

Saturnalia and Yule

Note taken from Bruce David Forbes' *Christmas: A Candid History* (University of California Press, 2007)

Historian Stephen Nissenbaum (Professor Emeritus of the University of Massachusetts) wrote:
“Late-December festivities were deeply rooted in popular culture, both in observance of the winter solstice and in celebration of the one brief period of leisure and plenty in the agricultural year. In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of [Jesus of Nazareth’s] birth by assigning it to this resonate date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been. From the beginning, the Church’s hold over Christmas was (and remains still) rather tenuous. There were always people for whom Christmas was a time of pious devotion rather than carnival, but such people were always in the minority. It may not be going too far to say that Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to Christianize.”

What are some elements about Christmas celebrations that are hard to explain using the Christian story?



Saturnalia

- Saturnalia began in Rome at least 200 years before the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Every December 17th a sacrifice was offered to Saturn (the God of Agriculture) in the Roman Forum.
- The sacrifice triggered a period of feasting and partying that varied in length from three to seven days. This period was considered the best days of the year – the “merriest of festivals.” No one worked during this time, except for those that helped prepare the lavish feasts.
- Houses, great halls, and streets were decorated with laurel, green trees and shrubs, and were illuminated by candles and lamps. Bonfires were lit at high points where many citizens could see them.
- People visited and celebrated with their family and friend and exchanged small gifts, such as wax candles, wax fruit and clay dolls.
- The two major themes of Saturnalia were abundance and equality.
 - In the few days of Saturnalia everyone was to be treated equally, or society was inverted (slaves became masters and vice versa).
 - Mock Kings may be selected to preside over Saturnalia, which meant that a person of any social standing could temporarily rule as king.
 - In England, the Lord of Misrule – known in Scotland as the Abbot of Unreason and in France as the Prince des Sots – was an officer appointed by lot during Christmastide to preside over the Feast of Fools (which largely – but not entirely – disappeared by the 17th century). The Lord of Misrule was generally a peasant or sub-deacon appointed to be in charge of Christmas revelries, which often included drunkenness and wild partying. Some English towns still nominate a “lord of misrule” to reign over festivities.



Saturn with head protected by winter cloak, holding a sickle in his right hand (fresco from the House of the Dioscuri at Pompeii, Naples Archaeological Museum)

- The Church held a similar festival involving a boy bishop. This custom was abolished by Henry VIII in 1541, restored by the Catholic Queen Mary I and again abolished by Protestant Elizabeth I, until being sporadically revived during the 20th and 21st centuries.
- Saturnalia gained a reputation for wanton behaviour, excessive drinking, gambling and other unrestrained activities. From Lucian's dialogue, the God Saturn instructs: *"Secondly, during my week the serious is barred; no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games and dice, appointing of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping of tremulous hands, an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy water,-- such are the functions over which I preside. But the great things, wealth and gold and such, Zeus distributes as he will."*
- The Saturnalia was the most popular holiday of the Roman year. Catullus describes it as "the best of days" (Poems, XIV), and Seneca complains that the "whole mob has let itself go in pleasures" (Epistles, XVIII.3). It was an occasion for celebration, visits to friends, and the presentation of gifts, particularly wax candles (cerei), perhaps to signify the returning light after the solstice, and sigillaria.



Brinsley Morrison, 13, was enthroned in the historic Ceremony of the Boy Bishop in Hereford Cathedral on December 10, 2017.



Yule, or Jul

- From the Teutonic Peoples of Scandinavia, the British Isles and northern Germany. Connected with Viking traditions and culture. Celts believed the sun stood still in the sky for 12 days, making it necessary to light a log fire to conquer the darkness.
 - Yule, or Jul, existed in these regions long before Christianity arrived.
 - Occurred in early winter, at the conclusion of the slaughter of livestock and the brewing of ale, with all the feasting and drinking that would naturally occur. Celebrations were probably mixed with animal sacrifices and religious observances to encourage fertility in the coming season.
- It is likely that Yule also involved ancestor worship, beliefs about the return of the dead and ghost stories.
 - Stories exist across the region that explains the howling winds of the night as “the wild hunt.”
 - In Norway it was the spirits’ ride, in which the spirits of those who had died the preceding year, and army of the dead, roared through the night.
 - In many cases the wild hunt was led by Odin (Wotan in Germany), a one-eyed god, with white hair and a beard, who rode a flying eight-legged horse.

- Yule was a natural time for ghost stories, a common practice in the season of the year that was dominated by darkness and leisure.
- Another common feature of Yule was fire. Bonfires and candles not only brought light, but were also believed to keep evil spirits away, or to warm the spirits of the dead.
- Evergreen branches may have been hung on doorposts and around windows in the hope that their prickly needles would ward off evil spirits.

