

Christmas History



The history of Christmas can be traced back to around 4000 years ago, and even though the traditions were very different, people still celebrated, feasted, and praised their gods with gifts of food and riches.

Many of these traditions began with the Mesopotamian celebration of New Years. The Mesopotamians believed in many gods. Each year as winter arrived, it was believed that Marduk, their chief god, would do battle with the monsters of chaos. To assist Marduk in his struggle, the Mesopotamians held a festival for the New Year. This was Zagmuk, the New Year's festival that lasted for 12 days.

The Persians and the Babylonians celebrated a similar festival called the Sacaea. Part of the celebration included exchanging places—the slaves would become the masters and the masters were to obey.



The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the arrival of Jesus, early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. Many people rejoiced during the winter solstice, when the worst of the winter was behind them and they could look forward to longer days and extended hours of sunlight.

The Romans celebrated their god Saturn in a festival called Saturnalia, which began in the middle of December and ended January 1st. The celebration would include parades in the streets, big festive meals, visiting friends, and the exchange of gifts. The Romans decked their halls with garlands of laurel and green trees lit with candles.

In the early years of Christianity, the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. But in the fourth century, church officials decided to proclaim the birth of Jesus as a holiday. The Bible does not mention a date for his birth, so Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date in an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival.



By holding Christmas, translated as “Christ Mass,” at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced, but they were not entirely in control of how Christmas should be celebrated. The Church was eventually successful in taking the merriment, lights, and gifts from the Saturnalia festival and bringing them to the celebration of Christmas.

By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas, believers attended church and then celebrated. The celebrations were rowdy and raucous, similar to Mardi Gras. During the Middle Ages, Christmas was a public festival, incorporating ivy, holly, and other evergreens. The annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, and card playing escalated in England, and by the 17th century the Christmas season featured lavish dinners, elaborate masks, and pageants.

In the early 17th century, religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence, and as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. After



the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, Charles II was restored to the throne. He brought with him the return of the Christmas Holiday.

In Colonial America, the separatists of New England believed strongly in their Puritan views. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. Following the American Revolution, colonists further lost interest in English customs and beliefs, including Christmas.

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Authors like Washington Irving and Charles Dickens are often credited with reviving the spirit of Christmas. Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* emphasized the



importance of charity and good will towards all humankind and showed members of Victorian society the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

As Christmas gained popularity in the United States, people began to look toward recent immigrants and churches to see how the day should be celebrated.

Consequently, over the next 100 years, customs from all over the world became a part of the traditional American Christmas celebration.