

Makings of Christmas

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A word on origins

Our current Christmas traditions owe their own nativity, in perhaps equal measure, to pagan rituals and Christian embellishments, innovations and substitutions. The celebration of Christmas on December 25 dates to approximately 336 A.D. From its first appearance in Rome, the observance of Christmas spread rapidly throughout western civilization, aided and abetted by the conversion of the barbarian tribes, who fleshed out the ascetic monasticism that had already tempered the merriment and abandon of heathen festivities.

Such observances as the Scandinavian Yule, says Clement Miles, suggest a sensual element added to Christmas by the primitive peoples who had just begun to discover Christianity at about the same time the festival of Christmas was established.

My Swedish husband's traditional Christmas Eve feast, I learn, originated in the winter solstice rituals of the Nordic/Teutonic tribes just coming into contact with proselytizing early Christians. Christmas feasting, intended to secure prosperity, can be traced back to sacrificial banquets, I muse, while contemplating heaping platters of pickled herring, poached fish balls and Gouda cheese, washed down with *akvavit*.

"How could the Church make a feast of the secular New Year; what mattered to her the world of time? Her eye was fixed upon the eternal realities — the great drama of the Redemption," wrote Miles. "Christmas and New Year's Day — the two festivals stood originally for the most opposed of principles."

The liturgical rites and devotions of Christmas, as Miles suggested, commemorate "the wonder of the Incarnation — God in man made manifest" — while the French Noel, or birthday of Christ, denotes the less mystical, more human aspects of Christ's coming. In this Christmas of popular tradition, the infant Jesus becomes a real child rather than a wholly abstract Redeemer, and the Nativity is mirrored in caroling, creches, feasting and the religious dramas of the later medieval era.

The early Church took a dim view of the Roman New Year's celebration of the Kalends, a day of wild revelry and even licentiousness still echoed by our own anniversary of *auld lang syne*. Despite the efforts of the Christian monks to eliminate from the observance of Christ's birth any legacy from the Kalends and the Saturnalia (celebrated by the ancient Romans during the winter solstice, Dec. 17-23), more than a trace of earthbound jubilation persisted.

"The struggle between the ascetic principle of self-mortification, world-renunciation, absorption in a transcendent ideal, and the natural human striving toward earthly joy and well-being, is, perhaps, the most interesting aspect of the history of Christianity," theorized Miles, who saw abundant evidence of the conflict in the permutations of Christmas throughout the monastic period.

As the Middle Ages progressed into the latter part of the 13th century, the asceticism of the monastic age began to subside in favor of a merrier Yuletide rite "suited to the instincts of ordinary humanity," wrote Miles, who credits the Catholic Church with preserving the life-affirming characteristics Christmas has assimilated over the centuries.

The early Latin hymns that had predominated since the fourth century began to be augmented by vernacular Christmas songs such as the poems of the Franciscan monk Jacopone da Todi (1228-1306), who wrote his joyous carols in Italian. The fact that Jacopone was a Franciscan was perhaps more noteworthy than the lyrics and timbre of his music. The apostolate of St. Francis of Assisi marked what Miles considered a democratizing of religion, an outreach to the masses from the cloister, which formerly had gleaned its members primarily from among the sons of the feudal aristocracy.

The first crib or manger (known also as a *praesepe*) made its appearance in Rome during the 11th century. Lavish examples, fashioned of precious stones and metals, could be found all over Italy by St. Francis' time, when the simple friar resolved to construct a more fitting memorial to the Christ Child's humble birth. At Greccio, St. Francis constructed his manger of wood and thatch, populating it with live animals. A nobleman who saw the realistic Nativity scene is said to have written: "Poverty was exalted, humility commended and of Greccio there was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem."

Early Franciscanism introduced what Miles referred to as "that 'carol spirit' which is the most winning part of the Christian Christmas, the spirit which, while not forgetting the divine side of the Nativity, yet delights in its simple humanity, the spirit that links the Incarnation to the common life of the people, that brings human tenderness into religion."

Technically, perhaps, carols should not be sung until Christmas Day itself, in order to preserve the hushed spirit of contemplation that accompanies the universal "shepherds' watch" for the miraculous star. Carols, indeed, are believed to have originated in 12th-century France, where the term denoted the amorous singing and dancing that hailed the vernal equinox.

Although the medieval Church frowned on the practice, 14th-century Germans often engaged in choral dancing around a facsimile of the Christ Child's cradle.

Yet how difficult it is to disparage the joy and simplicity of the genuine *noel*, the religious poem first set to music in 15th-century France. The reverent spirit of these simple melodic offerings — as well as that of such Latin legacies from France as *Adeste fidelis* — lives on in our modern-day religious carols.

My son still prefers singing "Silent Night" or "Away in a Manger" to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." And "O, Holy Night" almost succeeds in engaging more of his attention at this time of year than "Walk Like an Egyptian." (The former might have a better chance at topping his personal hit parade, I'll confess, if I could only sing it more appealingly.)

This past Sunday, the choir of Holy Trinity Church celebrated the season with a service of lessons and carols that recalled the prayers and

Home and hearth

A peculiar charm of the northern Christmas lies in the thought of the cold barned out, the home made a warm, gay place in contrast with the cheerless world outside," wrote Clement Miles in the conclusion of *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*.

Having grown up in a latitude so temperate that children could go outdoors in shirtsleeves to ride their new Christmas bicycles on December 25, I've never acclimated myself to winter this much closer to the polar ice cap. "Barring out the cold" seems to me a far more sensible pastime than cross-country skiing, particularly when the alternative includes hot mulled wine, Swedish coffee bread and a cozy evening spent reading or playing *Scrabble* by the flickering light of the Christmas tree.

Americans, on the whole, are an excessive lot. We tend to eat too much, drink too much and spend lavishly on Christmas gifts and festive trappings. For the affluent among us, the brimming cornucopia of our pioneer heritage spills over into a harvest of holiday plenty that often translates into conspicuous consumption.

songs sung by monks "during the dark hours of Christmas." Parish publicists promised "a quiet and beautiful setting" in which audience members could contemplate the significance of the Nativity from a monastic perspective.

Freelancer Jeanne Gehret, who pondered her own family's Christmas celebration during a recent pilgrimage to the Abbey of the Genesee at Piffard, comments on the legacy of the cloistered life, which has altered almost imperceptibly over the centuries to evolve into what it is today (see story, pages 6-7). The monks' celebration of the anniversary of Christ's birth, by Gehret's account, retains its mystical reverence and simplicity.

In the upstate countryside surrounding the abbey, it's easy to imagine the snowlit silence of Christmas in a simpler age.

Our modern repertoire of Christmas customs is a peculiar jumble of referents from different cultures and religious traditions. Even though we venture out to attend church, bring home the Christmas tree and shop for gifts, a significant proportion of American Yuletide preparation centers on homebound activities culled from a variety of sources. Handed down to us from sometimes obscure European beginnings are such traditional holiday pursuits as decorating home and hearth, baking, feasting and — when we stand still long enough to remember — prayer and reflection.

The ever-popular Christmas tree is of German origin, a legacy of the German *Wemacht* (sacred night). Although evergreens had always been brought into northern European homes as symbols of the life nearly eclipsed by severe

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Cribs, cradles and creches in Christian tradition



Jeff Goulding/Courier Journal

Under the Christmas tree, on a table or the fireplace mantel, the manger scene has been a part of family Christmas decorations for generations. While the tree itself originated in Germany, the manger scene developed in Southern European countries. Both of these decorative devices have been used since the 16th century, but the traditions from which they were derived are much older.

The Christmas crib — known in various cultures as the manger, *creche*, *presepio*, *krippe*, and *nacimiento*, has an ancient and complex heritage. This visualization of the birth of Christ stems from the first renderings of the Nativity found on sarcophagi of the 4th century. In the 6th century, a small chapel in Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore was devoted to crib relics for pilgrim worship. Free-standing carved figures of the Holy Family were added to this display in 1291, and were probably the first figures of their kind.

St. Francis of Assisi created a live tableau in 1223 in the forest of Greccio, a village near Assisi. He placed a child in a straw-filled feeding trough, added animals to the scene and recounted to his audience the Gospel story of Jesus' birth.

The construction and arrangement of the creche was a devotional practice of the Jesuits, who in the early 1560s built the first examples in Coimbra, Portugal, and in Prague. Artisans created figures of great realism from stone, wood and terra cotta. Originally, the scene consisted of only the figures of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Later, the three kings were added, and eventually animals, an angel and shepherds became components of the manger scene.

It has become a tradition in nativity scenes that the replica of the baby Jesus be inserted into the scene on Christmas Eve. Traditionally also, it is not until the Feast of the

Epiphany or Twelfth Night, that the three kings are added.

The first-known home creche belonged to the Dutchess of Amalfi, who commissioned its creation in the early 1560s for her Christmas celebration. Creche building soon became a practice in many homes, especially in Genoa, Sicily and Naples. By 1670, the leading families of Naples held open houses for the viewing of their elaborate presepios. In 1750, the depictions reached great artistic heights. At Christmastime, artists would be invited into the homes of prosperous homeowners to create unique and special creches. In time, the concept spread throughout Europe, as Italian artisans sent their works overland by way of peddlars and travelers.

Examples of some of these earliest creches are in the collections of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, Germany, and in the National Museum in Naples. A collection of 140 beautifully garbed and costumed figures in Renaissance style are assembled each holiday season at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The 12- to 15-inch figures are displayed in traditional arrangement to enhance a 30-foot Christmas tree.

The Nativity scene in the photograph at left — a life-size replica of a 17th century European Nativity scene — is from *The Journey to Bethlehem* display in the Ward Gallery of Sibley's downtown store. Sibley's commissioned the display in 1978 as a special Christmas gift for the Rochester community. It has continued to draw thousands of visitors in each of the eight years it has been displayed.

The figures were designed and crafted by the world-renowned theatrical costumers Bermans and Nathans, Ltd., of London. The costumes were carefully researched and sewn from hand-loomed fabrics, using real furs and pure silks.

The display continues through December 27 during Sibley's regular store hours.