



Historically Speaking

Volume 3, Number 12 December 2024

Saturnalia



What's happening?

The craft fair at Ridgeline High School is December 7 and 8, 2024. That will finish the craft fairs for us for this year. I will continue to use my time to write. I am a seasonal writer, starting usually in October and trying to wrap things up in March. Then I move into my woodworking/swimming season. I am enjoying retirement immensely, but I do miss the days of teaching all the wonderful students I had over the years.

The most powerful of the Titans was Cronus (Gr. Kronos). He led a revolt of the Titans against their father, Uranus (Gr. Ouranos. father sky). Gaea (mother earth) had grown tired of giving birth to giants and monsters. Consequently, she armed Cronus with a scythe and with this he attacked Uranus and drove him away.

In this manner, the Greeks may have symbolized their belief that originally earth and sky were close together. Cronus and his brother Titans symbolized the sun, moon and planets which drove earth and sky apart and took over the vast space between. In this way, the universe was put into its final shape.

The word Cronus is not Greek in its origin and is probably a hangover from those who inhabited Greece before the Greeks themselves arrived. It was easy to suppose that the unfamiliar word, Cronus, was actually the familiar Greek word "Chronos," meaning "time."

For that reason, Cronus was frequently considered to be the "god of time." Even today, "Father Time" is usually pictured as an old man carrying a scythe, the weapon with which Cronus defeated Uranus. That is' the most familiar way in which Cronus lingers on into modern times and it is a wrong one. (An old woman is sometimes called a "crone" but this has no connection with Cronus. It comes from an old Danish word and the similarity is a coincidence.)

To the people who preceded the Greeks, Cronus was probably a god of agriculture. The scythe with which he was supposed to have attacked his father, Uranus, was originally a tool for harvesting grain, nothing more deadly than that.

The Romans had a god of agriculture called Saturn, and they identified him with Cronus. The Romans honored Saturn during a week-long celebration from the 19th to the 26th of December. This celebration was called the "Saturnalia." There was great jollity, much feasting, and an exchange of presents. Some of the atmosphere lingers on into our modern celebration of Christmas at the same time of year.

However, so much wildness and drunkenness developed during the celebration that nowadays the word "saturnalia" means a wild, drunken party.

(This is an excerpt from Isaac Asimov's WORDS FROM THE MYTHS)

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How Saturnalia Led to Christmas

Thanks to the Roman Empire's conquests in Britain and the rest of Europe from the second century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.—and their suppression of older seasonal rites practiced by the Celts and other groups—today's Western cultures derive many of their traditional celebrations of midwinter from Saturnalia.

The Christian holiday of Christmas, especially, owes many of its traditions to the ancient Roman festival, including the time of year Christmas is celebrated. The Bible does not give a date for Jesus' birth; in fact, some theologians have concluded he was probably born in spring, as suggested by references to shepherds and sheep in the Nativity story.

But by the fourth century A.D., Western Christian churches settled on celebrating Christmas on December 25, which allowed them to incorporate the holiday with Saturnalia and other popular pagan midwinter traditions.



(from me)

In research I did many years ago, I found an article that suggested that the reason the Christians chose Dec. 25 to celebrate Christmas, had to do with the persecution of Christians by the pagan Romans. The Christians saw the opportunity to celebrate the birth of Christ within the celebration of Saturnalia without being detected, and so, adopted the traditions associated with Saturnalia, jollity, feasting and gift-giving included.

