

ROME, CHRISTMAS AND THE SUN GOD

A brief look at pre-Christian antecedents of Christmas in the Roman world



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Christmas is one of the most popular festivities throughout the world. It has become so much part of our culture that we cannot imagine our "calendar" without it... But things have not always been the way they are now so it may be interesting to see how they developed.

EARLY CELEBRATIONS OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

First of all, the commemoration of Christ's birth became an independent feast only in the fourth century when it was separated from the Epiphany (the Magi's visit to Jesus, ie, the pagan recognition of Christ's divinity). In the early Christian Church, in fact, the Birth of Christ, the Adoration of the Magi and the Theophany (the manifestation of Christ's divinity at his baptism) were all celebrated together on 6 January.

The Cronografo of 354, containing, among other things, lists of Roman feasts, of consuls, city prefects, and burial dates of Roman bishops and martyrs, is the first written evidence that Christ's Nativity was celebrated on 25 December and that it marked the beginning of the liturgical year in Rome from 336. Some scholars even believe that this celebration was first established around 300, possibly not in Rome, but in North Africa.

INFLUENTIAL PAGAN PRACTICES

It is certain that in Rome the institution and celebration of Christmas was strongly influenced by pre-existing pagan practices. Since 45 BC, Romans used to celebrate the winter solstice (from Latin *sol stitium*, ie, sun standstill) on 25 December, when the duration of daylight first begins to increase. All ancient religions were indeed very sensitive to the movement of the sun and the other celestial bodies, which were fundamental for all human activities (not only agriculture, but also war and peace, social organisation, etc.) since they determined the change of seasons and, thus, the whole cycle of life. This is shown in Greco-Roman art as well as in some ancient Jewish synagogues (eg, the zodiac of Beth Alpha synagogue). Representations of the sun-god Helios/Apollo, personifications of Seasons and seasonal activities (such as harvesting putti) were indeed quite widespread.

HELIOS/SOL INVICTUS

One of the most common theories is that the Christmas festivity originated from the pagan feast of Sol Invictus (the undefeated sun). This god counted among his many adepts the first Christian emperor, Constantine, whose syncretistic tendencies (ie, melding the traditions of various faiths) are well known. It is not surprising that the ceremony of dedication of Constantinople in 330 was half-pagan, half-Christian: the chariot of the sun-god was set in the market square with the Cross

of Christ over its head, while the Kyrie Eleison (Greek for 'Lord have mercy' and a liturgical rite) was sung.

As a matter of fact, Romans had developed a local Sun cult much earlier (at least from the first century BC, according to written evidence), which was centred on the Quirinal hill but did not have any preferential day for its festivities. This local cult was replaced in the second century AD by Oriental sun cults, namely Mithraism and Sol Invictus Elagabal. Neither of them, however, had a public celebration day on the winter solstice. Apparently, it was only in 274 with the Emperor Aurelian that 25 December became the day dedicated to Sol Invictus, whose cult, in the meanwhile, had been reformed and "Romanised" as an attempt at religious "monotheism" unifying the various cults diffused throughout the empire.

"THE SUN OF JUSTICE"

However, the reason why Christians adopted a day which had such strong "solar" connotations for the Birth of Christ is not merely linked to the cult of Sol Invictus. There are biblical references that justify these developments. Early Christians attributed to Christ the words of the Old Testament's prophet Malachi: "But for you who fear my name, the Sun of justice will rise with healing in his rays (Ml 3:20)". In a Christian text of an unknown author (Pseudo-Cyprian) called De pascha computus of 243, drawing a parallel between the creation of the world and the events of Christ's life, we read: "O how admirable and divine is the providence of the Lord, that on that day on which the sun was made on the same day was Christ born, the 5th of the Kalends of April, the fourth day of the week, and so rightly did the prophet Malachi say to the people: "the sun of righteousness shall rise upon you, with healing in his wings". Despite the fact that the date for Christ's nativity was not considered to be 25 December, but 28 March (25 March, ie, the Spring equinox, was thought to indicate the first day of creation; the sun was created on the fourth day according to Genesis), the comparison between Christ and the sun was clearly stated. Christ was greeted as the Sun of righteousness, the beginning of a new era, and his resurrection was associated with the dawn. He was the Saviour and the Lord of the universe, the Light and Life of the whole creation. This dimension of Christian worship is shown, for example, in the third century mosaic of the grottoes under St. Peter's Basilica, on the ceiling of the tomb of the Julii, where Christ is represented with a radiated crown as the sun-god Helios/Sol Invictus riding in his chariot (see photo).

Thus, Christmas is the celebration of Christ the Sun of the world, in a moment of the year when the sun starts "growing" again, and the darkness slowly makes room for the light... Nature and religion, astrology and liturgy are perfectly combined. Once again, early Christians anchored their faith in the "instinctive" and creative intelligence of the many generations and cultures that had preceded them.

Top
A pagan representation of Helios/Sol Invictus, Museo alle Terme

Right
Christ wearing the radiated crown of the Sun, Tomb of the Julii, Vatican Necropolis

