



The Ghosts of Christmas Past

The enmity of the Christians toward each other surpassed the fury of savage beasts against man.
Ammianus Marcellinus, 4th c.

THE USEFULNESS CONSTANTINE found in Christianity to advance his political and military ambitions apparently didn't extend to the religion's aspiring capital, Rome. (While mandatory for his subjects, Constantine delayed being baptized himself until he was literally on his deathbed—in order, perhaps, to be absolved of any interim sins, such as boiling alive his first wife or strangling his eldest son.)

After adopting Christianity as the official religion of the empire, he moved its capital to Byzantium—renaming it Constantinople—and never set foot in Rome again, abandoning the city to the ever-squabbling clergy.

But before leaving Rome, Constantine moved the reigning pope, Miltiades, out of his drab papal lodgings, installed him in the Lateran Palace, and showered him with gifts. (The luxurious palace actually belonged to Constantine's wife, Fausta, an obstacle he easily overcame—by murdering her in 326.)

In return for his generosity, Miltiades would indulge Constantine's every whim, beginning the papacy's long descent into pre-occupation with earthly riches and power.

By the late fourth century, the once great Roman Empire was in well into decline, its interior beset by corruption and its outer provinces under siege by hordes of Huns from Central Asia. Within Rome itself, rival clerics engaged in petty turf wars.

The future saint Jerome of Stridon was back in Rome during this period—in service to Pope Damasus I—having earlier been run out of town after a sex scandal.

Damasus had secured the papacy in a most enterprising manner. Playing both sides of the street, he worked for his papal predecessor Liberius, as well as for Liberius's arch-enemy, Felix II.

There was at this time still no formal method for choosing a new pope, and when Liberius died in 366, a faction loyal to Ursinus installed him as his successor, while a faction loyal to Felix favored Damasus. (Ursinus served a brief, contentious reign but is now considered—along with Felix—to be an antipope.)

After failing to secure the necessary support to oust Ursinus, Damasus resolved to settle the dispute by hiring a gang of thugs to ambush his rival's supporters. Those who escaped the initial attack holed up in the Liberian Basilica. Undeterred, Damasus's gang barricaded the building's exits and climbed up onto its roof.

After breaking open a suitably large hole, they showered the terrified clerics below with shards of broken tile and masonry. When the three day siege finally ended, 137 dead and dying clergy were dragged from the shattered church, and Damasus was pope.

Despite securing a pardon from Emperor Gratian, the ruthless manner in which Damasus had attained the papacy dogged him throughout his eighteen-year long reign.

The resourceful pope set to work restoring his tarnished reputation by spearheading the doctrine of *apostolic succession*—which asserted that the apostle Peter was the first Bishop of Rome, and thereby all succeeding popes were in turn Christ's sole divinely-appointed representatives on Earth.

To bolster the pope's claim to supreme authority, Damasus commissioned Jerome to translate the Bible into less accessible Latin, which would be the officially-sanctioned version for the next millennium.

Damasus funded the endeavor by removing the bones of hundreds of ordinary Christians from the catacombs, which—once broken up into suitably small pieces—were sold as relics of saints to gullible pilgrims.

Jerome's imaginative rendition of Jesus's words in Matthew 16: "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church..." has been cited ever since by popes as biblical 'proof' of Peter's—and hence the papacy's—divinely ordained authority. (After his benefactor's death in 384, Jerome was embroiled in yet another sex scandal, and was once again forced to flee the city, this time for good.)

But the most enduring way Damasus rewrote his tainted legacy was by formalizing the celebration of Christ's birthday on December 25, thereby usurping the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, held annually for centuries at the Winter Solstice.

Saturn was the god of renewal and liberation, and the festival was marked by several days of feasting, public drunkenness, gambling and ribald merriment.

Not surprisingly, the holiday was immensely popular, and to appease the peasantry, Damasus expropriated not only the traditional festivities but also much of the rite's pagan trappings and ritual—including the now-familiar 'Christmas' trees and cookies, Yuletide holly, and mistletoe.

Over time, the practice of singing and dancing naked in the streets was reduced to innocuous Christmas caroling, and mandatory offerings to the emperor to the voluntary gift-giving of jolly Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus.

Today, millions of devout Christians celebrate this annual holiday, oblivious to its pagan origins and unaware that the Bible itself specifically forbids their participation, branding it 'the way of the heathen.'