

## Sylvester's Eve & New Year's Eve

We don't think much about why we celebrate on New Year's Eve. However, there is actually a historical reason that we naturally associate New Year's Eve with wild parties. This is because of a Christian feast day, The Feast of St. Sylvester, which took place on December 31, the anniversary of Pope Sylvester's death in 335 CE. When the Gregorian calendar was reformed in 1582, the last day of the year was placed on December 31st, combining Sylvester's feast day with what we now call New Year's Eve. It is celebrated in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Hungary, and France. His feast day was established in 1227 by Pope Gregory IX. It has suggested that his feast day was placed on December 31 for symbolic reasons, because just as December 31 ushers in a new year, so, too, did the conversion of the emperor Constantine usher in a new epoch in the history of Christianity. St. Sylvester was Pope in the year 325 CE, when the Emperor Constantine declared that the pagan religion of Rome would be replaced by Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Although it is unclear exactly what role, if any, St. Sylvester played in this important event, he is usually given at least some of the credit for stamping out paganism. Among the Western Christian Churches, the feast day is held on the anniversary of Saint Sylvester's death, 31 December, a date that, since the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, has coincided with New Year's Eve.

Since "Silvester Abend," or "Sylvester's Eve," is also New Year's Eve, many Austrians and Germans hold late-night parties. In Germany, these festive gatherings may include drinking, eating, dancing, singing, and fortune-telling. In some Swiss towns, bands of mummers known as "Silvesterclausen" still parade through the streets in costumes, bells, and headdresses on December 31, as well as on St. Sylvester's Day Old Style, which falls on January 13 (which is also called "Old Christmas Day"). They visit homes, yodel three times, and are rewarded with wine by the occupants. Because St. Sylvester's Day is also New Year's Eve, it is celebrated in Switzerland by lighting bonfires in the mountains and ringing church bells to signal the passing of the old year and the beginning of the new. Smudging and incense rituals of the smudging nights marked the completion of the cycle of the year. Juniper twigs that had been collected at the beginning of the year were burned to protect the house and the court. Making a lot of noise was an important part of these ancient year-end traditions, which was practiced in some regions as a way should also keep evil spirits away. For instance, in the Alpine region, there is also blasting on all rough nights, which is still widespread in northern Germany today. Called "thunder and witch lightning" in earlier times, the Sylvester New Year's Eve fireworks explode with bright lights against the winter sky, driving out the demons of the old year and clearing the way for the new. In early times, the

lights and noise of the fireworks was considered protection and a way to drive bad weather away from house and court. It is likely that the fireworks set off in multitudes on New Year's Eve today are the modern evolution of this tradition.

However, despite the feast's namesake, some of the customs associated with St. Sylvester's Day cannot easily be connected with the life of the saint. In past eras the Germans celebrated St. Sylvester's Day with mumming and noisemaking. In some parts of Austria, a rather sinister figure called "Sylvester" haunted New Year's Eve gatherings. He wore a grotesque mask, flaxen beard, and a wreath of mistletoe. He lurked in some dark corner until someone foolishly walked under the pine boughs suspended from the ceiling. Then he leaped forward, seized them, and roughly kissed them. At midnight the guests drove him away as the last remnant of the old year. It is obvious that this custom bears little association with the Christian saint's life.

So, who is this wild creature appearing on New Year's Eve, this wild feast day that falls at the beginning of the new year cycle? It is a clue that nearby forests probably provided the mistletoe associated with the Germanic Sylvester. A little etymological digging is helpful here. The name "Sylvester" comes from the Latin word for forest, *silva*. The word sylvan comes from the Latin and means "wooded" or "wilderness." But we know that Sylvester is also a god of the forest, who later became "the strange old man of the woods"—*waldschrat*. In tracing the word "Sylvester" back to its origins, we discover another instance of the Church's appropriating a pagan tradition, i.e., replacing an old pagan god with one of their saints. The fact is that Sylvanus is the name of the Roman god of the woods and fields—a god sometimes identified with the Greek god Pan. These words gave rise to English sylvan in the 16th century. The English word was first used as a noun meaning "a mythological deity of the woods," eventually taking on the broader meaning "one who frequents the woods." In other words, with Sylvester we are taken back—way, way back—to the archaic origins of our Christianized celebrations at this midwinter dawning of a new year. Despite the Church's attempts to stamp out all vestiges of paganism associated with the old Winter Solstice or Yuletide season, these gods of the "Old Religion" inevitably return, to be discovered behind the thin Christian veneer in Germanic countries, which never quite let go of their pagan traditions. This is certainly the case with Sylvester, who once was one of the Germanic manifestations of the archaic "Wild Man" of the woods, indicated by his grotesque mask, flaxen beard, and a wreath of mistletoe. Therefore, if St. Sylvester is given some of the credit for stamping out paganism, it is not without irony. As with St. Nicholas, the Church made other attempts to replace the "Wild Man" with holy figures. (As pointed out in my previous "Winter Solstice/Christmas" musical essay, the Germanic Santa Claus is the descendent of this "Wild Man.") Yet, there was another method the Church made use of in order

to stamp out paganism. This was to demonize its old gods and make them “evil use of in order to stamp out paganism. According to *The Encyclopedia of Antiquity and Christianity*: “The totally negative connotation of demons (and, to a lesser degree, of spirits) as destroyers and enemies of humanity started when Christianity damned and downgraded the pagan gods and beings that may have been called spirits or demons in a neutral, good, or ambivalent way.” This demonization of the old gods tells us that many, if not all, of the so-called “evil spirits” the Christian people needed to protect themselves from during the dark months of winter, and especially on Sylvester eve, were none other than these former pagan gods.

Despite the shared date, then, most Silvester traditions in Germany actually stem from a far older pagan celebration called *Rauhnächte*. It is of consequence that the German word for Christmas, *Weihnachten*, meaning “consecrated” or “holy night,” is plural because it comes from the original pagan Germanic “*Raunächte*” (lit. “raw nights”). These were the long, cold winter nights of the Winter Solstice period, when the people of far northern Europe awaited the return of the sun. To celebrate the coming “rebirth” of the light, they used candles and evergreen wreaths, items that are still part of the Christmas observance today.

The *Rauhnächte* (also *Raunächte* or smoke nights), are the twelve nights; inner nights or sub nights which in the European tradition is attributed a special importance. Usually, it is the twelve days of Christmas from Christmas Day (December 25th) to the feast of the Epiphany (January 6th), occasionally other periods, for example those between St. Thomas’s Day and New Year’s. According to popular belief, the stormy forces of midwinter withdrew in the night of January 6th, which marked the time when “the wild hunt” went to rest at the end of the rough nights. The *Rauhnächte* are a time that is said to have been suitable for casting out or conjuring spirits, for contact with animals or for divination practices since early modern times. In some areas, it was believed that in the middle of the twelve nights, namely on New Year’s Eve, the infamous “wild hunt” should start.