

Winter Solstice Festivals



First off, let me say that I hope you are all having a Merry Christmas, Hanukkah, Dong Zhi, or whatever winter solstice festival you celebrate. I'm spending it with my daughter and grandkids, as is usual this time of the year. The grandkids are seven and four, so the magic of Christmas is still alive and well on December 25. This year, the Grandson promises not to come down and wake up Oma and Grandpa at 3 AM.

In ancient times, the winter solstice was a call for celebration as it marked when days would begin to become longer, and the return of spring and renewal was assured. Astronomers from those times studied the movement of the stars and planets and could determine the shortest and longest days. Calendars were created by determining where the sun came up and went down each day.

Today, we know the winter solstice is in and around December 22. In 2018, it was marked at 10:22 PM Greenwich Mean Time (here in Alberta, it was 3:22 PM). At this exact moment, the earth was aligned to shine directly at the Tropic of Capricorn before starting its slow movement back towards the Tropic of Cancer. Modern technology is capable of marking this point down to the second. December 22 was approximately six seconds longer than December 21. The 23rd, another seven seconds longer. In ancient times, they weren't so accurate.

After years of studies, ancient astronomers were able to find the stretch of days that were the shortest according to the instruments they had at the time. The solstice was marked as the mid point of these days. However, there was nothing to celebrate until the days could be seen as measurably longer. They never

knew if the gods decided to just kill everyone off with an eternal winter. The first measurably longer day occurred on December 25.

Most, if not all pagan religions had some connections to the cycle of the seasons. It was so important for the life of the society. Planting, harvesting, and survival through the winter (at least in the northern climates) was all scheduled by the movement of the sun. The solstices and equinoxes were a consistent theme in pagan religions. It was only natural that as new religions came into being, they would also revolve around the cycles of the seasons.

So, on or about December 25 has been celebrated for eons. In Europe, pagan festivals that couldn't be stamped out by Christianity were just usurped, along with many of their traditions to help with conversions. In ancient Rome, the festival of Saturnalia that ran from December 17-23 was converted to Christian advent, expanding to the whole month of December and ending on the 25th. As the 25th is the first day measurably longer than the solstice, it was marked as Jesus' birthday as the coming of the light.

Now, I don't want to start a religious controversy, but no one really knows when Jesus was born. Of the four gospels, only two have a Christmas story and neither of them were written first or mark a particular day, let alone year. Both Matthew and Luke were written forty to fifty years after Jesus died. That they found out Jesus' birthday that long after his death is highly not believable. In the end, records of births of lowly carpenters' sons were not recorded. Sorry to say that although it is a great story and makes for a great holiday season, it was made up. Jesus did exist (you don't get a major world religion without someone starting it) and it is his message which is the important part. Because he was put to death, most early Christian ritual revolved around Easter and was the basis for the religion (he died for our sins). Christmas wasn't instituted until the 4th century after Emperor Constantine made Christianity the empire's official religion. Apparently, they had to replace Saturnalia with something. Reading Luke and finding out it was cold when Jesus was born was enough to figure December as a good place to put Christmas.

I'm not going to go anywhere near Santa Claus at this time.

Made up or not, enjoy your holidays and may you have a prosperous 2019.