



*'Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry feast.'*

*William Shakespeare "The Comedy of Errors", Act 3 scene 1*

*If you thought recycling to be a new activity, think again. Humans are great at 'stealing ideas' from each other and Christians with Christmas were no exception. The cosy traditions we know and love are not just about celebrating Christmas. Things like kissing under a mistletoe, carolling, wreaths, and even gift-giving, are all aspects of pagan holidays that were adapted into Christmas celebrations in the early years. Decorating trees, feasting with loved ones, hanging up socks by the fireplace, and drinking yourself silly are no different – they're all a part of pagan history and sacred holidays. In fact, most of the cultural aspects we associate with Christmas are steeped in pagan roots.*

*Some pagan traditions that have become associated with Christmas are: -*

*Gift-giving, Santa Claus, Christmas stockings, Christmas carolling, decking the halls with holly, and decorating trees.*

## **THE PAGANS**

*So who do we mean when we say pagan? This is a sweeping term that encompasses anyone from the Romans to the Norse in Scandinavia. As Christianity spread in the early Common Era, missionaries got to know a lot of different groups of people with varying religious systems and beliefs. All of these people and religions were lumped into the catch-all term of 'pagan'. Christians had the goal of spreading their religion across Europe, but were still fascinated by many of the customs and ways of the pagans. The crafty Christians knew they were*

*onto a good way of spreading their faith, by picking up a few of those beliefs and traditions and adapting them as part of Christian celebrations! Assimilate don't assassinate!*

### ***Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?***

*Well, the Christmas traditions are adaptations from the traditions of the Romans, Celts, Norse, Druids, and more (all pagan), who all shared one big celebration that just happened to fall around 'Christmas' time – the winter solstice. At this solstice was celebrated the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus), around December 25<sup>th</sup>. As the Gospels give no specific date for the birth of Christ, the church in Rome began formally celebrating Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> in 336 CE, during the reign of the Christian Emperor Constantine.*

*In the northern hemisphere winter solstice is the shortest day of the year. This was a huge part of pagan life. Winter marked the end of the year's harvest, and the chance to enjoy the company of loved ones and rest from toiling the fields. Pagans could stop farming through the winter, and instead devoted themselves to worshipping their various gods and celebrating with those around them. As winter in the northern hemisphere tends to be a dark, cold, and hungry period of time, the winter solstice was celebrated to help keep people entertained and enjoy themselves, until the sun rolled around again. Before Christianity came to the Danes, Christmas Day was a celebration of brighter days, jól, as it occurred just before winter solstice. The twelve days of Christmas were critical to nursing the new sun into life.*

## **GIFT GIVING**

*Not only is December a time to celebrate winter solstice, but between the 17th and 24th of the month, the Romans also celebrated Saturnalia, and would spend the week of Saturnalia much like how we spend Christmas today – feasting, drinking, giving gifts, and being joyful. Romans exchanged small gifts for the sake of good luck. The idea was to give a gift in the hope of bringing in a bountiful harvest the next year. Romans shared only one gift with one other person –but how did they choose who that person would be?*

## **CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS AND /FATHER CHRISTMAS**

*Whilst the modern image of Santa Claus, in red fur with a big white beard, was largely developed by a well-known beverage company in the 1930s, the idea of an old man giving gifts to children dates much earlier than that, back to the time of the pagans.*

*For Christianity, Father Christmas, otherwise known as St. Nicholas, was a patron saint of children, the poor, and, who knew, prostitutes. What an enlightened man! Living around 4th century CE, He was a generous bishop who was known for giving gifts to the poor, sporting a big beard and a long cloak much like today's Santa.*

*But Father Christmas has his roots in the Norse God Odin, another bearded old Pagan God worshipped by Danish and Germanic tribes. He rode across the skies on an eight-legged horse called Sleipnur, possibly a model for the Reindeer? (That would account for enough legs for Donner and Blitzen at least). It puts a whole new light on what we see on the Santa*

*Tracker web site on Christmas Eve, when trying to persuade the children to go to bed.*

*Today in Denmark, Santa Claus is known as Julemanden (literally "the Yule Man") and is said to arrive on a sleigh drawn by reindeer, with presents for the children. He is assisted with his Yuletide chores by elves known as julenisser (or simply nisser), who are traditionally believed to live in attics, barns or similar places. Danish homes may also be decorated with kravlenisser (climbing nisse), cardboard cut-outs of nisser which can be attached to paintings and bookshelves. This is a unique Danish tradition started in the early 20th century. To maintain the favour and protection of these nisser, children leave out saucers of milk, rice pudding or other treats for them, on the afternoon on the 24th, and are delighted to find the food gone on Yule morning. In my house, the Reindeer tended to leave their footprints in the icing sugar (snow) in front of the fireplace, and Father Christmas always left a polite thank you note, as he still does for the grandchildren.*

*During the winter, children would fill their booties with hay and honey balls and leave them by the chimney for Sleipnur to feed on. Odin would fly by and reward the children with little presents in their booties. Hay and honey balls sound much better for a chilly flight than carrots and sherry. Hence the tradition of Christmas stockings.*

## **CHRISTMAS CAROLS**

*The tradition of going door-to-door singing to your neighbours comes from a pagan tradition called wassailing, from the*

*Anglo-Saxon phrase of 'waes hael', translating to 'good health'. Every year, wassailers would roam through their villages in small groups, singing loudly with the aim of banishing evil spirits and wishing good health to those around them.*

*Of course, to improve the effect, no wassailing group was complete without drink to hand – mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, eggs, spices, and sugar. Sounds delicious. In the 13th century, St. Francis took inspiration from these happy choirs and started the tradition of Christmas carolling.*

### **KISSING UNDER A MISTLETOE**

*Ever wondered why we kiss under the mistletoe? Well, did you guess that the tradition goes back to the pagans? Everyone from the Romans and Celts to the Druids and the Norse had a thing about mistletoe. It was considered to be a highly sacred plant, involved in several pagan rituals.*

*In the Roman world, mistletoe honoured the god Saturn. To keep him happy, they would perform fertility rituals underneath sprigs of mistletoe – yes, really, that's exactly what it sounds like! Generally, these days we confine the activity to a decorous kiss, but I guess - whatever floats your boat!*

*In the world of the Druids, mistletoe symbolised peace and joy. In times of war, if enemies were to meet underneath woodland mistletoe, then they would drop their weapons and form a truce until the next day. In a way, kissing could be a form of truce. What a great idea, the world would be a much more peaceful place if we copied that tradition.*

## **DECKING THE HALLS WITH HOLLY**

*Mistletoe wasn't the only sacred plant for pagans. Holly was another holy plant connected with the god Saturn. During Saturnalia, Romans made holly wreaths to exchange as gifts for good luck. When early Christians began to celebrate Christmas, they were often persecuted for practicing their new religion. Saturnalia allowed them cover for their Christmas celebrations.*

*To make it look like they were celebrating Saturnalia, Christians started hanging holly wreaths around their homes. Eventually, as paganism decreased, holly became a symbol of Christmas instead of Saturnalia.*

## **CHRISTMAS TREE DECORATING**

*Tree decorating is just another borrowed Roman tradition! Romans hung small metal ornaments on trees outside their homes. Each of these little ornaments represented a god, either Saturn or the family's personal patron saint. Early Germanic tribes practiced a similar tree decorating tradition, this time with fruits and candles to honour the god Odin throughout winter solstice.*

*So, whether you are following a 20<sup>th</sup> century variation of tradition, Pagan ritual or other religious observance, or simply taking a break, may you have a Festive Season and a Peaceful and Prosperous New Year?*

