

Most of us associate Santa Claus with ice and snow, winter, reindeer, and evergreen trees, not to mention presents. But the real Santa Claus lived a very great distance from the realm of northern winter. St. Nicholas, the original Santa Claus (the Nicholas became shortened to Claus), was a 4th century AD Christian bishop in the city of Myra in what today is southwestern Turkey. His home was a hot, dry, desert region, and instead of reindeer and a sleigh, he more likely rode a donkey or was pulled by a team of donkeys in a four-wheeled carrus or a two-wheeled cisium. He probably would have worn a dull coloured tunic and cloak of undyed wool (and no trousers). He most certainly would have had a beard, a long and scraggly one. It likely would not have been cut very often: good Christian gentlemen were not supposed to spend time on their personal appearance, and the representations of early Christian saints generally show them with long grey beards and a gaunt, unkempt appearance. They certainly weren't supposed to bathe very often or use perfumed oils. Today children know when Santa Claus is coming to town; in the 4th century everyone would know when St. Nick was on his way, but for very different reasons. He probably would not have been laughing all the way, either. Laughter and mirth were not virtues; the possibility of eternal damnation, not to mention the sins of this world, were not humorous subjects, especially in early eastern Christianity, which was excessively preoccupied with penance and agony.

Almost nothing is known about St. Nicholas' actual life, other than his existence; by the 6th century, however, he was a very popular saint. He had a shrine at Myra, and in the 11th century his relics were moved to Bari in eastern Italy. He was already known in the West by the 10th century; there are wall paintings of St. Nick in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome dating to the 8th century, in the church of Santa Sophia in Istanbul dating to the 10th century, and in many other places throughout Europe. He was, for many centuries, the most commonly represented saint in western churches. In England alone there are 400 churches dedicated to him, and he is prominently represented in art in others, at Winchester, Westminster and Oxford, to name a few.

Part of St. Nick's popularity seems to have been the result of his generosity as well as the standard saintly ability to work miracles. He was the patron saint of children, unmarried girls, pawnbrokers, merchants, sailors, apothecaries and perfumers. He gave three bags of gold to three girls to

serve as dowries, and thus saved them from a life of prostitution, the fate of many unmarried girls in the 4th century. The three bags of gold seem to be the reason he is also patron of merchants, and also the reason for the representation of three balls (perhaps really representing three bags) outside a pawnbroker's shop. The number three occurs frequently in his legendary acts. He rescued three children and brought them back to life after they had been murdered and pickled in brine by a wicked butcher. He saved three men unjustly condemned to death and rescued three sailors from shipwreck off the coast of Turkey. His patronage of perfumers, however, seems to have been due to the wonderful, fragrant scent which was said to have come from his body in the tomb and shrine at Bari. Perhaps as well as a fragrant scent there was also the odour of embalming fluid, which might better explain the patronage of apothecaries.

St. Nick's most popular representation today is of course as the Christmas saint, generous and jolly, during whose feast period miracles may occur. His patronage of children and generosity are his most notable features, although perhaps the commercialism of the Christmas season also recalls his patronage of merchants. His physical appearance, definitely a northern gentleman dressed for winter weather, was added from his new home in northern Europe, and transported to North America by early settlers, specifically the Dutch. In the last century or so, modern ideas of health, sanitation and deportment have altered the gaunt and unkempt saint into the rotund, clean and jolly gentleman we see depicted on Christmas cards and in shop-windows.