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## The Merriest Days of the Year: Unearthing the Pagan Origins of Christmas

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by *Kate Prendergast*

*The religious and cultural traditions that hold sway in the modern world have arisen from the rich loam of ancient faiths and rituals whose origins reach back into the murk of prehistory. But an abiding connection to the great cycle of the seasons provides an element of continuity to practices that began on pagan altars and can still be found, in transfigured form, in the homes of Christmas revelers today.*

Among the vast corpus of ancient Greek myths, the story of Chronos, Father of Time, tells of how time itself came into existence. In later Roman mythology, the god that was most explicitly equated with Chronos was Saturn. And like many of the great pagan mystery cycles, both Chronos and Saturn were associated with a set of rituals - the *Kronia* and the *Saturnalia* - that were structured primarily around the seasons. The same is true of the cult of Mithra, which spread rapidly across the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries CE, and exactly reproduced the logic of these other seasonal rites.

If we explore these classical mystery cycles from the perspective of *seasonality*, the development of the Christian festival of Christmas should not be seen as the heralding of a new religious era. Rather, it appears to be a restatement of the ritual logic of these late antique pagan mysteries.

Tracing the evidence for such ritual continuities has major implications for our

understanding of the development of Christianity as a world religion, for it puts this development in the context of the far older religious practices from which it emerged. It may also reveal some of the deeper elements of continuity by which religious practice has been - and continues to be - organized.

## **Chronos: Myth and Ritual**

In Greek mythology, Chronos was born from Uranus, god of the sky, and Gaia, goddess of the earth. Gaia, seeking vengeance against Uranus for his mistreatment of their children, armed Chronos with a sickle, with which he castrated his father. The blood from Uranus' bleeding phallus fell into the sea, from which was born Aphrodite, goddess of love.

In usurping his father, Chronos was now lord of the earth. But his dying parents prophesied that history would repeat itself, and that one of Chronos' sons would dethrone him. Because of this prophecy, Chronos swallowed his children as soon as his wife Rhea gave birth to them. When Zeus was born, however, she deceived Chronos, and instead of giving him the child, gave him a stone wrapped in clothes. Zeus grew up and sought to usurp his father, giving him a poisoned potion that forced Chronos to vomit up all his children - Hades, Posiedon, Hestia, Hera and Demeter - unharmed, and also the stone. Zeus then overthrew Chronos; in some versions he castrated him. Chronos was banished, and Zeus, now lord of the Olympian gods, placed the stone at Delphi, to become an object of veneration.

The Chronos story represents an origin-myth because it tells both of the birth of the Olympian gods, and of the birth of time - of the "chronology" derived from Chronos. However, if this myth ushers in time, it does so because it defies categories. As such, it is a complex, deeply layered and disturbing myth, encompassing both stark cruelty and utopian blessing. Chronos presides over a time both of child cannibalism, gender inversion and violent disorder, and of a time outside time; a mythical golden age of bliss and plenty. When Chronos is finally vanquished, he presides over the Elysian Fields, the home of the dead, the Greek version of heaven.

Ancient cult sites dedicated to Chronos date back to at least circa 600 BCE. In some cases - at Rhodes, for example - Kronian rituals were associated with human sacrifice. In others, as at Attica, the festival appears to have been joyous and peaceful.

Perhaps most significantly, the Greek rituals dedicated to Chronos were practiced

on a *seasonal* basis. Kronia rituals were associated with the harvest. The Athenian Kronia in particular took place in the first months of the year, and seems to have been a sort of New Year celebration. The rituals involved carnivalesque feasts of exultation, abundance and role reversal: their special feature was that masters and slaves ate together; and in some cases masters even served their slaves. While these practices echoed elements of the mythological story, it was perhaps their seasonal structure that had real significance in defining the festival as a sacred time - a redemptive period set apart from ordinary life, in which relationships were re-made and deep meaning in the world rediscovered.

## **Saturn, Mithra and Sol**

In Rome, the god most explicitly identified with Chronos was Saturn, and the Saturnalia was recognised as a festival almost identical to the Kronia of Classical Athens. The Saturnalia formed the heart of a set of winter rituals that were celebrated across the winter solstice and into the New Year. The Saturnalia itself began on December 17, and lasted for a week. It was widely recognized as the most popular festival of the Roman year. Cattalus described the Saturnalia as "the merriest festival of the year," "the best of days." Like the Kronia, the Saturnalia was a ritual typified above all by role reversal, in which slaves were given temporary liberty to do as they liked, and dined before their masters, and a mock king was enthroned who presided over feasts and amusements. Gifts were also exchanged between friends and family, and the time was spent eating, drinking and playing games.

The New Year festival that complemented the Saturnalia was the *Compitalia* or *Kalends*. Although the Saturnalia was the more ancient and important of the two, Libanius, writing in the fourth century CE, describes the Kalends as "celebrated everywhere, as far as the limits of the Roman Empire extend." Like the Saturnalia, the Kalends was typified by feasting, gift-exchange, masquerade and role reversal. It was both the well-established, popular nature of the Saturnalia-Kalends in Roman Europe, and its twin-peaked solstice-New Year structure that formed a basis for the emergence of the Christian festival of Christmas.

If the Saturnalia-Kalends, like the Kronia, were winter rituals that formed part of the popular and public festivals of the Greek and Roman worlds, they were complemented from the first centuries CE onwards by the cult of Mithra: one of the last great mystery cults of the ancient world. Mithra was an ancient Indo-Iranian god whose existence can be traced back at least to the second millennium BCE. The Indo-Iranian Mithra was a god of light - of the sun - a bull slayer, and

a savior figure, and it was these characteristics that were elaborated in the esoteric Roman cult that developed across the Empire between the first and third centuries CE.

The archaeological evidence for Mithraic cult practices in the Roman world are abundant, and over 400 Mithraic "find-spots" have been identified in the archaeological record. Most of these were meeting places: the underground *Mithraea*, also known as caves, where initiates met to practice the cult. A thousand dedicatory inscriptions to Mithra have also been found, and over a thousand pieces of sculpture and some frescos suggest an extraordinarily rich sacred art associated with the cult.

The three central Mithraic motifs depict Mithra's life cycle: Mithra's birth from the cosmic egg or rock; Mithra slaying the bull; and Mithra's meal with Sol celebrating these cosmic acts. As scholars have demonstrated, the esoteric logic by which these images were structured - and the ritual stages of initiation they represent - are primarily seasonal and astrological in nature. Mithra was born on the winter solstice, and slew the bull - the act of salvation - on the spring equinox. It was these mythic events of birth, sacrifice and salvation that were evoked in Mithraic ritual, in the initiations and meals celebrated in the *Mithraea*. Thus at the heart of the Mithraic cult is a seasonally-based and astrological mythic and ritual cycle: Mithra's mythic life cycle was structured primarily by the winter solstice and spring equinox, and lived out again each year in such seasonally-based rituals.

Finally, there was a further winter-based cult that spread to the Roman Empire in the third century CE. Like Mithraism, the *Deus Sol Invictus* cult had an eastern, Syrian and possibly pre-Jewish Canaanite origin; and it was also a cult of the invincible sun god, centred on the winter solstice. However, while Mithraic practitioners were principally associated with the Roman army, *Deus Sol Invictus* was disseminated in Rome as a cult of the emperor and the state.

The *Deus Sol Invictus* cult was first imported to Rome in 219 CE. By 274, it was proclaimed the dominant religion of the Roman state by the emperor Aurelian. It was during the reign of Constantine the Great (306-37 CE) that the cult of *Deus Sol Invictus* reached extraordinary heights, so that Constantine's reign was even spoken of as a Sun Emperorhip. The heart of the cult centered on the celebration of the *Dies Natalis Invicti* on December 25, and it was this date on which Constantine subsequently based the date of Christmas.

The variety of mid-winter festivals in the Roman world may have reflected differences in class and status; however, there is much deeper evidence for the existence of an ongoing process of religious syncretism, with festivals slowly merging in their seasonal and ideological similarities.

## The Development of Christmas

By the fourth century CE, therefore, there existed in Roman Europe a combination of winter solstice festivals which reflected and in many ways embodied the complex logic that can be identified in seasonally structured ritual. If it was the ancient and seasonal nature of such winter festivals that provided the basis for a series of combinations and syncretic associations in the late pagan period, it was precisely through the continuation of such syncretic processes that these festivals came to form the basis of the Christian festival of Christmas.

Although the Gospels say nothing about the date of Christ's birth, in the Eastern Church a tradition gradually evolved of giving the Nativity a mid-winter date, and by the fourth century CE it was universally established in the East that Christ's birth fell on January 6. However, the Western Church never recognized January 6 as the date of the Nativity, and instead chose to synchronize the Christian festival with existing Western traditions. In the 350s, Constantine established the date of Christ's birth as falling on December 25 - thus simultaneously incorporating the Saturnalia, the official Julian date for the solstice, and the symbolism of Mithra's birth into Christianity .

Moreover, as the Christian festival developed over medieval and modern Europe, the core practices of gift-exchange, feasting, carnival and role-reversal, which were such an enduring and popular part of the Kronia and Saturnalia-Kalends, continued, indicating the degree to which Christmas represented a Christian appropriation of a much longer-lived tradition. Perhaps as significantly, the establishment of Christmas echoed the ritual logic of Mithraism - with the savior-figure of Christianity born on the winter solstice and enacting the act of sacrifice and salvation on the spring equinox: a seasonally-based mythic cycle which continues to be re-enacted in Christian ritual on an annual basis.

Despite the many apparent shifts in religious belief and practice in late classical culture, it is the use of *seasonality* to demarcate a time of mythic and ritual significance that remains one of the most remarkably consistent features among the religious practices outlined here. In revealing the deeper structures by which ritual practices maintained such consistency, the seasonal structure of ritual may

in turn suggest the degree to which these changes were more apparent than real.

This may indicate the degree to which assumptions about religious change in the West are still influenced by the Christian claim to a redemption event that is both historically grounded and unique. However, the evidence for repetition in seasonally-structured rituals not only reveals the earlier (pagan and ultimately prehistoric) contexts out of which the world religions emerged, but also that this continuity is one that world religions in general, and Christianity in particular, has sought to obscure.

The evidence for such continuities requires new paradigms, new ways of thinking about and exploring the nature of religion. It may be that archaeology, with its focus on the deep structures of the past, and anthropology, with its ability to recognize the links between religious philosophy and practice, can contribute as much as traditional theology to our understanding of religious beliefs and practices, and of how they have evolved over time.

### Further Reading

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