

CHRISTMAS AND ITS SONGS



THE EARLIEST SOURCE of Christmas customs is probably the Sumerian civilization which flourished over 4000 years ago.

Marduk, the chief god of Sumer, won that position by engaging in a titanic battle with Tiamat, the goddess monster who ruled the underworld kingdom of Chaos. Marduk killed her and fashioned the world from her corpse.

This world of Marduk's making had to be rejuvenated periodically. When vegetation withered and died, and leaves fell from the trees, the world was running down. Chaos was closing in to take revenge for Tiamat's death.

An elaborate festival, *Zagmuk*, was established to persuade Marduk to return to the underworld and battle Chaos for another cycle of seasons. *Zagmuk* lasted for twelve days and began with the people purifying themselves from the sins of the past year by transferring all sins to the Sumerian king, who was to die for their atonement. After his death, the king was to accompany Marduk and fight by his side for the new year. The king, however, did some transferring of his own. He selected a criminal and dressed him in regalia. Then, to make sure that Marduk would be convinced that the substitute was an authentic king, the populace worshiped him ostentatiously for several days. After his short reign, the substitute king was stripped of his regal clothes and slain.

A time of great anxiety and constant prayer followed the substitute king's death, because Marduk was locked in a mortal struggle with the demons of Chaos. Gradually, he gained the advantage. With the turn in the battle, the Sumerians abandoned themselves to celebration: Mock battles dramatized the underworld fight; bonfires blazed and wooden effigies of Tiamat were tossed into them; processions of masqueraders danced and rioted through the streets; good wishes for the new-gained year passed from friend to friend; gifts were exchanged; and everywhere, shouts of thanksgiving and praise rose to Marduk, the deliverer.

Persians and Babylonians followed the traditions of *Zagmuk* set up by the Sumerians, adding a few new touches. In one of their innovations, masters and slaves traded places during the festival, introducing much clowning and horseplay.

As the Mesopotamian civilization grew older, Marduk's character changed. He increasingly controlled the fate of men and ordained their destiny. Magic incantations for health and prosperity joined *Zagmuk*, and the people built their plans for the coming year around fortune predictions. Our New Year's resolutions likely stem from this precedent.

The chief influence of Mesopotamian religion upon Greece and Egypt was through a sun-worshipping cult developed by the Persian prophet, Mithras. Rome also reserved a prominent place for sun worship. According to the Roman Calendar, December 25 was the day the sun reached its weakest point and began to regain its strength. It was also the birthday of Mithras. Romans observed a special ritual on December 25, the *Sol Invictus*, for the sun's replenishment. Candles, representing the sun's returning power, were the symbol of the day. Thousands of them lighted houses, blinked in processions, made temples and entire cities glow.

Greece and Egypt paid scant attention to new year ceremonies. It was Rome that

appropriated the traditions of *Zagmuk* in the West, and enlarged upon them.

The Roman god, Saturn, was an agricultural deity. During his festival, *Saturnalia* (December 17 to 24), slaves lorded it over their masters, masquerading and street processions abounded, and good luck charms were favorite gifts. Obviously, these customs had crossed the Mediterranean from Mesopotamia to find a new home.

Unlike the Mesopotamians, the Romans made no attempt to fight the threatening monsters of the underworld. They were content to keep them at bay with magic charms used during *Saturnalia*. Since they refused to die in the winter, evergreen trees were a mighty symbol of life and strong protection against anything that would destroy it. *Saturnalia* saw all Roman houses decorated with evergreen boughs. *Strenae*, small cookies or fruit that warded off evil, were universally given and received as part of the celebration.

Saturnalia was much less grim and serious than *Zagmuk*. Since Saturn was god of the harvest, his holiday concentrated upon feasting, giving thanks for earth's fruitfulness, and offering prayers for her continued abundance. After the prescribed religious ceremonies (which became ever shorter and less important), the populace hurried to banquet tables to eat and carouse. Each year the observance grew more boisterous and licentious until its religious significance almost completely disappeared.

Meanwhile, far to the north of Rome, Celtic and Teutonic tribes had developed gods and rituals of their own to assure protection and assistance in the new year. Woden (Odin in Scandinavian countries), a giant fellow who wore a floppy, wide-brimmed hat and rode an incredibly swift, eight-legged horse, was their chief god. Warlike, but very wise, Woden fought against the giants in the earth that were constantly seeking to destroy his people. Later, as we shall see, Woden assumes a specific role in our celebration of Christmas.

Life was hard in the severe northern climate. Plans had to be laid carefully at the onset of the long winter to make certain that there would be enough food to last until spring. If herds were large, they had to be thinned, because they would eat too much precious stored food. Stock-slaughtering and meat-curing time offered an opportunity to invite neighbors in for a feast, to thank the gods for the past year, and to pray for another revolution of the wheel of the seasons.

The menace of the cruelly cold, long nights as well as that of the giants who might rush from the bowels of the earth at any moment and overwhelm the people demanded strong protective measures. In addition to the aid of the gods, the northmen relied heavily on magic symbols and charms. Even more than the Romans, they depended upon evergreens to shield them against their enemies. Holly, pine, bay, spruce, laurel, ivy, fir—the aid of every conceivable bush and tree of lasting green was invoked. Celtic priests, the Druids, attributed miraculous healing powers to mistletoe and included it in their sacred rituals. The light and heat of fire was also considered helpful magic. Bonfires of large logs burned during the new year observance were the forebears of the Yule log of today.



In this pagan setting, Christ made his appearance. His birthdate was hardly noted for some time, even by Christians. To them, the Resurrection was the important thing, and they expected him to return any day.

Telesphorus, the second bishop of Rome (129–138) ordained that “in the holy night of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, they do celebrate public church services, and in them solemnly sing the Angels’ Hymn, because also the same night he was declared unto the shepherds by an angel, as the truth itself doth witness.” Theophilus, who was Bishop of Caesarea during this same period, urged that “the observance or celebration of the birthday of our Lord [be held] on what day soever the 25 of December shall happen.”

There was opposition: Origen, one of the great leaders of the early church, proclaimed in 245 that it was a sin to observe Christ’s birthday as if he were an Egyptian Pharaoh. December 25 was not officially designated as Christmas and a church festival until sometime between 325 and 350.

During the sixth century, Dionysius Exiguus, a Roman monk, conducted investigations to determine the year Christ was born. It was Dionysius’ idea to divide history into two eras, B.C. and A.D., with Christ’s birth date as the separation point. He calculated that the Nativity occurred in the year 754 of the Roman calendar, and our calendar is based on his conclusion. The New Testament offers contradictory evidence in several places, and archaeological findings corroborate its statements. The year 7 B.C. (the Roman year 747) appears to be the actual year of Christ’s birth.

As the Christian faith spread, it ran headlong into the various pagan cults. Converted Romans were extremely hard to wean away from their pagan observances. Loath to give up the frivolity and feasting of *Saturnalia*, they were also afraid to ignore the prayers of *Sol Invictus*: What if the sun should become angry and refuse to return? The old gods of Greece were equally difficult to displace. Many converts played it safe and observed the rituals of both the pagan gods and Christianity.

Hateful as pagan bacchanales were to the early church leaders, no matter how hard they battled, they could not eradicate them. The best they could do was to Christianize them. Sun worship was replaced by worship of the Son of Righteousness; magic and sooth-saying gave way to reading of the Scriptures. But down through the centuries, the ribaldry, the buffoonery, and the debauchery of the old pagan rites have lingered. Nowadays, they have been relegated largely to Hallowe’en, New Year’s, and Mardi Gras, but they are still with us!

At the same time, the ascetic severity of the first Christians became tempered with human alloys. The faith developed a heart, and flesh and blood. It turned its gaze on both earth and heaven. In the forefront of this humanization was the figure of Christ himself. The stern arbiter of the last judgment was joined by the defender of the woman taken in adultery, and the man who forgave his enemies during his agony on the cross.

As interest in Christ’s earthly experiences grew, the circumstances of his birth became a major center of attention. This inevitably led to a particular interest in his mother. Mary had been considered a saint of the church for centuries, but only now did she begin to receive homage as the blessed virgin who was chosen to be the mother of God. Commenting on the virgin birth in his excellent little book, *4000 Years of Christmas*, Earl W. Count says:

It is a thought which for centuries the minds of ignorant and educated alike have striven to comprehend. How they have striven, and how in their utmost they have

yet realized that they have never quite comprehended, is written in the record of the jewel-covered Bambino in the manger which stands in the Italian churches at Christmas time; in the hymns of the Greek and the Latin churches; in the *Ave Maris Stella*, the *Stabat Mater*, the *Ave Maria*; in the quaint fancies of the carols from Bohemia, Flanders, the Tyrol; the dramatic re-enacting, at Christmastime, both in church and market-place, of the Gospel stories of the Nativity; and the many, many pictures and statues of the Madonna and Child which have come down the years to tell us how mightily a great thought had seized upon the faith of our forebears.

Christ's baptism by John the Baptist, set as occurring on January 6, was equally as significant for the early church as the Nativity. This twelfth day after Christmas had another distinction: It was the day the Wise Men arrived at Bethlehem and presented their gifts. The date, known as Epiphany, is still an important festival of the church. In many countries it climaxes the Christmas season and is the time that gifts are exchanged.

While the festival of Christmas was being developed by the church at Rome, a priest named Nicholas was serving churches in Asia Minor. As a young man, he was consecrated Archbishop of Myra, an important seacoast town. Not much is known of his life, but he was greatly venerated throughout the land and exerted a strong influence on the entire Byzantine branch of Christendom. Soon after his death on December 6, 326, he became known as Saint Nicholas. Officially, he was made patron saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, and unofficially, of all seamen, travelers, and children.

Many legends grew up about Nicholas' generosity and unselfishness. He was particularly the benefactor of poor and humble people. His many gifts were always given secretly, in the dead of night, so that the recipients would never know who gave them.

When the tribes of the north were converted to Christianity, legends of Nicholas mingled with those of Woden, the Teutonic god. The resulting figure became the Saint Nicholas who rides a white horse through central and northern Europe on December 6 and quizzes children to see if they have behaved properly during the past year. Eventually the same personality crossed the Atlantic to become the American Santa Claus.



We have briefly reviewed some of the paths by which Christmas found its place in history. But what of the music of Christmas? Where did it come from?

As with most early Christian hymns, the first Christmas hymns were probably sung to the melodies of Jewish temple hymns and psalms.

In addition to the angels' song, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, other great hymns of the early church concerned themselves with Christmas, among them *Veni Redemptor* (Come, Redeemer) attributed to Saint Ambrose, and *Corde Natus Ex Parentis* (Of the Father's Love Begotten) by Prudentius. These highly spiritual expressions were used as an integral part of the worship service.

Carols were a very different breed from the hymns. They derived from secular, pagan sources. Greeks had used them in their plays; Romans, in *Saturnalia*. They were a popular part of village festivals, weddings, and birthdays. The word *carol* originally referred to a circle dance which, for a long time, was danced without being sung.

When words were added, at first they were likely used merely as an accompaniment to the dance movements.

As the church struggled against the influences of pagan customs, she sternly barred carols from sacred services. But outside the church, Nativity carols appeared in increasing quantities and flourished. Nearly all were simple folk songs that sprang from the hearts of humble country people.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with bringing carols into the formal worship of the church. In 1223, Francis was conducting Christmas services at Greccio, in the province of Umbria. For some time, he had been seeking a way to present the concept of the Incarnation of God to his parish. On Christmas Eve, he borrowed some farm animals, collected the trappings of a stable, and placed a statue of the infant Christ in a manger filled with hay. In a cave near the ancient castle of Greccio, he arranged them to re-create the setting of the first Christmas night. By special permission of the Pope, Francis was allowed to conduct a midnight Mass before his handiwork. Friars composed and sang new, joyful songs much more akin to carols than hymns to accompany the tableau. Thus, the way was opened for the church and carols to become reconciled. Manger scenes (known as a *crèche* in France, a *presebre* in Italy, and a *nacimiento* in Spain) universally present in the Christmas observances of all Mediterranean countries and Latin America stem from Saint Francis' presentation.

Carols enjoyed further development and popularity through their connection with the mystery plays of the Middle Ages. A complex of pageantry, revelry, piety, and song, the mysteries were dramatizations of biblical stories, usually presented in conjunction with major church festivals.

Among the mysteries, two of the most favored and long-lived were the Donkey's Festival (*Fête de l'Âne*), performed for Christmas, and the Feast of Fools (*Fête de Foux*), performed for New Year's.

The Donkey's Festival, a re-enactment of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, was performed most colorfully at Beauvais and Sens in France. The donkey carrying Mary was arrayed in all the colors of the rainbow. The huge procession which surrounded and followed the family group as it wound its way through the narrow streets sang a hymn of praise to the donkey set to an old Latin hymn, *Orientis Partibus*. The text ran thus:

From Eastern lands comes the Donkey,
Beautiful and strong Donkey,
Most patient carrier of burdens.
Hee-haw, Sir Donkey, hee-haw!

The Feast of Fools was a much rowdier, more vulgar procession. Presiding over it was a "Lord of Misrule" or "Abbott of Unreason" (often the village idiot), a direct descendent of the mock king of the early Mesopotamians and leaders of the street processions of *Saturnalia*. His Lordship, mounted on a donkey and dressed as a clown or jester, was attended by a gibbering, capering retinue clad in the most ludicrous attire they could find. Unless forbidden, the procession would move to the cathedral, and proceed down the nave to the altar. There, they would present a parody Mass, including squawking motets by the "choir" and an apish devil's dance.

Carols used with the processional mysteries followed a special pattern. They began with a "burden", or refrain, sung by the spectators as members of the procession danced. A verse sung by a solo voice followed, during which the dancers rested and caught their breath. The burden was repeated, followed by another solo verse, and so on. As might be expected, the carols had many verses, each sandwiched in between the danced burdens. Nearly all were in 3/4 meter, since it lends itself to dancing. Many Spanish carols still retain the burden-verse form.

Not all mystery plays were processions. Some were performed inside the church, and many were presented on a cart divided horizontally into two decks. The lower deck was screened and served as the actors' dressing room. The upper deck formed the stage. A trapdoor was often installed between the decks, which the devil, a great favorite with audiences, used for his entrances and exits. The famous mysteries of Chester and Coventry in England were presented on carts.

A number of the medieval carols have been preserved in manuscript. Their texts are quite intellectual as well as spiritual, indicating they were probably written by clerics. Many others, however, were not written down, but were passed along from generation to generation in the true folk tradition. The topics they treat are seemingly endless. Mystical and fantastic subjects abound, for this was an era when imagination was given full sway. The age which produced the gargoyle and other fanciful creatures surrounded the manger of Bethlehem with talking animals, flocks of worshipping birds, and flowers that bloomed miraculously in the winter night.

French *Noëls*, among the oldest and most durable of carols, may have derived their name from the Latin word for birthday, *Natalis*. The first *Noëls* were supposedly an amalgamation of the songs sung around Saint Francis' manger scene and the songs of troubadours. They form an unbroken line of words and melody that has continued virtually unchanged to the present.

Noëls almost always tell a story, and this same characteristic furnished the name for the early English Ballad Carol, largely developed by wandering minstrels. Dialogues, legends, and lengthy narratives abound in both the *Noëls* and Ballad Carols.

Our strolling carolers of Christmas are part of a long tradition which extends back through the beggars of the Middle Ages to the exchanged roles of master and slave in pagan festivals. Medieval beggars roamed the streets at Christmastime singing carols to cadge alms or free portions of food and drink. In England, Yule serenaders came to be known as Waits, and they were often rewarded with an invitation to enter the warm house and have a cup of Wassail (hot spiced ale or wine). Only recently has caroling come to be a way of extending charity than of asking it.

The Protestant Reformation resulted in a sharp reduction in secular, boisterous observances of Christmas. The German chorales of Luther and Bach brought the ceremonies back into the church and tied music closely to religious texts. Protestantism asked that Christmas songs avoid secular subjects and remain reverent, which was somewhat of a return to the spirit of the early Christian hymns. Joyful hymns were welcomed, but they should not stray from a scriptural and sacred context. The universal emphasis on congregational singing led to more widespread familiarity with Christmas hymns, and the combining of folk melodies with sacred words that occurred in many of them increased their popularity.

The rise of Puritanism brought the greatest opposition to carols, and to the entire

tradition of Christmas. The Puritan attitude was set forth by the clergyman Edmund Calamy in a sermon preached in the House of Lords on Christmas Day, 1644:

This day is commonly called Christmas-day, a day that has heretofore been much abused in superstition and profaneness. It is not easy to say whether the superstition has been the greater, or the profaneness. . . There is no way to reform it, but by dealing with it as Hezekiah did with the brazen serpent. This year God, by His providence, has buried it in a feast, and I hope it will never rise again.

In 1645, observance of all festival days, including Christmas, was abolished by Cromwell's Parliament. During the twelve years the ban held, the spirit of the carol of the middle ages sickened and died in England. Some hardy specimens survived, such as *The First Nowell* and *The Boar's Head*, but not many.

The United States, closely allied in its early years with Puritanism, spurned most carols, and restricted itself to singing and writing hymns.

In countries not associated with the Reformation or Puritanism, carols continued to be sung, but even there interest in them was waning, and few new ones appeared.

Fortunately, recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in carols. Collections such as the *Oxford Book of Carols* have brought many of them back into favor. English-speaking people are becoming more aware of the rich and varied musical heritage of Christmas from other countries: the dance carols of Scandinavia, the shepherd carols of the Slavic countries, the German lullaby carols, the *posadas* and *villancicos* of Spanish lands, and other gems that form a constantly expanding treasure-trove. They return to add to the joy and brightness of Christmas, making it glow again with the imagination and fantasy that welled from the hearts of simple folk offering their adoration and love to the Babe of Bethlehem.

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In Middle English pertiche "partridge," was derived from Perdix, one of Athene's sacred kings, thrown in the seas from a tower, and carried to heaven in the form of a bird by his goddess. He was the partridge, she the pear tree. Athena was worshipped in Boeotia as Once, the Pear Tree, mother of all pear trees. Perdix, whose name originally meant "the Lost One," was a form of Vishnu-Narayana, called Lord of the Pear Trees in his holy city of Badrinath in the Himalayas (from badri, "pear tree"). The pear tree had a feminine-masculine significance through Eurasia. It was also sacred to Hera, whose oldest image at Heraeum in Mycenae was made of pear wood. European peasants considered the pear a favorite "life-tree" for a girl. In Russia pears were used as protective charms for cows. It seems that when the partridge in a pear tree was made into a Christmas carol the symbol of Christ was substituted for Perdix.