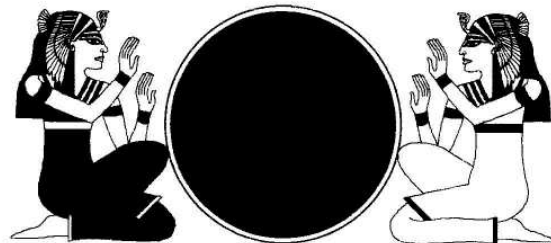


Temple of the Dark Moon



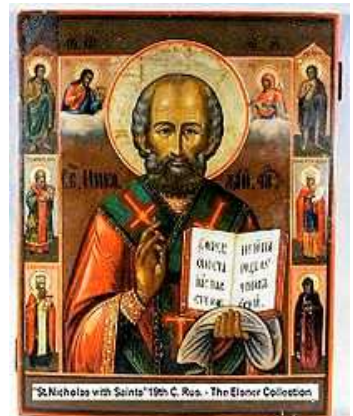
In Search of the Real Santa Claus

By Frances Billinghamurst © 2004
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"Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung in the chimney with care,
In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there."

("The Night before Christmas" - Clement C Moore 1779-1863)

While Christmas is an important festival of the Christian calendar in that it remembers the birth of Jesus, in the modern celebrations there is another equally important person associated with this time of the year. This person, without whom Christmas would have little meaning for some people, could very well have a hidden Pagan past. I am talking about that jolly, white bearded man in the red suit who secretly visits us in the middle of the night, leaving gifts underneath the trees as his calling card, and who has been delighting and tantalising children for generations - Santa Claus.



How Santa Claus came about combines both Christian and Pagan beliefs. For Christians, Santa is said to have been based on St Nicholas, a 4th century bishop of Myra (modern Turkey), whose piousness resulted in him generosity giving his wealth away in the form of gifts to those in need. Stories tell of how St Nicholas dropped bags of gold down chimneys or threw them through windows where they landed in the stockings hung from the fireplace to dry. One of St Nicholas's miracles was bringing back to life three murdered boys, and it was because of this act that he became the patron saint of children. The Dutch referred to St Nicholas as "Sinter Klaas", and it is a corruption

of this pronunciation when the Dutch came to America that has led to him being known as Santa Claus.

But is the Santa Claus, who we allow into our houses in the middle of the night, really St Nicholas? Do we honestly believe that a pious Christian saint would ride through the night and surround himself by a horde of strange magickally possessed creatures?

Interestingly, there are stories that make reference to St Nicholas riding through the sky on a horse. Some even mention that he is accompanied by an elf, Black Peter, who whips the naughty children. But I cannot help but wonder why a Christian saint would be surrounded by otherworldly characters unless, of course, there are other associations with possibly pre-Christian legends, involved in the story of who Santa Claus really is. And you need to look no further than mythology to find evidence of this.

Santa Claus rides through the skies similar to other sky-riding Gods in pre-Christian times such as Odin and his son, Thor, from Norse mythology, and Kronos or Saturn, from Greek or Roman myths. These Gods gave us the basis for many of Santa's distinctive characteristics.



"Odin Rides to Hel" (1908) by W.G. Collingwood

Odin is the leader of the Norse Gods known as the Aesir. He was the God of war, poetry, wisdom, and death. From his high seat, Hlidskialf, he could see all over the world. Odin is probably best known for sacrificing himself by hanging on the world tree, the Yggdrasil, in order to obtain the knowledge of the runes. Odin also sacrificed an eye in order to drink from the Well of Mimir which bestowed great knowledge. Odin is depicted as an old one-eyed man, with a long grey beard and wearing a wide brimmed hat down low over his face to conceal his one-eyed visage.

Thor, Odin's son, is the God of Thunder and would ride around Middle Earth in his wagon drawn by two goats. He was the foremost God of the common man, being widely worshipped and associated with fertility. Thor also lent his name to a day of the week, Thursday, and he is associated with the Roman God Jupiter, and Greek Zeus, all being Gods who threw lightning bolts.

The Greek God Kronos (Romanised as Saturn), was known as "Grandfather Time", and who is also depicted as an old man with a long beard. In ancient Greece, Kronos was celebrated at yearly festivals during which the normal social order was overturned with masters inviting slaves to dinner. The Roman equivalent to these festivals, the Saturnalia, or Brumalia, was celebrated in December. These festivals are believed to be the forerunner of our Christmas festivities.

There are a number of other rather intriguing characters that appear to be rather similar to our beloved Santa Claus. They also possess otherworldly characteristics and are known the bearers of gifts. In Scandinavia a goblin-like grandfather character known as Tomte Gubbe visits families on Christmas eve. As he had supernatural powers, his goodwill has to be earned and a bowl of porridge as well as some fresh milk was often left out for him, as well as other gifts that included clothing, tobacco and even alcohol. In Italian, there is a spritely grandmother or witch like character known as the La Befana who appears on the eve of 6

January, the day of the Epiphany, when the three kings were said to bring gifts for Jesus. On this day the La Befana rides out on her broomstick, carrying a sack full of presents and sweet delights for both children and adults. Like Santa, she comes down the chimney where stockings are hung in order to collect her gifts - chocolates and sweets for those who have been good, and pieces of coal for those who have not.



An 1881 illustration by Thomas Nast who helped to create the modern image of Santa Claus

Our modern today image of a rotund Santa Claus comes to us from America, when between 1860 and 1880 Thomas Nast illustrated a series of Christmas editions for the magazine "Harper's" (right). Then, in 1931, rather than the elf like character mentioned in Moore's poem, illustrations for Coca-Cola appeared with Santa was now full human-sized. But his otherworldly connection still remains with his elf workers and magickal sleigh.

So, who will come calling this Christmas time, bring delight to our children? Will it be the jolly man in red, the kind grandmotherly witch, a Sky God or the pious Christian Saint? As long as this mysterious midnight caller leaves his token gifts, I really do not think his strongest believers would care.

About the Author:

Frances has been a student of metaphysics and the occult for most of her life, with her formal training commencing in 1993. She is trained in both ceremonial magick and Alexandrian Wicca, and has been initiated into the Alexandrian Wiccan tradition.

Frances founded the Temple of the Dark Moon in 1999 to provide accurate information on Paganism (in particular Wicca and Wytchcraft. For a period of six years from 2000 Frances was the secretary for the Pagan Alliance Inc (SA) and worked closely with both the SA Police and Attorney General with respect to changes in legislation.

In 2003 she was invited to speak at the New Zealand Pagan Fest where she also led the opening ritual with Chief Druid, Philip Carr-Gomm.

Frances regularly writes for Australia's number one spiritual lifestyle magazine "Insight" and her articles also appearing in over 10 separate publications around the world including the 2008 Llewellyn's Witch's Calendar. Frances has appeared in the "Sunday Mail", the "Messenger" and the "Melbourne Age" with respect to being a Wytch.

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