

Ancient Christmas Celebrations

In any case, by the middle of the fourth century, the Church had boldly declared its Nativity holy day to be observed on the same day as the winter solstice. The concurrence of the two celebrations gave the Church an opportunity to turn elements of the Saturnalia itself to Christian ends. For example, it used the creation of the sun, the center of the Saturnalia, to reinforce and symbolize frequent scriptural and doctrinal imagery of God as the sun, and of Jesus' role as Son of God. The creation of Christmas was thus a measure of Christianity's growing power, challenging the crowds enjoying Saturnalian revelry to join the once secretive Christians in a celebration not of the birth of the sun, but rather the birth of Jesus, the Son of God.⁶

Figure 1. Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ?.

- In the Early Middle Ages, Christmas was not as popular as the Epiphany on 6 January, the celebration of Jesus' baptism and the visit from the three kings. Indeed, Christmas was not originally seen as a time for fun and frolics but an opportunity for quiet prayer and reflection during a special mass.
- But by the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) Christmas had become the most prominent religious celebration in Europe, signalling the beginning of Christmastide, or the Twelve Days of Christmas as they are more commonly known today.
- The medieval calendar became dominated by Christmas events starting forty days prior to Christmas Day, the period we now know as Advent (from the Latin word *adventus* meaning "coming") but which was originally known as the "forty days of St. Martin" because it began on 11 November, the feast day of St Martin of Tours.
- Although gift giving at Christmas was temporarily banned by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages due to its suspected pagan origins, it was soon popular again as the festive season in the Middle Ages became a time of excess dominated by a great feast, gifts for rich and poor and general indulgence in eating, drinking, dancing and singing.
- Many monarchs chose this merry day for their coronation. This included William the Conqueror, whose coronation on Christmas Day in 1066 incited so much cheering and merriment inside Westminster Abbey that the guards stationed outside believed the King was under attack and rushed to assist him, culminating in a riot that saw many killed and houses destroyed by fire.

Fun Facts:

Carol singers. Some of us enjoy the sound of carollers on our doorsteps but the tradition for carol singers going door to door is actually a result of carols being banned in churches in medieval times. Many carollers took the word carol literally (to sing and dance in a circle) which meant that the more serious Christmas masses were being ruined and so the Church decided to send the carol singers outside.

Mince Pies were originally baked in rectangular cases to represent the infant Jesus' crib and the addition of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg was meant to symbolise the gifts bestowed by the three wise men. Similarly to the more modern mince pies we see today, these pies were not very large and it was widely believed to be lucky to eat one mince pie on each of the twelve days of Christmas. However, as the name suggests, mince pies were originally made of a variety of shredded meat along with spices and fruit. It was only as recently as the Victorian era that the recipe was amended to include only spices and fruit.

Boxing Day has traditionally been seen as the reversal of fortunes, where the rich provide gifts for the poor. In medieval times, the gift was generally money and it was provided in a hollow clay pot with a slit in the top which had to be smashed for the money to be taken out. These small clay pots were nicknamed "piggies" and thus became the first version of the piggy banks we use today. Unfortunately Christmas Day was also traditionally a "quarter day", one of the four days in the financial year on which payments such as ground rents were due, meaning many poor tenants had to pay their rent on Christmas Day!¹

December 28th is a day children may not have enjoyed in Medieval times. December 28th is "Holy Innocents Day" or "Childermass Day". This is the day when King Herod ordered that all children under two years of age be killed. In some European towns it was the custom for a boy to be given charge of a town for one day after being made a bishop for just December 28th. In Medieval England, children were reminded of Herod's cruelty by being beaten. December 28th was seen by many then as a day of bad luck. No-one would get married on that day; no-one would start a building on that day and Edward IV refused to be crowned on that day.

A less than Christian practice at this time and found only really in the countryside was the practice of **killing a wild boar**, cutting off its head, and offering it to the goddess of farming so that you would have a good crop in the following year.

Humble (or 'umble) pie was made from the "humbles" of a deer -- the heart, liver, brains and so forth. While the lords and ladies ate the choice cuts, the servants baked the humbles into a pie (which of course made them go further as a source of food).

¹ Ben Johnson, *A Medieval Christmas* (Historic UK).