

The Christmas Goose

by Sarajane Williams

While ancient man watched migrating geese appear and disappear during important points along the solar and agricultural year, he developed a symbolic association between the goose, harvest time, the sun and hope for the Earth's regeneration. As a result, a ritual sacrifice of goose flesh was offered to give thanks for the autumn harvest and to ensure the return of the light in spring. Later, the goose feast became associated with other important holiday celebrations. In some countries, harvest goose feasts that were traditionally held during the autumnal equinox, such as Michaelmas and Martinmas, were moved to December, to more closely coincide with winter solstice and Christmas celebrations.

When American settlers arrived in the new world, they found turkeys, which were also symbolized as sun birds by Native Americans, to be plentiful. The ritual goose feast was often substituted by celebratory turkey feasts in the Western world.

But there's more to the story about the importance of the Christmas goose. Frau Holda (or Holle, Hulda) was the pre-Christian Mother Goddess of Germanic people. The reverence for Frau Holda (or 'Hollerbeier Fraa' in Pennsylvania Deitsch) and her symbolic message of birth and rebirth that secretly imbued our early Pennsylvania German immigrants, existed for countless generations. In children's stories, Mother Holda was depicted as "Mother Goose," an old, silver-haired, wise woman with a shawl and tall hat, who flew on the back of a goose to deliver newborn babies to mothers. Frau Holda, the patron of domestic arts, industriousness, childrearing, spinning and agriculture, was the goddess of the Underworld and also of Winter. Christmas was her holiday. Children would leave bread and milk for the red-cloaked witch, who filled their shoes with goodies at night and then would fly away on a broom. When snowflakes fell, it meant that Mother Holda was either plucking her geese or shaking out her goose-filled pillows. She was also credited with knitting blankets of snow during the season when people stayed indoors, to spin her sacred flax into linen.

During the latter part of the 19th century, "goose feather" Christmas trees were created to supposedly allay some of the concerns about deforestation in Germany. These novel artificial white pine trees were usually tabletop size and candleholders or red berries were placed at the tips of the goose feather branches. Isn't it interesting that goose feathers were chosen for the symbol of such an important holiday?

The perennial Christmas goose continues to return in a variety of forms, to remind us to be thankful for light and to provide hope for the Earth's regeneration.