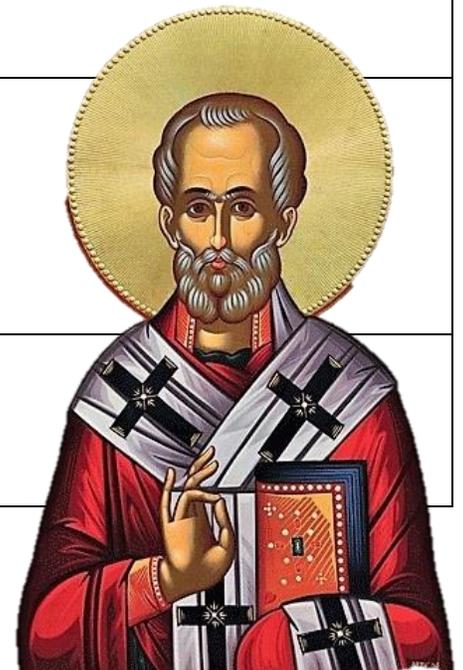


# The Fragmentation of St. Nicholas

Timeline<sup>1</sup>



Date	Notes	Region
343 CE	Bishop Nicholas died on December 6, 343 CE	Asia Minor
Post 343 CE	Since the fifth century the Eastern Church has revered St. Nicholas for the many miracles attributed to him and for his inspiring witness as a follower of Jesus Christ.	Christian World
987 AD	Following his baptism, Grand Prince Vladimir I brought Christianity and St. Nicholas to Kiev. All Kievan Rus were baptized (the area now occupied by Belarus, Ukraine, and parts of Russia). St. Nicholas is Russia's favorite saint.	The area now occupied by Belarus, Ukraine, and parts of Russia
1087 CE	Italian sailors took the bones of St. Nicholas to Bari, Italy. This "translation of the relics" is commemorated in Bari with a fantastic festival each year on May 9th.	Italy
1100s CE	French nuns began giving candy and gifts to needy children on December 6th, St. Nicholas feast day. Children still eagerly await his treats in French Alsace and Lorraine and in many other parts of Europe.	French Alsace and Lorraine and in many other parts of Europe
c. 1200s CE	All over Europe boys were selected to be the "Nicholas Bishop" from December 6th through the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28th). Boy bishops and their retinues collected alms for the poor, but sometimes turned into disruptive roving gangs.	Europe
1823	A Visit from Saint Nicholas or 'Twas the Night Before Christmas. First publication of the poem that became an American classic—and formed lasting images of an American St. Nicholas.	America



<sup>1</sup> St. Nicholas Centre, <http://www.stnicholascenter.org>, accessed 9 December, 2015.  
Updated December 2018

## **The Companions of St. Nicholas**

In the German-speaking regions of Europe traditions developed a companion who acted as the complete antithesis of St. Nicholas.

### Knecht Ruprecht

Knecht Ruprecht is St. Nicholas' most familiar attendant in Germany. According to some stories, Ruprecht began as a farmhand; in others, he is a wild foundling whom St. Nicholas raises from childhood.

Ruprecht wears a black or brown robe with a pointed hood. Sometimes he walks with a limp, because of a childhood injury. He can be seen carrying a long staff and a bag of ashes, and on occasion wears little bells on his clothes. Sometimes he rides on a white horse, and sometimes he is accompanied by fairies or men with blackened faces dressed as old women. According to tradition, Knecht Ruprecht asks children whether they can pray. If they can, they receive apples, nuts, and gingerbread. If they cannot, he beats the children with his bag of ashes. In other (presumably more modern) versions of the story, Knecht Ruprecht gives naughty children gifts such as lumps of coal, sticks, and stones, while well-behaving children receive sweets from Saint Nicholas. He also can be known to give naughty children a switch (stick) in their shoes for their parents to beat them with, instead of candy, fruit and nuts, in the German tradition.

### Krampus

Krampus is a terrifying figure found in parts of Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia, most probably originating in the Pre-Christian Alpine traditions. Local tradition typically portrays these figures as children of poor families, roaming the streets and sledding hills during the holiday festival. The Krampus wore black rags and masks, dragging chains behind them, and occasionally hurling them towards children in their way.

The Feast of St. Nicholas is celebrated in parts of Europe on December 6th. On the preceding evening, Krampus Night or Krampusnacht, the wicked hairy devil appears on the streets. Sometimes accompanying St Nicholas and sometimes on his own, Krampus visits homes and businesses. Saint Nicholas dispenses gifts, while Krampus supplies coal and bundles of birch branches.



## Belsnickel

Belsnickel is a companion of Saint Nicholas in the Palatinate (Pfalz), Germany. Belsnickel is a man wearing fur which covers his entire body, and he sometimes wears a mask with a long tongue. He is a rather scary creature who visits children at Christmas time and delivers socks or shoes full of candy, but if the children were not good, they will find coal and/or switches in their stockings instead.

## Zwarte Piet

The Zwarte Piet character is part of the annual feast of St. Nicholas, celebrated on the evening of 5 December (Sinterklaasavond, that is, St. Nicholas' Eve) in the Netherlands, Curaçao and Aruba and on 6 December in Belgium and Luxembourg, when sweets and presents are distributed to children. The characters of Zwarte Pieten appear only in the weeks before Saint Nicholas's feast, first when the saint is welcomed with a parade as he arrives in the country (generally by boat, having traveled from Madrid, Spain). The tasks of the Zwarte Pieten are mostly to amuse children, and to scatter pepernoten, kruidnoten and stroigoed (special sinterklaas candies) for those who come to meet the saint as he visits stores, schools, and other places.

## **St. Nicholas and other related characters across Europe**



Figure 1. Joulupukki of Finland (Yule Goat)



## Befana

In popular folklore Befana visits all the children of Italy on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany to fill their stockings with candy and presents if they are good. Or a lump of coal or dark candy if they are bad. In many poorer parts of Italy and in particular rural Sicily, a stick in a stocking was placed instead of coal. Being a good housekeeper, many say she will sweep the floor before she leaves. To some the sweeping meant the sweeping away of the problems of the year. The child's family typically leaves a small glass of wine and a plate with a few morsels of food, often regional or local, for the Befana.



She is usually portrayed as an old lady riding a broomstick through the air wearing a black shawl and is covered in soot because she enters the children's houses through the chimney. She is often smiling and carries a bag or hamper filled with candy, gifts, or both.