

The Pagan Origins of Christmas

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

Are you in a festive mood, Duncan?

So first a bit of a disclaimer: if you subscribe to one of the major world religions and take it super seriously, we don't have anything against your or your beliefs, but this probably isn't the episode for you. As the saying goes, "you are entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts," and this episode is going to examine the facts behind a holiday that is technically named Christ Mass despite the most tenuous possible connections to its namesake.

I have always been fascinated with the iconography of holidays and especially Christian holidays, the way that religious people just kind of shrug off the lack of any meaningful relationship between the symbols of the holiday and Jesus. Rabbits and eggs, candy canes and elves and reindeer, where's the Jesus tie-in? The truth is that these holidays have almost nothing to do with Christianity, they are 90%

pagan, and much of their symbolism originated from cultures that existed long before the birth of Christ (an event which most likely took place in the spring if it took place at all).

The modern version of Christmas is part of a larger celebration called Christmastide, you're probably familiar with the 12 days that make up the larger holiday; I only know about the 12 days of Christmas from the song about the partridge and the pear tree and the drummers drumming and lords leaping...by the way, I don't know how you give someone a gift that consist of a bunch of leaping lords. Are they leaping over things, or just kind of jumping in place for hours...do they get to take breaks? How do I know that they're lords? Do they come with papers, like a pedigree? Either way it sounds exhausting for them. If I were a Lord, I would not sanction that buffoonery. Sounds more like a slave than a Lord. What are the benefits to being a lord if you can be given as a gift and forced to leap for someone's amusement? That's a weird present. Here, I have procured you some humans. There are other versions of the 12 days of Christmas song from different countries; a French version from 1856 includes the gift of 8 cows biting, and three wooden branches. You can keep the aggressive bovines and the lumber. I'm good on those. All I want are the five gold rings, honestly. Yet another French version includes "10 good turkeycocks." Not the whole turkey, I guess. A Scottish version

includes "an Arabian baboon," which is creative. And very specific. Don't try to substitute some crappy European baboon. I am a baboon sommelier.

Christmastide starts on Christmas Eve, the 24th of December, and ends at sunset on December 5th, known as 12th night or Epiphany Eve. During that almost two-week stretch, various holidays are celebrated depending on the type of Christian you are. There is Christmas day, obvi, which is celebrated by pretty much everyone who enjoys free stuff and is not prohibited from celebrating it by their beliefs, and then the 26th of December is St. Stephen's Day, or the Feast of Saint Stephen. If you're part of the Eastern Orthodox church you might instead celebrate on the 27th. Saint Stephen was the first martyr in Christianity, known as the protomartyr. Basically he was an early Christian convert who preached about Jesus to the Jews, which wasn't particularly appreciated at the time. You could say it wasn't kosher—rimshot. Eventually he was stoned to death, mostly because of religious persecution but there was an element of pure annoyance. It seems like Stephen had plenty of opportunities to quit blathering but just wouldn't shut up about Christ. "Stephen denounce[d] his listeners as "stiff-necked" people who, just as their ancestors had done, resist the Holy Spirit...Thus castigated, the...crowd could contain their anger no longer." I'm not defending their actions, but maybe don't antagonize a

crowd. play stupid games and win stupid prizes. The holiday is celebrated with a feast on the day after Christmas, so if you aren't too full of milk and cookies and roast beast, you can partake in a post-xmas buffet in honor of an annoying dumbass who didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. (I apologize in advance if any religious people are still listening, we respect your views but we WILL mock them.) The next holiday during Christmastide is Childermas on the 28th of December. This one is pretty grim. The Feast of the Holy Innocents commemorates a massacre of children in Bethlehem by King Herod the Great, a Roman who had been appointed king of Judea.

According to the gospel of Matthew—and pretty much nothing else—Herod was attempting to kill Jesus but couldn't find him, so he ordered the execution of all male children under 2 years old in Bethlehem. I don't know who dubbed Herod "great" and what their criteria were for greatness, but he was a real historical figure who most likely did NOT kill a bunch of children so maybe he was nicknamed great for other, legit reasons.

Regardless...this was kind of a strange excuse for a celebration and a feast. Bunch of kids were killed, party time. Next in the christmastide list of holidays comes New Year's Eve, which is mostly self explanatory except I didn't know that it's also referred to as Saint Sylvester's Day, after Pope Sylvester the first, who died on New Years Eve in the year 335. In the

Eastern Orthodox Church the celebration occurs two days later on January second because I guess those Eastern Christians just have to be edgy and rebellious. Eastern Orthodox is the hipster sect of Catholicism. But seriously, the only reason to insist on celebrating a guy's death a couple days after the actual anniversary is just to be ornery. Unless maybe they disagree on the date of his death? I don't know, but I choose to believe that they're the honey badgers of religious sects.

Next on January 1st we have the feast of the circumcision of Christ. Or at least that's how it was known until 1960. The idea of holding a feast in honor of the savior's severed foreskin became less and less appealing throughout the years, weirdly. It's not the most appetizing topic for a feast, I'll probably pass on the calamari rings. "The circumcision of Jesus has traditionally been seen...as the first time the blood of Christ was shed, and thus the beginning of the process of the redemption of man, and a demonstration that Christ was fully human, and of his obedience to Biblical Law." I always assumed that when you're drinking the blood of Christ during communion, it's a reference to the blood from his crucifixion wounds, but maybe not. The region of his body from which his holy blood was first shed was not his hands or feet, but rather that tiny sacred penis. That got weird.

In 1960, pope John the XXIII renamed the circumcision feast to the "octave of the nativity" because Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day after his birth. And also because, you know, branding. They were like, going forward let's maybe leave our Lord's infant genitals out of the title if this celebration. Finally, during the second Vatican council which ended in 1965, the church fully removed any references to the sacred ween; January 1st is now officially referred to as the "Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God" and celebrates the woman who *truly* sacrificed for humanity: Mary was forced to endure the ordeal of birth without ever getting to enjoy the pleasures of copulation. Virgin birth is pretty cruel. It's like being injected with an std...you get all of the misery and inconvenience that can result from sex without any of the sex that results from sex. I guess I probably shouldn't compare babies to herpes, but I don't know which I would choose if I had to pick. Both are forever, both are eternal burdens, and herpes never wrecked the family car. Parenting seems awful to me but hey, I don't kink shame. If you're into that, cool. I'm not going to criticize anyone's breeding kink. Sorry June.

So next there is the Feast of the Holy Family, which is held on the Sunday between Christmas and January first. This year, both Christmas and January first *are* Sundays, this is a rare occasion, and so the Feast of the Holy Family will be held on December 30th,

which is the Friday after Christmas. While Christmas itself is a celebration of Jesus and the Solemnity of Mary is a celebration of the mother of Jesus, this feast celebrates the whole family. Finally Joseph gets some love. He doesn't get his *own* feast, which kind of makes sense, he didn't actually contribute anything to the conception. He's a cuckold, technically. God cuckolded Joseph, he put the baby in Mary, so Joseph is not part of the biological family. He's a solid stepdad, though, stepdads are the real heroes, Joseph raised some deity's baby. But don't hold your breath for a Joseph Feast being added to the liturgical calendar any time soon.

The final holiday during Christmastide is 12th night, or Epiphany Eve, on January 5th. Traditions include singing Christmas carols...which, if you're outside my house singing Christmas carols on January 5th, you're going to get hosed down. I like Christmas but I will turn into the Grinch on December 26th. If you're trying to shower me with Yuletide cheer after the New Year, you're getting a shower as well. Other traditions include eating three-kings cake, which is a small cake with a figurine hidden inside, also known as a choking hazard. Finally, a household celebrating Epiphany Eve might do what's called "chalking the door," and that's when Christians go full QAnon and scrawl a bunch of cryptic numerology nonsense on their front door. The most likely scribble you'd see this year would be the numbers

and letters "20 ✝ C ✝ M ✝ B ✝ 22". If you've ever seen it this looks like an algebra equation but actually the numbers 20 and 22 stand for the year 2022, though I don't know why they're written super far apart like that, and the letters C, M, and B stand for Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, the three wise men. Basically a bunch of coded gobbledygook to confuse and frustrate the atheists.

So that is the full contemporary holiday of Christmastide, but what about Christmas Day specifically...how did it become associated with bearded fat men and toys and tiny little guys with pointy hats...it sounds very bears and twinkles all of a sudden. It's a Grinder Christmas! But where did all of the famous Christmas traditions come from? Santa and elves and flying sleighs and home invasions via the chimney? How did we get from baby Jesus to flying reindeer?

We've mentioned that Christmas has pagan origins, and paganism often has a negative connotation, it sounds weirdly sinister. When I hear the phrase "Pagan rituals" my mind jumps straight to horror stories of witches and demon-summoning, but in reality "pagan" simply refers to any religious practice that isn't one of the major current world religions. In today's world, if you worship Odin or Zeus, you are technically a pagan. And probably a little weird and annoying. But back before Christianity went mainstream the Greeks and Romans obviously had their own religious

traditions, and many of those traditions—including feasts and celebrations—were extremely popular. So if you were a new religion—like Christianity was in the middle ages—and you were trying to get people to convert, it was a lot easier to convince them to do that if you weren't forcing them to give up all of the feasts and celebrations that they grew up with and enjoyed. Of course, you couldn't have them worshipping false gods and prophets, so the easiest solution was to just rebrand. Keep all of the best parts of the holidays, but change the names and stories behind them.

In the Roman calendar, December 17th through 23rd spanned the holiday of Saturnalia. This roughly coincides with the Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere, which occurs each year on approximately December 21st; it's the shortest day of the year for us Northerners, when the earth is at its maximum tilt away from the sun and the northern hemisphere gets the least amount of light. Saturnalia was a celebration of the god Saturn, and a remembrance of the so-called Golden Age, roughly equivalent to the Garden of Eden in Christianity. According to Roman historian Justinus, "The first inhabitants of Italy were the Aborigines, whose king, Saturnus, is said to have been a man of such extraordinary justice, that no one was a slave in his reign, or had any private property, but all things were common to all, and undivided, as one estate for the use of every one; in memory of

which way of life, it has been ordered that at the Saturnalia slaves should everywhere sit down with their masters at the entertainments, the rank of all being made equal."

I love how they're like, "this celebration harkens back to a better time, an egalitarian utopia before we started enslaving people and stealing their land. We like to commemorate our glorious past for a few days every year, we give slaves a brief taste their freedom to atone for our current misdeeds...and then go back to enslaving and annexing territory because hey, life ain't fair. It USED to be fair, but everything is shitty now and there's no way we could possibly go back to a better time even though we do for like a week every year."

We don't have a comprehensive description of Saturnalia traditions...it is thought to have involved a festival of light, with lots of candles. I went to a Waldorf school, are you familiar with those? They're pagan as hell, it's basically hippy Hogwarts and it's great, honestly, I really have affection for Waldorf. In December they celebrate the Advent Spiral or the Winter Garden; each kid walks along a spiral of evergreen branches on the ground and they each place down a candle and at the end you have this giant spiral of light, it's very cool and mystical and I can only imagine that it was inspired by celebrations like Saturnalia. In 217BC the Romans reformed the holiday to incorporate more of the Greek elements, hearkening back to Hellenistic

traditions with various sacrifices and public banquets and the shouting of "io Saturnalia." Io was basically an exclamation of joy or triumph. Like "Huzzah!" which is my favorite renaissance faire larping shout. I've never larped but if I did I would definitely Huzzah vigorously. I'm glad that we don't have the tradition of shouting during the Christmas holiday. Caroling is cool but if people just went around shouting "IO Christmas" I'd have to bust out the hose again.

Note about Saturnalia: In the city of Rome there was a statue of Saturn located in the appropriately-named Temple of Saturn, and for most of the year the statue was filled with oil and had its feet bound with wool. During the Saturnalia holiday those wool bindings would be removed, symbolizing freedom and liberation. The breaking of the woolen shackles, very dramatic. I hope that if I am ever bound or confined, that my captors choose as their material of imprisonment...wool. Seems like those might have just been slippers. The statue's like, "It's the middle of December, how about you take off my wool shoes in June instead?"

Apart from Roman holidays, the Norse and Anglo Saxons traditionally celebrated a festival in the winter roughly around the same time as Christmas called "Yule," featuring traditions like the "Yule log," the "Yule boar" and the "Yule goat." There were a lot of goats in Viking lore; The thunder god Thor famously rode a

chariot pulled by two goats, and goat sacrifices to the god Saturn aka Njord were common during this season. The Yule goat could take the form of a person dressed as a goat or else a goat-like figure constructed of straw or wood, and the Yule goat would eventually evolve into a common Christmas ornament in modern Scandinavian Christmas celebrations.

The Yule boar was just a pig that was sacrificed to the gods at Yule time.

The Yule boar sacrifice was unique, though...a boar would first be led into the dining hall and "then people laid their hands on its bristles and made vows." This was known as

Heitstrenging. Kind of an interspecies Me Too situation. Killing the animal is bad enough, can we not grope the pig before we murder it? Also those were some patient boars. From what I know of wild boars, they are ornery. Maybe the Vikings got it drunk? That seems even more dangerous.

The Yule log was...a log. We went in order from most interesting to least. It was a log for the fire.

So continuing on our journey toward modern Christmas, in the 1500s, good Ol king Henry the VIII wanted to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, but pope Clement the VII forbade it, so Henry broke away from Catholicism and formed the Anglican Church. Known as the Church of England, the Anglican Church is essentially the official church of "suck it," basically

the only church formed explicitly as a middle finger to a pope. Over the years the Anglican Church would get super into the idea of Christmas, Anglicans were all about merriment and cheer, but the much more pious Christian sects, particularly puritans, weren't having it. I think of the puritans as a bunch of grinchy glaring down at the Anglican Whoville and vowing to kill Christmas.

"...in 17th century England, some groups such as the [Puritans](#) strongly condemned the celebration of Christmas, considering it a Catholic invention and the "trappings of [popery](#)" or the "rags of [the Beast](#)". In contrast, the established [Anglican Church](#) "pressed for a more elaborate observance of feasts, penitential seasons, and saints' days. The calendar reform became a major point of tension between the Anglican party and the Puritan party ...England's Puritan rulers banned Christmas in 1647. Protests followed as pro-Christmas rioting broke out in several cities and for weeks Canterbury was controlled by the rioters, who decorated doorways with holly and shouted royalist slogans." Those were some aggressive Christmas enthusiasts...they were decorating other people's doorways? That's holiday vandalism. I love Christmas but I feel like Christmas decorations should be consensual. I picture them shouting drunken Christmas carols outside Puritan houses at like three in

the morning and refusing to leave.

“The [Restoration](#) of [King Charles II](#) in 1660 ended the ban, and Christmas was again freely celebrated in England.” But the Puritans, whose hearts were three sizes too small, were not thrilled by the return of Christmas. The puritans were in fact so butthurt about the return of Christmas that they traveled 3,000 miles across the sea to bring their grinchiness to the new world. I guess it wasn't just Christmas, they also griped about general religious persecution...they hadn't been treated great in Europe, but if you look into history they were pretty damn annoying and I don't blame the English and Dutch for icing them out. Puritans were some of the worst people in Europe really, just boring tightass haters. When Europe sent their people they were not sending their best. They were sending people who had lots of problems...they were uptight, they were intolerant. Some, I assume, were good people. The Native Americans should've built a wall in the ocean. Maybe one of those floating barrier lines that we put in swimming areas of lakes and to divide public pools. That'll stop 'em. To be fair the pilgrims had a valid point about Christmas: it is never mentioned in the Bible and as we've discussed and will soon explore in more depth— the traditions of Christmas are pagan af. We learned in our Salem episode that early American colonists were not sanctioning any pagan buffoonery, they would get very hang-y and crush-

y when they thought someone was engaging in pagan rituals. Here's a fun fact: every year we hear Fox News screaming about a war on Christmas, but the only people in America who have ever waged a war on Christmas were hardcore Christians.

So lets talk about the modern version of Christmas. Unlike the pagan celebrations on which it is based, Christmas now supposedly commemorates the birth of Jesus, and here's a quick primer for the one listener in a hermit cave who doesn't know the story of Jesus. Hermit cave equipped with a generator and a smartphone and a podcast app, this is the CRIBS of hermit caves. According to the New Testament, back in the year 0 a virgin named Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would soon bear from her womb the son of God. From Luke 1:34, English Standard Version, "And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God." Mary's fiancé Joseph, finding that his soon-to-be-wife was pregnant, was initially a tiny bit suspicious about this turn of events. He was like, So let me get this straight...

He was pretty sure it wasn't his. From Matthew 1:18, "her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her

quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." And he was like, seems a little sus, but ok. I dreamed that my pregnant fiancé didn't cheat on me, so case closed. Thanks, subconscious rationalizations. Around this time the Roman emperor ordered everyone to head to their ancestral town to be counted in a census, for taxation purposes. This would have been the emperor Augustus, although there's no historical record of such an order being given. I'm sure it totally happened, though; the entire empire had to reshuffle itself and masses of humans traveled across country and every facet of daily life was disrupted yet no one wrote about it or mentioned it ever again. Sure. Regardless, Joseph and the very-pregnant Mary traveled by donkey to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. Unfortunately when they arrived, every hotel in town was full, but one of the innkeepers offered them a dirty horse stall to sleep in; they were hobos, basically. Mary went into labor and gave birth in the least hygienic environment imaginable, surrounded by farm animals on a manger, which is a feed-trough. I didn't know that's what a manger was. Jesus was born on a slop-stained slobbery trough, it's a weird hero-

origin story. Immediately after the birth, an angel appeared to some nearby shepherds who were grazing their flock, just to kind of humble brag about how this amazing kid had been born nearby, telling them that the baby is the Son of God and maybe they should go check it out because damn, this kid is super cool and awesome and SOMEONE should be worshipping him, hint hint, frankly God was expecting a little more pageantry around the birth of his kid and he's getting annoyed. The nativity scene is always depicted as very cozy and clean...that's your first clue that the bible might be taking some liberties with actual circumstances. Your second clue is everything else in the bible.

Interestingly, no date for Jesus's birth is ever provided in the New Testament. It's unlikely that shepherds would have been grazing their flocks at night in the dead of winter, so if Jesus was a real person, he was most likely born in the spring, but since we're accepting all of this other bullshit, whatever.

The first mention of December 25th as a birthdate for JC was in a book by Roman Theologian Hippolytus, in the third century, a few hundred years after the supposed birth event. He claimed to base this on the idea that Jesus was conceived near the March 25th spring equinox and then he added nine months to get the actual date of birth, but I'm not sure what he considers a conception. It was more like an implantation, I guess? Some historians have claimed—and it is

technically possible—that in 350AD Pope Julius 1 declared December 25th to be Jesus's birthday, and as we mentioned earlier this would've been to take advantage of the existing holiday of Saturnalia, but the evidence for this is tenuous. Regardless, sometime in the 4th century the Christian church settled on the date of Jesus's birth as December 25th. Isaac Newton was born on Christmas, incidentally, and he subscribed to the theory that December 25 was selected due to being close to the winter equinox. His opinion is irrelevant, he was not a historian, but he *was* born on Christmas and knew a lot about the physics of falling fruit. But hadn't been smart enough to not sit directly under a fully laden Apple tree. There is evidence actually that Newton did witness an apple falling and that it contributed to his musings on gravity but not that it hit him on the head.

As for the evolution of the holiday's name, "Christenmas" was used back in postiquity, a shortening of Christian mass, and later was further shortened to Christ Mass, and if you want to get even shorter, the symbol for the Greek letter chi is an x, which explains the use of "Xmas" as an abbreviation. I... guess? Seems like that would be "Chi-mas," but who am I to question the Internet. Also I thought Xmas was the result of people trying to be edgy, like you know how X is supposed to be cool, like the "x-games." *I'll see you on Xmas bro.* It's like the extreme version of Christmas, you have to battle the

reindeer for presents. Each reindeer from Dancer to Prancer is increasingly powerful, and Rudolph is the boss battle.

Christmas is currently celebrated all around the world, even in countries that are predominantly non-Christian, like Japan. At this point it is basically a secular holiday characterized by the buying and giving of gifts...it's a heartwarming international celebration of commerce and capitalism. It's all about money.

In America there is however still a strong religious component for many people...in 2010 a survey revealed that 6 in 10 attend church services at some point during Christmastide. Of course, the numbers are dropping. And that was more than a decade ago.

So Duncan, why don't you list some traditions and objects or decorations etc that you associate with Christmas. And we'll dive into the craziness.

CHRISTMAS TREES

The Christmas tree's origins potentially trace as far back as the ancient Egyptians and Chinese; tree worship worldwide has been historically common, as trees are often viewed as symbols of growth and rebirth. various European pagan cultures in particular associated evergreen trees with the winter solstice, and the modern version of the decorated Christmas tree took shape in 16th century Germany. German Lutherans initially placed

lighted candles on the trees as decoration...feels like a Darwin Awards callback. There were no fire extinguishers back then. The star at the top represented the star of Bethlehem, which shone in the night sky beginning on the night of Jesus's birth and led three wise men to visit the Christ child. It was like a gps to the hobo manger.

According to Time magazine the popularity of the Christmas trees exploded due to the British royal family. "the image of a decorated Christmas tree with presents underneath has a very specific origin: an engraving of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and their children gathering around a Christmas tree, eyeing the presents underneath, published in the Illustrated London News in 1848. The premier women's magazine in America back then, Godey's Lady's Book, reprinted a version of the image a couple of years later as 'The Christmas Tree.'"

SANTA CLAUS

There are a number of pagan religions which feature gods or heroes who fly across the world on various steeds. In fact we recently mentioned the Norse god Odin and his eight-legged flying arachnid horse Sleipnir, and of course there's Pegasus and Perseus or Bellerophon, there's Helios and his horse drawn chariot. But before Santa Claus had airborne reindeer he was a bishop known as Saint Nicholas of

Myra, aka Nicolas of Bari, or Nicholas the wonder worker. That last one is better than Saint Nick, or Santa Claus. Nicholas lived in the city of Myra in modern-day Turkey in the third century CE and was of Greek descent. Most of the stories of his life are clearly nonsense. He was sort of Robinhood mixed with a marvel character. Like, he was born to wealthy parents but when his parents died he gave their fortune away to the poor, which is cool but doesn't take a lot of effort. It's better than being a selfish rich kid but he didn't earn that money. Later he supposedly saved three women from prostitution by dropping bags of gold through their father's window. He was the original captain save a ho. He didn't want the man to feel shamed for taking charity and possibly refuse the gift, so he snuck the gifts of gold through the window over three successive nights, and the father used the gold to pay a dowry to get his daughters married off. Being bartered away via bribes, that's waaay better than prostitution. I guess with arranged marriage you only have to fuck one guy, but like forever. I might prefer variety. Anyway, then the legends go off the rails...it's like season four of a Netflix show where they say fuck reality and everyone goes to space or whatever. Nikolas saved sailors from storms by "rebuk[ing] the waves" to cause them to settle down. he chopped down a demon-possessed tree and saved a bunch of innocent soldiers from being executed.

Some of the legends are downright morbid and grisly. Have you seen the movie *Delicatessen*? During a famine, there was a cannibal butcher who murdered three children and placed their corpses in brine barrels to pickle them and sell them as ham. "Nicholas, visiting the region to care for the hungry, saw through the butcher's lies and resurrected the pickled children by making the sign of the cross."

Seems like it could backfire, that's kind of a monkey's paw scenario.

Those kids would be a little salty.

Dessicated might be the word.

Shriveled hideous little zombies, those are other words. But that story

became so ubiquitous that it entered the medieval version of pop culture, it

was reproduced on stainedglass windows, on frescoes and wood panel

paintings, usually depicted via the figures of three naked children

alongside Saint Nick. Eventually the context of the scene was mostly

forgotten and people began to assume that Nick was the patron saint of

children, though that would not have been my assumption.

Due to Saint Nick's ability to rebuke the ocean, he is remembered and

celebrated in a number of port cities as the patron Saint of the sea.

Especially in Greece where he is also the saint of the Hellenic Navy.

But it was Nickolas's habit of giving gifts secretly that spawned the current version of Santa. He would reportedly put coins in people's shoes overnight, which is a tradition still observed in some countries during Christmas.

So how did this rogue-wave taming, naked-kid-saving, magical Robinhood become the modern Santa Claus? Well, blame Holland. The original inhabitants of modern day Manhattan were Dutch, and when they established New Amsterdam in the new world they brought with them the legend of the "Sinterklaas," a Dutch version of Saint Nikolaas, and we have covered a bit about this on another episode. Like Saint Nick and the bags of money, Sinterklaas would sneak into the houses of poor people and leave gifts, like coins in the shoes. He also lived in Spain and had black slaves that would beat naughty children, but we won't get into that again.

What about the outfit? Well I mentioned that the OG Saint Nick was a bishop and so he was often portrayed with a long beard and brightly colored vestments. From a history today article: "He was also said to travel through the sky and to have an uncanny knack for remaining unseen. At times, St Nicholas was even associated with certain animals. In the Netherlands there was a tradition of leaving hay for his horses, in some parts of Germany he still rides a horse, in eastern France he keeps his presents in baskets carried by a donkey and in Italy he is often accompanied by a jovial ass." That's the best kind of ass. You don't want a surly ass.

So in the melting pot of cultures that was the new world it makes sense that diverse traditions would transform and

combine. Sinterklaas was anglicized to become Santa Claus and Washington Irving solidified the first modern version of Santa in 1809's Knickerbocker's History of New York. A collection of satirical sketches, Irving portrayed Santa as a fat Dutchman, sporting 'a low, broad-brimmed hat, a huge pair of Flemish trunk hose, and a long pipe' and riding across the sky in a 'wagon' full of presents.

The reindeer were introduced 12 years later with publication of The Children's Friend: A New Year's Present to the Little Ones from Five to Twelve in New York, featuring a poem with this verse:

"Old SANTECLAUS with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night,
O'r chimney tops, and tracts of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you."

As with many aspects of Christmas, you can thank commercialization for the rest of the reindeer mythology. "In 1939 Montgomery Ward department stores commissioned Robert L. May to write a story book which could be given to children visiting their branches over the Christmas period. In May's tale, Rudolph [the reindeer] was shunned by the other reindeer because of his bright red nose."

Next, enter American cartoonist Thomas Nast. We have definitely covered this part of the story. In the January 3, 1863 issue of Harper's Weekly, Santa Claus arrives by sleigh to deliver gifts to Union soldiers during

the civil war. He's wearing a Stars and Stripes jacket but otherwise is basically the Santa we know today, complete with sleigh and reindeer. Nash would refine the figure over the years, adding the North Pole. Later the author of the wizard of Oz, L Frank Baum, would pen a children's book called the life and adventures of Santa Claus, and the last piece of the puzzle would be Haddon Sundblom's iconic Coca Cola ads in the 1930s, which fully fleshed out the rosy cheeked, white bearded, red-clad Santa character.

The elves were an extension of a silly concept that had existed as long as the auto factory; the idea of identical tiny workers manning a factory assembly line, sweatshop style, was a common trope in the 1900s. The depictions have evolved over the years.

"An excerpt from a 2004 article, from a supply chain managers' trade magazine, aptly illustrates this depiction:

Santa's main [distribution center](#) is a sight to behold. At 4,000,000 square feet (370,000 m²), it's one of the world's largest facilities. A real-time [warehouse management system](#) (WMS) is of course required to run such a complex. The facility makes extensive use of task interleaving, literally combining dozens of DC activities (putaway, replenishing, order picking, sleigh loading, cycle counting) in a dynamic queue the DC elves have been on engineered standards and incentives for three years, leading to a

12% gain in [productivity](#)." Santa's warehouse is basically Amazon.

And that's Christmas. Huzzah!

New CA\$4.50 patron! 🎉 Meet Felica Gallant

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<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/natural-histories/how-father-christmas-found-his-reindeer>

<https://time.com/5736523/history-of-christmas-trees/>

[Temple of Saturn \(virginia.edu\)](#)

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