

Tales of Times Forgotten

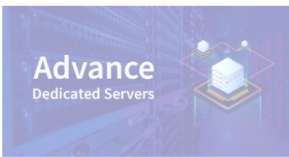
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The Origins of the Christmas Tree



Spencer McDaniel

December 5, 2018

Bible, Christmas, Classics, Current events, Debunking, Early Modern Period, Holidays, Middle Ages, Misconceptions, Origins

Ancient Rome, Bible, Christmas, Christmas trees, Saturnalia

Decorating Christmas trees every December is a time-honored western holiday tradition, one that almost everyone has fond memories of. [According to the USA Today](#), in December 2017, approximately 95 million households had Christmas trees in the United States alone. Strangely, though, few people actually know where this tradition originally comes from and most people who *think* they know where it comes from have been misinformed. Decorating Christmas trees is not nearly as old of a tradition as many accounts would lead one to believe.

An ancient Canaanite custom?

Over the years, in the place of accurate history, an elaborate folk narrative has grown up claiming that Christmas trees are part of some kind of age-old pre-Christian tradition that dates back millennia. In reality, there is no



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historical evidence that Christmas trees are nearly that old; we have no evidence that would lead us to believe they date back any earlier than the 1400s, but this has not stopped people from trying to find evidence for Christmas trees as an ancient pagan custom.

Some groups of Protestant fundamentalists love to cite [Jeremiah 10:1–5](#) as evidence that Christmas trees are an ancient Canaanite custom explicitly prohibited by the Bible. Here is the full passage:

“Hear the word that the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord:
Do not learn the way of the nations,
or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens;
for the nations are dismayed at them.
For the customs of the peoples are false:
a tree from the forest is cut down,
and worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan;
people deck it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so that it cannot move.
Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,
and they cannot speak;
they have to be carried,
for they cannot walk.
Do not be afraid of them,
for they cannot do evil,
nor is it in them to do good” (NRSV).

The fact is, though, that this passage is not talking about Christmas trees at all. (Notice, for instance, that Jeremiah never mentions anything about evergreens.) In reality, this passage is talking about the Israelites fashioning idols, as in *cult statues*, from wood. Notice that Jeremiah says, “worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan.” This line makes perfect sense if we are talking about cult statues, because cult statues have to be carved by artisans. Christmas trees, though, are not carved; they are merely decorated as they are.

Likewise, it hardly makes sense at all why Jeremiah would be talking about how Christmas trees cannot “speak” or “move,” because there are just trees and everyone *knows* perfectly well that they cannot speak or move. In antiquity, however, cult statues were widely believed to be the literal, physical embodiment of the deity and there are dozens of ancient accounts claiming that they could move, speak, and even sometimes deliver judgments in court cases. In reality, these accounts are probably either legends, fabrications, or the results of priests using various methods of chicanery to make it appear as though the cult statues were speaking.





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We have no historical evidence of any kind to suggest that the ancient Canaanites decorated evergreen trees. The interpretation of this passage as a reference to Christmas trees is nothing more than a phenomenon known as *pareidolia*. Pareidolia is when people interpret sensory or informational input to match what they are already familiar with.



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Everyone in the modern era is already familiar with Christmas trees, so, when we read a passage that mentions cutting down trees and decorating things, we have a natural tendency to automatically assume that the passage is about decorating Christmas trees. The problem is that, if it were not for our modern Christmas traditions, no one would ever have interpreted this passage as being about decorating trees. (“How preposterous!”) Instead, we would clearly be able to see that this passage is talking about fashioning cult statues.



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ABOVE: The reason Jeremiah 10:1-5 seems to some people like it is about Christmas trees is because the human brain interprets patterns based on what is familiar. It is the same reason why, in this painting by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, you see a face, even though it is made of vegetables.

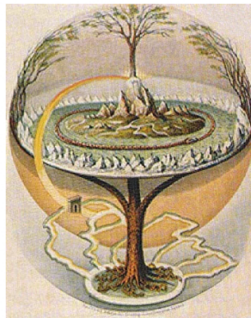
An ancient Roman custom?

Now, everyone always seems to say that, in late December, the ancient Romans would cut down evergreen trees and bring them into their homes for their holiday of Saturnalia. You will find this notion in all the articles on the internet from both mainstream and non-mainstream news sources. It seems to be one thing almost everyone agrees upon.

Is it true? Nope. Not in the slightest. I am not sure where this idea comes from, but there are no references whatsoever to any traditions involving decorating evergreen trees in any of the copious surviving ancient writings about the holiday of Saturnalia. Yet people keep repeating this line about the Romans decorating evergreens. The media repeats it every year, presumably because they cannot be bothered to read through [Macrobius's Saturnalia](#) (which does not mention evergreen trees being used for decoration during the holiday) or any other Roman writings. They could even just, you know, just ask a classicist, but, as far as I can tell, they never have.

An ancient Germanic custom?

Others insist that the Christmas tree is actually the world-tree Yggdrasil from Norse mythology. Is this true? Well, it hypothetically could be, but we have absolutely no evidence to support the notion that it is. Any attempt to connect the modern Christmas tree custom to ancient pre-Christian Germanic paganism is pure speculation. In fact, we have no good evidence to believe that the Christmas tree custom in any form dates back any earlier than the sixteenth century.



ABOVE: A modern illustration of Yggdrasil, the world tree in Norse mythology

The real origins of the Christmas tree

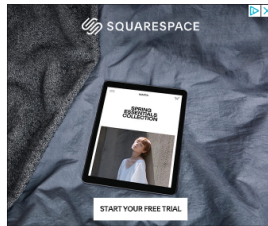
So where does this bizarre custom of decorating trees come from, if it does not come from pre-Christian paganism? Well, the earliest known reference to a Christmas tree is a depiction of one from a sculpture on the keystone of a private home located in Turckheim, France dating to 1576. If we assume that the custom was around for roughly fifty years or so before it was mentioned or depicted anywhere, that would indicate that the very first Christmas trees probably appeared in western Europe in the early 1500s. Christmas trees seem to have most likely originated from the "tree of Paradise," that is, the tree used in late medieval mystery plays to represent the tree that Adam and Eve are said to have eaten from the Garden of Eden.





ABOVE: The Fall of Man (1628–1629) by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens

The Christmas tree does not seem to have become popular, though, until the eighteenth century, at first mostly among affluent German Lutherans. The earliest known Christmas trees were decorated with nuts, berries, and other small, edible foods. These nuts and berries were later replaced by ornaments and candles. There is a tradition claiming that Martin Luther himself was the first person ever to decorate a Christmas tree using candles, but there is no historical record to vindicate this tradition and it is most likely apocryphal.



The Lutherans helped spread the tradition of the Christmas tree to other parts of Europe and, by the late 1700s, the custom had reached England and North America. In the 1840s, Queen Victoria greatly boosted the popularity of Christmas trees in England by having multiple highly publicized Christmas trees in her home at Windsor Castle every year. Media and advertisements for Christmas trees emphasized Queen Victoria's favor of them and an illustration of Queen Victoria's family gathered around the Christmas tree was even printed in an edition of *The Illustrated London News* in 1848.

Partially as a result of Queen Victoria's enthusiasm for them, Christmas trees became all the rage among middle and upper class English and American families. It was also during the nineteenth century that decorating Christmas trees with candles first appears to have become popular. After electric lighting was invented, candles on Christmas trees were replaced with electric lights—the very first “Christmas lights.”



ABOVE: Queen Victoria greatly helped popularize the tradition of decorating Christmas trees in England in the 1840s. Shown here is an illustration of the royal family's private Christmas tree from 1848, originally printed in *The Illustrated London News*.

But... what about ancient traditions and paganism?

People in the twenty-first century have this bizarre, instinctive notion that any custom we have today that we cannot rationally explain must be a survival of pre-Christian paganism. The idea of “pagan survivals” is so widespread that it has basically become the *de facto* explanation to any puzzling or peculiar tradition. People essentially just answer the question “Why do we decorate trees at Christmas?” with “I don’t know, so it must be paganism.”

Perhaps this idea of pagan origin is also fueled by the fact that we usually associate trees with nature and, for various reasons, we tend to associate paganism with nature also. This idea of “nature-loving pagans” is a really inaccurate and frankly anachronistic stereotype, since ancient peoples who lived before the advent of Christianity rarely cared very much about the natural environment, except when its destruction affected them personally.

			
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The idea that it is our moral obligation as human beings to take care of the Earth did not really emerge as a widespread opinion until the late twentieth century. The idea of ancient peoples living “in harmony with nature” is mostly just a Romantic fiction invented by nostalgic writers who lived many centuries afterwards. (I am actually planning on writing an article about this at some point in the relatively near future.)



ABOVE: Modern highly imaginative Romantic representation of a Druid in the woods from 1815, illustrating the modern tendency to associate ancient pre-Christian peoples with nature

The truth is that there are very few modern Christmas traditions that can legitimately be traced back to pre-Christian paganism. The holiday of Christmas itself dates back to the early centuries of the common era, but, as I discuss in [this article I have written](#), for most of its history, it was celebrated nothing at all like how we celebrate it today.

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For nearly the entire Middle Ages and for a large part of the Early Modern Period, in most parts of western Europe, Christmas was like an even rowdier, more carnivalesque version of Mardi Gras—a time of drinking, gambling, reversed social norms, and all-around general debauchery. Then the Reformation happened in the 1500s and Protestants did away with all that. (For a span of time, the Puritans actually banned the holiday entirely and fined anyone who was caught celebrating it.)

Most of the customs, traditions, and ideas we associate with the modern, secular Christmas are products of the past two hundred years. If you want to blame something for “ruining” Christmas and “taking Christ out Christmas,” you would be closer to the mark blaming twentieth and twenty-first century American capitalism than seventh-century BC Canaanite paganism (or whatever other variety of paganism you happen to fancy).

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Author: Spencer McDaniel

Hello! I'm Spencer McDaniel! I am currently a student at Indiana University Bloomington pursuing a double major in classical studies and history. I am obsessed with the ancient world and I write about it constantly. My main area of study is ancient Greece, but I also write about other areas of history as well.

[View all posts by Spencer McDaniel](#)

6 thoughts on “The Origins of the Christmas Tree”



Michelle

December 15, 2020 at 3:14 pm

I'm doing some research on Saturnalia specifically.

Did the ancient Romans decorate AT ALL with greenery during Saturnalia (perhaps bay leaves or other indigenous plants)?

Thank you for your time!

[Reply](#)



Spencer Alexander McDaniel

December 15, 2020 at 5:33 pm

So far, I haven't been able to find any ancient source that says anything about the Romans decorating for Saturnalia with any kind of greenery, but it's possible that they may have done some kind of decorating with plants native to the Mediterranean. They certainly did not decorate evergreen trees in any way resembling the way contemporary people decorate evergreen trees for Christmas.

If you're interested in Saturnalia, I wrote [a much more detailed article about the holiday last year](#), which I think you may enjoy.

[Reply](#)



M -

December 16, 2020 at 11:42 am

Spencer:

I actually did read the article you wrote last year and enjoyed it very much! Very helpful.

Thank you.

Lo Saturnalia!

Have a very joyous Yuletide.

[Reply](#)

Pingback: [Pagan Christmas - History for Atheists](#)



Carmen Kefler/DasTenna

January 17, 2021 at 5:58 am

I enjoy your texts on the history of customs.

Guess I found a minor mistake in this one, though. At the beginning, you mention that “we have no evidence that would lead us to believe they date back any earlier than the 1400s”, but in the sections “An ancient Germanic custom?” and “The real origins of the Christmas tree”, you write that “we have no good evidence to believe that the Christmas tree custom in any form dates back any earlier than the sixteenth century” and that “the earliest known reference to a Christmas tree is a depiction [...] dating to 1576 (which) would indicate that the very first Christmas trees probably appeared in western Europe in the early 1500s.”

[Reply](#)



Spencer Alexander McDaniel

January 17, 2021 at 7:05 am

There is no error here, but I can see why someone might find my words confusing. In the opening, the reason I say “any earlier than the 1400s” is because I’m being cautious and hedging my bets. We don’t have evidence for Christmas trees in the 1400s, since the earliest evidence is from the 1500s, but it’s possible that there may have been Christmas trees in the 1400s that just aren’t documented.

Regarding the statements later in the article that you find to be contradictory, the term “sixteenth century” actually refers to the 1500s. I know it’s a bit confusing, but the term “first century” refers to the century lasting from 1 CE to 100 CE, the term “second century” refers to the century lasting from 101 CE to 200 CE, and so on. There is no “century zero.” Thus, the “sixteenth century” is the century lasting from 1501 CE to 1600 CE.

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