

Christmas Before Christ

The ancient winter festivals of the Jews, the Romans, the Celts, and other Races, from whose rites and customs most of our christian traditions are derived

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Henry J. Markland

AGES and ages ago, perhaps a hundred centuries or more, when human beings began to record the facts of the physical world, they noted that there was a definite season at which the short days of winter began to lengthen, and the long, grim nights to grow more brief. This was the time of the winter solstice, in December, when the sun turns in its apparent course among the stars, and seems slowly to return, with its radiant light and vivifying heat. And although, as the old weather maxim has it, "When the days begin to lengthen, the cold begins to strengthen," men knew that the power of stern winter had been broken, and that soon would come the springtime, thrilling the earth with new life, causing the seed to swell and the buds to burgeon, and suffusing all created things with the fresh joy of vigorous youth.

All over the world, then, this moment of transition was watched for eagerly; and when it came it was welcomed with merrymaking and with a sort of symbolism which belonged to the nature-worship of the primitive peoples—east, west, north, and south alike. These peoples had, in most instances, no knowledge of one another, yet they all had marked the time when the life of the world was about to be renewed.

Thus the Jews, on what is now December 25, held their great feast of Hanukkah, the Festival of the Lights, every house or hut or tent blazing with rude torches or clustered lamps. These were meant to welcome the renewal of light and heat from the returning sun, and the custom goes back farther than recorded history. Its early significance became in part forgotten, so that in the second century before Christ it was revived and made to have a new significance; yet it is in reality the infinitely ancient greeting to the sun.

In much the same way the Egyptians celebrated the same season, and it is a curious and interesting fact that they chose for its symbol a new-born child, since at that time another year was born, and it was the period when Nature began to give birth to the new plants and grain and blossoms.

In the Northern Forests

In the remote north and west, where the winter was far more terrible and

stern, the first token of its decline was hailed with wilder joy. In the black Scandinavian forests great fires were kindled, fed with mighty trunks of pine and spruce, until the flames shot far up into the heavens, defying the Frost King and hailing his approaching downfall. Around these roaring seas of billowy flame gathered the savage, bearded Northmen, basking in the ruddy warmth, quaffing great horns of mead and ale, calling with hoarse voices on their barbaric gods, and clashing their rude weapons: for the time was coming when the ice on the fjords would melt, when the serpent-shaped boats could again be launched, and when the vikings could glide out to slay the monsters of the sea, or to fight and to plunder and ravage the abodes of other men.

But on the night that was longest, just before the great flaming wheel of the sun turned backward once again, and when the Yule logs were made ready to flare out, a terror, strange and sinister, took possession of the timid. Men and women and children whispered to one another that on this night there were many who suddenly put off their human forms and were changed into wolves, fierce, ravening, and thirsting for blood; and that these dreadful creatures roamed in the forest glades until the rising of the sun of the new year. In this belief we see, perhaps, only another symbol—that of the transformation of the season—of which we shall find many more.

The Weird Rites of the Druids

Strange and weird and awe-inspiring was the December ceremonial among the Celtic peoples of western Europe, and most of it all in the rites of the Druids, who observed this period of the winter solstice in their great roofless temples at Stonehenge and Avebury, in Britain. In them, torches blazed at night, and mysterious ceremonies accompanied the cutting of the sacred mistletoe, which symbolized the continuance of life and of the means of life throughout the winter.

But far more wonderful must have been the scene at Carnac, on the coast of Brittany, the seat of the Druids worship among the Gauls. Human eyes have never gazed upon a stranger sight than this marvelous sanctuary, with its thousands of huge white columns, all

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GENERAL ALLENBY, WHO BEAT THE TURKS, MEETS HIS MOTHER AFTER TWO YEARS' PARTING

Lord Allenby, defeater of the Turks and captor of Palestine, replying to an address of welcome from the great crowd which met him at Felixstowe, said: "I owe everything in the world to my mother." The massed throng echoed, "God, bless her." The photo shows Lord and Lady Allenby and Lord Allenby's mother reunited after a parting of over two years.



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