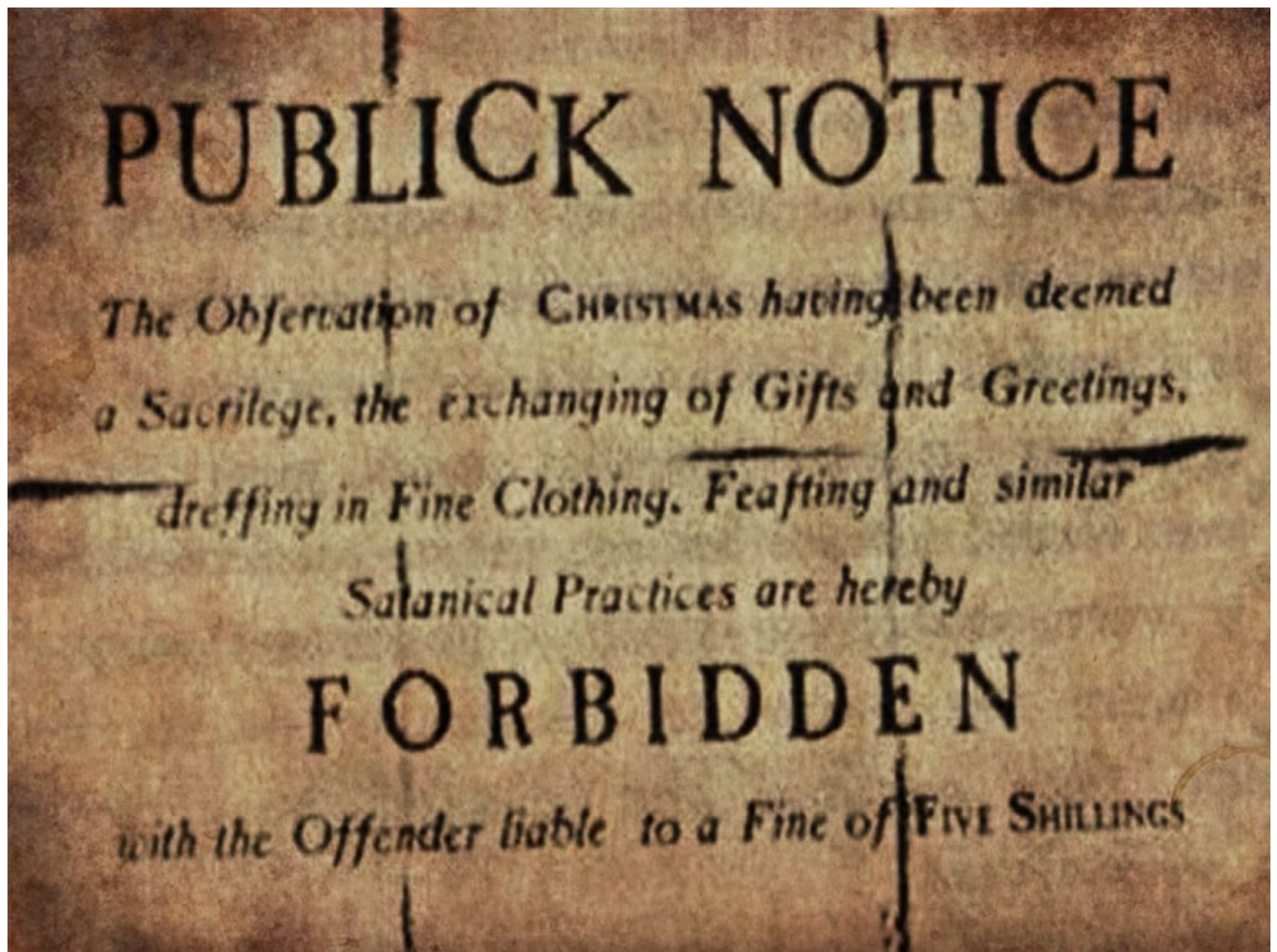
Image by Kelly Sikkema

Although ancient winter solstice celebrations pre-date Christianity by many centuries, our modern Christmas traditions have absorbed many of the early customs and symbolism.

It may surprise you to know that long after Christianity came into practice, the [English Puritans](#) prohibited partaking in any of the “heathen traditions” during Christmas time and condemned anyone caught celebrating the ancient customs.

In colonial Massachusetts celebrations of Christmas were considered “un-Christian” and strictly banned. Anyone who got caught participating in these celebrations had to pay a fine.

It was unlawful for a Christian to decorate trees, burn a Yule log, hang holly or mistletoe or participate in caroling — this was proof of holding on to Pagan ways.



WikiCommons

However, after all the effort put into erasing the ancient ways and homogenizing our rituals, the old traditions still shine their light on our modern Christmas celebrations. Here are just a few of those:

Christmas Tree — Unrealized by the Christian church, [Pagan](#) spiritualists didn't, in fact, chop down trees in order to celebrate the Solstice. This practice was considered unnecessarily destructive and disrespectful to the Earth. The olden cultures that decorated trees as a part of their [festivities](#), did so without harming or killing the evergreens — they were decorated, where they stood, to show respect for the living thing that could withstand the chill of winter.

German immigrants brought the “modern” [Christmas tree tradition](#) to the U.S. in the late 1700's. Evergreens were cut down, brought in and decorated to symbolize the Tree of Knowledge during the Feast of Adam and Eve on December 24th.

Wreaths — Evergreen wreaths date back to ancient Saturnalia festivities where Romans celebrated the returning of the sun after the short days of winter. They were made in a round shape to [symbolize](#) the promise of a never-dying, always returning, eternal sunshine. Today they are still hung on our walls, doors and have even been seen adorning the radiator grills of tractor trailer rigs.



Image by Aaron Burden

Yule log — [The Feast of Yule](#) (Juul) took place in pre-Christian Scandinavia during the Winter Solstice. Fires to warm the gatherers were symbolic of the light and life-giving properties of the soon returning sun. The fire-starter log was decorated with evergreen sprigs and holly to represent the life that holds on through the cold winter. Pieces of the burnt log were kept to bring good luck to the persons retaining them and then used to light the Yule log for the Solstice fire the next year. The ashes were scattered into garden soils to ensure the springtime brought bountiful new growth.

Mistletoe — Throughout history mistletoe has been revered for its [magical](#)

[properties](#) — as an antidote to poisons, an aphrodisiac, and a bringer of fertility. The woods priests of the ancient Celts saw mistletoe as a symbol of everlasting life — due to its evergreen nature — and used it during their Solstice rituals.

The Vikings believed mistletoe had the power to resurrect the dead. They used this plant in their Winter Solstice celebrations and connected it symbolically to the resurrection of [Baldr](#), the Sun God. These ancient Norse legends tell us of Baldr's mother, Frigga, the goddess of love and beauty. When her son was killed by an arrow made of mistletoe, she wept until her tears became the white berries of the plant. When her son's life was restored, she [blessed the plant](#) with everlasting love and gratitude — thus when someone stands under the mistletoe they are protected from any harm and may receive kisses as a show of this love.

Holly — Druids considered [holly](#) sacred because it could withstand the harshness of winter, and used it freely when celebrating the Winter Solstice. It was used by ancient cultures to ward off lightening, evil spirits and sickness. Due to the association with the ancient legends, early Christians were forbidden to use holly in their decorations, especially while the Pagans were celebrating Winter Solstice. Holly was also considered the sacred plant of Saturn and was used at the Roman [Saturnalia](#) festivals. Later on English virgins hung it on their beds to protect their virtue during winter festivities.



The Holly Man by Dean Ayres

Though we may think some of the ancient rituals and customs barbaric and foreign, we still agree that holly holds to its ancient reputation of warding off evil spirits. Many modern homeowners use holly for this purpose — planted in front of a window, it is known to be a nice deterrent to keep the burglars out!

Before the start of the Civil War, Northern and Southern states disagreed on the idea of Christmas. Many states in the North considered it sinful, whereas most Southern people were in favor of making Christmas a festive occasion. Christmas became a legal holiday first in [Alabama](#) (1836), then Louisiana and Arkansas (1838). Christmas was designated a US [National holiday](#) in 1870.

From pagans to druids and shamans and English Protestants, Christmas has been passed around quite a lot — and has retained a great deal of the ancient traditions. Today, in modern American culture, we've kept the mistletoe and holly, and also introduced a jolly elf and the most famous reindeer of all.

The birth of Santa & Rudolph



Image by Srikanta H.U.

The Santa Claus of our childhood is an amalgam of many pre-Christian legends sprinkled with a dash of modern literary fun. Before our Santa was a jolly old toymaker living with elf friends at the North Pole, he held a myriad of other positions. He's always been old, he's always been generous and before he hung out with elves, he was working with fairies and other nature folk of Pagan descent.

One of Santa's ancestors would've been Thor, the Norse Yule god from the Northlands who wore a long white beard, road a chariot pulled by two white goats and manifested through fire — often inside people's homes through their chimneys.

There was also Odin, a wise old man who rode an eight-legged horse and flew through the air during the Winter Solstice. The Saxons' Santa was called Father Time and the Pagans had a King of Frost; the Dutch's Sinter Klaas, as well as the German *Sankt Niklaus* — and later, St. Nicholas, who “walked the Earth, caring for those in need”.

We also cannot forget Father Christmas, nor Sante Claus — who arrived in

an anonymous poem entitled *The Children's Friend* in 1821. Then in 1823, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (later known as *The Night Before Christmas*) helped to Americanize the Saintly Bishop Nicholas once and for all.



Santa Claus, as presented in Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress, 1848

The rotund elf-like gift bringer that we all know today became Santa Claus in Harper's Weekly in the 1880's. Norman Rockwell gave Santa his warm red suit in the 1920's and by the 1930's Santa was pitching advertisements for Coca Cola.

With the onset of the war in the '40's, Santa became an employee of the War Department, and could be found in many political posters during this time promoting war bonds. After the war he found a new opportunity, 1950's Santa became very popular by way of his work in advertising

“endorsing an amazing range of consumer products”. (St. Nicholas Center)

“It’s been a long journey from the Fourth Century Bishop of [Myra](#), St. Nicholas, who showed his devotion to God in extraordinary kindness and generosity to those in need, to America’s jolly Santa Claus, whose largesse often supplies luxuries to the affluent.” — (St. Nicholas Center)

And last but not least, the most famous reindeer of all:



Young Rudolph (right) and Hermey the Elf as seen in the 1964 TV special.

Rudolph, nearly named Reginald, born of Montgomery Ward and owned by The Rudolph Company, L.P (1939 — present). Rudolph’s life in song began via Gene Autry in 1949 — quickly becoming the only song ever to sit for Billboard’s #1 one week, then fall completely off the charts the next.

Throughout the years many people have sung about Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer including: Jewel, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Burl Ives, Dolly Parton,

Merle Haggard, the Jackson Five, Alvin and the Chipmunks, Ringo Starr, Barry Manilow, Jack Johnson and many others.

Rudolph hit the screen in 1947 as a cartoon short with his television debut in 1964. His appearance in his self-titled feature film occurred in 1998.

Robbie the Reindeer, presumably Rudolph's son, works as a cartoon actor on BBC (though due to copyright issues, Rudolph cannot be mentioned). Rudolph's brother, Rusty appeared in an American film in 2006, where it was ok to mention the kinship. Rumor also has it that there is another brother, an overweight, infra-red nosed deer named Ralph, and a cousin, Leroy who Joe Diffie sings about in his redneck reindeer song.

Santa and Rudolph, along with Frosty and other fun cartoon characters now serve primarily as the spokespeople to remind us what songs to sing, where to go shop and that Christmas is warm and fun and expensive.



Image by Ben White

But it doesn't have to be that way — Christmas still has something for everyone, from the protestant to the atheist and

all the flavors in between. Hidden beneath the modern layers of commercial materialism you can still find a festive dose of history and culture... and enough to go around.

We can choose to deck our halls with mountains of consumer products wrapped in plastic, or we can follow one or more of the ancient ways, and deck those halls with boughs of holly, or mistletoe or little signs that say Jesus is the reason, or happy Winter Solstice, or Yuletide blessings... you get the idea. Whatever suits your fancy.

So, whether you're a God fearing Christian celebrating the birth of the Son of God, or a neo-Pagan holding onto the Nature-based customs of the Ancients, this season is a time for all of us to count our blessings, share our joy and spread our seeds of peace and kindness.

The coming of the Son or the coming of the Sun... Christmas, Yule, Hanukah, Ramadan and the Winter Solstice all have a common core, deeply rooted in bringing warmth to the cold winter. From the primeval depths of our human past, these mid-winter customs provide a gathering of families and loved ones for sharing their reflections and sending out their hopes for the future.

As the Earth completes this year's revolution around the sun and we begin a new Lunar year, we can all look to the promise of longer, brighter, warmer days. May we all trim this season back to the roots, and nourish it with our respect for each other, for our Earth, for days gone by and for days yet to come.



Image by Joanna Kosinska

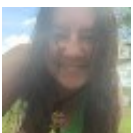
Some interesting statistics on today's Christmas:

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans add an additional six million tons of household waste to our landfills over the Christmas holidays.

Half of the paper consumed in the United States every year is used to wrap and decorate consumer products.

2.6 billion Holiday cards are sold each year in the United States, enough to fill a football field 10 stories high.

What is the cost of today's Christmas? Officials have many different answers; however, it's roughly averaged at \$1000 per household, with some guesses at a staggering \$500 billion+ nationwide — each year. Some experts have pointed out that this is more than we, as a country, spent on disaster aid for the Katrina catastrophe. (www.godweb.org)



- [Tauna Pierce](#)

Writer, artist, naturalist, free thinker. I believe we all have an obligation to nurture our living earth in all the ways we can. Tryin' my best to do my part.

**Drift
Wood**

- [Driftwood Chronicle](#)

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