

# Saturnalia and Yule

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 resonant 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 families and friends, exchanging small gifts, such as wax candles, wax fruit and clay dolls (called **sigillaria**).
- ❖ The two major themes of Saturnalia were **abundance** and **equality**.
- ❖ 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.”*<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ 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).



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)

<sup>1</sup> Lucian of Samosata: Saturnalia, Book IV.

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.

- ❖ In the days of Saturnalia society was inverted (slaves became masters and vice versa). **The inversion of society is a key part of the season.**
  - A *Mock King* (*Saturnalicus Princeps* or 'leader of the Saturnalia') was selected to preside over Saturnalia, while each household would also elect their own king of the festival to lead the fun and games on a smaller scale.
  - Household *Saturnalicus Princeps* were typically taken from individuals lower in the household and were responsible for creating mischief and fun in the house.<sup>2</sup>

With its emphasis on license and levity, the Saturnalia feast may have featured much of the same and thus been cause for some anxiety. Children may have seen adults behaving indecorously with respect to their status and rank, temporarily demeaning themselves for the amusement of their peers and slaves, which parents may not have wanted their children to see. Furthermore, since it was slave child-minders, not parents, who regulated children's table-time activities and slaves were apparently temporarily freed from such responsibilities, children were presumably left to their own devices during the feast and revel which Tacitus (*Annals* 13.15) appears to confirm. He recounts the story of the future emperor Nero, Britannicus and other boys playing *rex Saturnaliū* ("king of the Saturnalia") where each had an opportunity to order the others around. The boys appear unsupervised, free to humiliate one another, which Nero does by forcing Britannicus to sing before a drunken crowd. Lucian (*Saturnalia* 4) makes it clear that humiliation was typical of this game where the goal was "to become sole king of all so that you not only escape silly orders but can give them yourself, telling one man to shout something disgraceful about himself, another to dance stark naked." <sup>10</sup> Writing late in the first century CE, the Stoic philosopher and former slave Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.25.8) records similar dynamics

[a] king is chosen by lot; for it has been decided to play this game. The king gives his commands: "You drink, you mix wine, you sing, you go, you come." I obey, so as not to be the one to break up the game. <sup>11</sup>

Taken from: *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Germany: Wiley, 2010.

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Festival - by Mansi Dhokia. *Saturnalia: the History and Traditions of the Winter Festival*. Retrieved November 8, 2021, from <https://www.academuseducation.co.uk/post/saturnalia-the-history-and-traditions>.

❖ The idea of creating a *Mock King* became the practice in medieval England of appointing the *Lord of Misrule* – known in Scotland as the *Abbot of Unreason* and in France as the *Prince des Sots*. The *Lord of Misrule* was an officer appointed by lot during Christmastide to preside over the Feast of Fools and was generally a peasant or sub-deacon appointed to be in charge of Christmas revelries, which often included drunkenness and wild partying (and more!). Some English towns still nominate a *Lord of Misrule* to reign over festivities.

❖ The English Church holds a similar festival involving a boy bishop. This custom was abolished during the Reformation Period 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 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

❖ Charles Dickens 1843 ghost story *A Christmas Carol* included three spirits. The second spirit, or *Ghost of Christmas Present*, is rooted in the pre-Christian (Saturnalian) origins of the season. Typically depicted amongst food and drink, the ghost represents the English *Father Christmas* or *Old Christmas* (who has no relation to *Santa Claus*).

- Dickens uses the *Ghost of Christmas Present* to also highlight the Victorian value of Charity (wealthy giving to the poor). Stephen Nissenbaum links the 19<sup>th</sup> century's intensified pressure for the rich to give to the poor as a manifestation of the Saturnalian **inversion of society**.



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



Scrooge encounters the Ghost of Christmas Present - illustration by John Leech (1843)

- ❖ Professor Stephen Nissenbaum writes about medieval Christmas in *The Battle for Christmas*:

*At other times of the year it was the poor who owed goods, labour, and deference to the rich. But on this occasion the tables were turned – literally. The poor – most often bands of boys and young men – claimed the right to march to the houses of the well-to-do, enter their halls, and receive gifts of food, drink, and sometimes money as well. And the rich had to let them in – essentially, to hold “open house.” Christmas was a time when peasants, servants, and apprentices exercised their right to demand that their wealthier neighbours and patrons treat them as if they were wealthy and powerful . . . In return, the peasants offered something of true value in a paternalistic society – their **goodwill**.*



Can you think of modern examples of this dynamic in North American society?



# Yule, or Jul



*Asgårdsreien* [The Wild Hunt of Odin] (1872) by Peter Nicolai Arbo

- ❖ 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 some livestock (who wouldn't survive the long winter) and the brewing of ale (which was ready to drink by December), with all the feasting, drinking and general revelry 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 Scandinavia 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.
- ❖ Wassailing (caroling) was also a big part of the festivities.
- ❖ Evergreen branches may have been hung on doorposts and around windows in the hope that their prickly needles would ward off evil spirits.

#### Sources:

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