

A brief history of Christmas

Many of our Christmas traditions were celebrated centuries before Christ was born. Giving gifts, the Yule log, carol singing, church processions and the 12 days of Christmas can all be traced back to the early Mesopotamians.

Sacaea, celebrated by the Persians and Babylonians, was a similar festival during which slaves and masters would exchange roles.

Early Europeans believed in evil spirits and as the dark days of winter approached, special rituals and celebrations were held to drive out evil and welcome back the sun.

During winter in Scandinavia the sun would disappear for many days. When it returned a Yuletide celebration was held and a special feast served around a burning Yule log fire.

The Roman's celebrated their god Saturn with a festival called Saturnalia which ran from 17 to 24 December.

Celebrations included masquerades in the streets, festive meals, visits to friends and the exchange of good-luck gifts. The Romans used decorations of garlands of laurel and green trees lit with candles. The fun and festivities in honour of a pagan god were frowned on by the early Christians who wanted to keep the birth of Christ a solemn, religious festival.

Some theories claim that the Christmas celebration was invented by the Christians to compete against the pagan December celebrations. Eventually the church succeeded in integrating some of the merriment, lights