

## THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

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‘Washington- More than a century before **Tickle Me Elmo**, Christmas wasn’t much of a gift giving day across the land. Santa resembled Napoleon, that un-jolly old elf, and lots of folks simply went about their business.

To some, it was too pagan, or too Catholic, or otherwise too foreign to local ways and mores. However deeply embedded in Christianity, it was once overshadowed by New Years Day as the big day of presents.

Christmas came slowly--if inexorably, like a steamroller--to its status as a giant commercial affair that gives merchants one quarter of their annual business and makes people crazy in search of that Sesame Street doll. New Year’s gifts shadowed Christmas presents deep into the 19th century. In old New England, Christmas was not celebrated. New England being the birth place of the Americas by the Quakers who desired religious freedom. Puritan New Englanders had suspicions about partying, especially end-of-year revelry, which they associated with the Saturnalia of the ancient Romans,’ *End of Quote.*

After reading this article today in our Florida Today Paper, page 13A it inspired me to search in our newly acquired Eleventh Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (written in 1910) for words like; “Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, Sinter Klas and Kris Kringel. To my amazement I could not find any mention of the words mentioned.

I immediately looked for the meaning of the Word Saturnalia and found the reason why the Puritan New Englanders would not celebrate Christmas.

*Quote;* ‘Saturnalia.---This, the great festival of Saturn, was celebrated on the 19th, but after Caesar’s reform of the calendar on the 17th, of December. Augustus decreed that the 17th should be sacred to Saturn and the 19th to Ops.<sup>1</sup> **Saturn [Saturnus], a god of ancient Italy, whom the Romans, and till recently the moderns, identified with the Greek god Cronus.** Cronus was the youngest of the Titans, the children of Sky (Uranus) and Earth (Gaea). Besides the Titans, Sky and Earth had other children, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-handers.

Henceforward it appears that the 17th and 18th were devoted to the Saturnalia, and the 19th and the 20th to the Opalia, a festival of Ops.<sup>2</sup> **Caligula added a fifth day, “the day of youth”** (sounds like Christmas) (*dies juvenalis*), devoted no doubt to the sports of the young. But in popular usage the festival lasted seven days. The woollen fetters were taken from the feet of the image of Saturn, and each man offered a pig. During the festival schools were closed; no war was declared or battle fought; no punishment was inflicted. In place of the toga an undress garment (*synthesis*) was worn. Distinctions of rank were laid aside: slaves sat at table with their masters or were waited on by them, and the utmost freedom of speech was allowed them. Gambling with dice, at other times illegal, was now permitted.<sup>3</sup> All classes exchanged gifts, the commonest being wax tapers and clay dolls. These dolls were especially given to children, and the makers of them held a regular fair at this

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<sup>1</sup> There was also a special festival, Opeconsiva, on the 25th.

<sup>2</sup> The fourth day of the festival was added by someone unknown.

<sup>3</sup> It is curious to find a similar rule with a similar exception in Nepal.

time. Varro thought these dolls represented original sacrifices of human beings to the infernal god. There was as we have seen, a tradition that human sacrifices were once offered to Saturn, and the Greeks and Romans gave the name of Cronus and Saturn to a cruel Phoenician Baal, to whom, e.g. children were sacrificed at Carthage.

The Cronus to whom human sacrifices are said to have been offered in Rhodes was probably a Baal, for there are traces of Phoenician worship in Rhodes. It may be conjectured that the Saturnalia was originally a celebration of the winter solstice. Hence the legend that it was instituted by Romulus under the name of the Brumalia (*bruma* = winter solstice).

The prominence given to candles at the festival points to the custom of making a new fire at this time. The custom of solemnly kindling fires at the summer solstice (Eve of St. John) has prevailed in most parts of Europe, notably in Germany, and there are traces (of which the yule-log is one) of the observance of a similar custom at the winter solstice. In ancient Mexico a new fire was kindled, amid great rejoicing, at the end of every period of fifty-two years.

The designation of the planets by the names of gods is at least as old as the 4th century B.C. The first certain mention of the star of Cronus (Saturn) is in Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, p.1073 b.35). The name also occurs in *Epinomis* (p.987 b), a dialogue of uncertain date, wrongly ascribed to Plato. In Latin, Cicero (1st century B.C.) is the first author who speaks of the planet Saturn. The application of the name Saturn to a day of the week (*Saturni dies*, Saturday) is first found in Tibullus (I.3, 18)'. End of Quote.<sup>4</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF SANTA

In pre-Christian times, according to legend, the gray-bearded Norse god, Odin, wandered among his people during the winter feast called Yule and rewarded or punished folks as he saw fit. As Christianity spread to the far north-lands of Europe, Odin lost favor, but the larger-than-life role of gift-giving was too popular to discard. Who would take Odin's place? Enter Nicholas, bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (now Demre, Turkey). In the years circa 300 A.D., Nicolas won the hearts of many for the abundant generosity he showed toward the children in his domain.

Following Nicholas' death in December 6, 343, his reputation grew, and eventually he was deemed a saint. Nearly a thousand years after his death, December 6 became an official church holiday celebrated by reenacting his generosity toward children, and St. Nick was represented as a man dressed in red bishop's robes, riding a horse to the home of every child. A bit of Odin's reputation for punishing bad behavior remained, however, and St. Nick not only brought gifts for the good children, but rods for the bad.

Dutch settlers brought the tradition of celebrating St. Nicholas' Day to the United States. As the Dutch and British settlers in the New World commingled, big Christmas celebrations by the British risked overwhelming the Dutch remembrance of Saint Nicholas. Over time, St. Nick's Day became combined with the British celebration of Christmas, and "Sinter Claus," (as St. Nicholas was called by the Dutch) became "Santa Claus" to English speakers.

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th Edition, p. 231,232. Printed in 1910.

And why does he ho-ho so loudly that his large form jiggles “like a bowlful of jelly?” Dr. Clement Clarke Moore is largely responsible for St. Nicholas’ physical transformation from a tall, thin bishop to the jolly fat man we know today. Moore’s poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (better known as “The Night Before Christmas”), which was first published in 1822, describes Santa as a plump, jolly fellow with a white beard, fur-trimmed clothes, and a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Fifty years later, political cartoonist Thomas Nast translated Dr. Moore’s description into cartoon form for Harper’s Weekly magazine, creating the visual image we all know so well.<sup>5</sup>

Odin, a Norse Myth., the chief of the gods, represented as a one-eyed man with hat and staff: the deity of war, agriculture, culture, and art, and also the god of the dead: identified with the German *Woden*.<sup>6</sup>

Woden, akin to mad and frenzied, the chief god: called by the Norse Odin. Also, Wodan.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From the Granger Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Odin, Page 674, Winston Dictionary, advanced edition, 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Winston Dictionary, Page 1146.