Does Christmas have pagan roots?

In ancient Rome, December 25 was a celebration of the Unconquered Sun, marking the return of longer days. It followed [Saturnalia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saturnalia-Roman-festival), a festival where people feasted and exchanged gifts. The church in Rome began celebrating Christmas on December 25 in the 4th century during the reign of [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-I-Roman-emperor), the first Christian emperor, possibly to weaken pagan traditions.

One [widespread](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/widespread) explanation of the origin of this date is that December 25 was the Christianizing of the dies solis invicti nati (“day of the birth of the unconquered sun”), a popular holiday in the [Roman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire) that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer. Indeed, after December 25 had become widely accepted as the date of Jesus’ birth, Christian writers frequently made the connection between the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Son. One of the difficulties with this view is that it suggests a nonchalant willingness on the part of the Christian church to appropriate a pagan festival when the [early church](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-early-Christianity) was so intent on distinguishing itself categorically from pagan beliefs and practices.

Encyclopedia Brittanica (above quotes)

**A Historical Perspective of Christmas**

Growing concern regarding the Christmas tradition is not something totally new. Christians in the past also questioned and even opposed its practice within the Christian community. Historian and Pulitzer Prize finalist Stephen Nissenbaum from the University of Massachusetts writes about this struggle in “The Battle for Christmas.” Nissenbaum relates, “In New England, for the first two centuries of white settlement most people did not celebrate Christmas. In fact, the holiday was systematically suppressed by Puritans during the colonial period and largely ignored by their descendants. It was actually illegal to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 (the fine was five shillings). Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did Christmas gain legal recognition as an official holiday in New England.” Nissenbaum goes on to say, “It was only in the fourth century that the (Roman) Church officially decided to observe Christmas on December 25th. And this date was not chosen for religious reasons but simply because it happened to mark the approximate arrival of the winter solstice, an event that was celebrated long before the advent of Christianity. The puritans were correct when they pointed out – and they pointed it out often – that Christmas is nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer.”