

THE STORY OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE

According to tradition¹, the first Christmas tree was the brain-child of a man named Winfrith, also known by the Latin name Boniface, and as Saint Boniface today.



Boniface's story is not the typical saintly tale. Oh, there are undoubtedly miraculous acts, but they play out more like a Marvel comic rather than a monastic intervention. The story goes...

Boniface, who was born around 680 in England, entered a Benedictine monastery before being commissioned by the pope to evangelize modern-day Germany, first as a priest, and eventually as a bishop. Boniface spent much of his life traveling through all of Germany. "...with his tireless activity, his gift for organization, and his adaptable, friendly, yet firm character." Boniface went about re-strengthening regions that had already been introduced to Christ, and bringing the good news of Jesus to those that had not.

Henry Van Dyke in his retelling of the story in *The First Christmas Tree* (1897) described Boniface as,

"Fair and slight, but straight as a spear and strong as an oaken staff. His face was still young; the smooth skin was bronzed by wind and sun. His gray eyes, clean and kind, flashed like fire when he spoke of his adventures, and of the evil deeds of the false priests with whom he contended." (1)

Around the year 723, Boniface was traveling with a small party in the region of lower Hesse - a central German state known for its forests. He knew of a community near Geismar (halfway between Frankfurt and Berlin) who continued to worship the gods of their ancestors and were known to celebrate winter's solstice with a human sacrifice, typically a child, to the thunder-god Thor. Yep, the same Thor who fights alongside the Avengers.

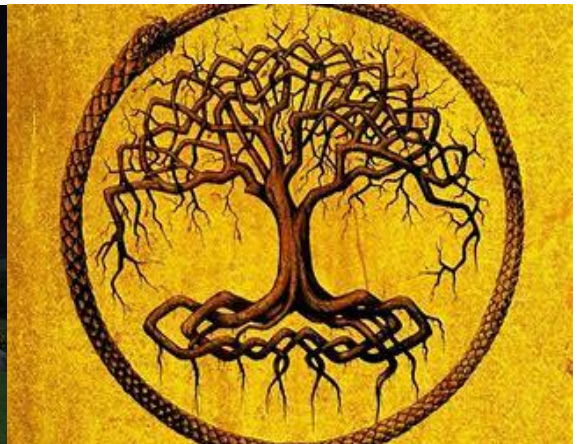


¹ (adapted from [Matthew Sewell's summary](#))

In Bonifaces' day, Thor looked more like this though:



Now, Thor's sacrifice was offered yearly at the base of a sacred oak tree, known as the "Thunder Oak."



Boniface desired to destroy the Thunder Oak, to not only save the life of the human sacrifice but also to show those who had little respect for the carpenter's son that he would not be struck down by lightning at the hands of Thor.

As the story goes, Boniface and his companions, reaching the village on Christmas Eve, arrived at the place of the sacrifice in time enough to interrupt it. With his bishops' staff (also called a crozier) in hand, Boniface approached the pagan crowd, who had surrounded the base of the Thunder Oak, saying to his group, *"Here is the Thunder Oak, and here the cross of Christ shall break the hammer of the false god, Thor."*

With a small child laid out for the sacrifice, the executioner raised his hammer high. But on the downswing, Boniface extended his crozier to block the blow, miraculously breaking the great stone hammer and saving the child's life.

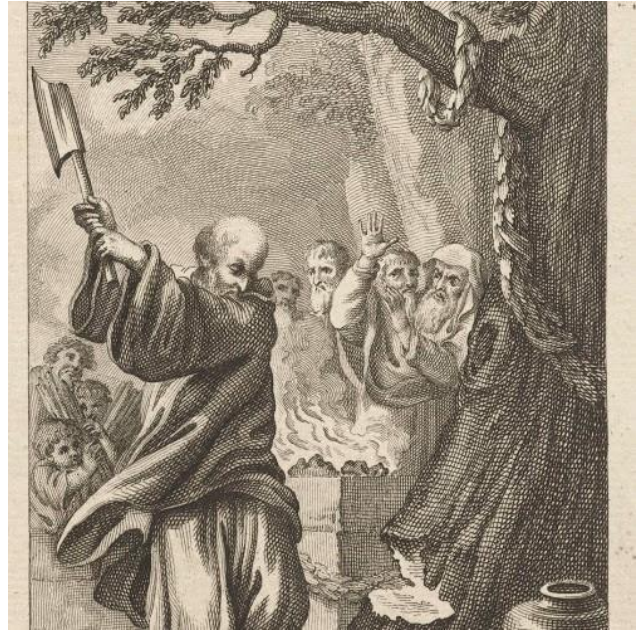


Afterward, Boniface is said to have proclaimed to the people:

“Hearken, sons of the forest! No blood shall flow this night save that which pity has drawn from a mother’s breast. For this is the birth-night of the Christ, the son of the Almighty, the Savior of mankind. Fairer is He than Baldur the Beautiful, greater than Odin the Wise, kinder than Freya the Good. Since He has come, sacrifice is ended. The dark, Thor, on whom you have vainly called, is dead. Deep in the shades of Niffelheim, he is lost forever. And now on this Christ-night, you shall begin to live. This blood-tree shall darken your land no more. In the name of the Lord, I will destroy it.” (2)

Boniface picked up a nearby ax and, as legend has it, took one mighty swing at the oak when a great gust of wind arose through the forest and felled the tree, roots and all. The tree laid on the forest floor, broken into four pieces. Later Boniface would have a chapel built from the wood, but the story does not end with the thunder tree’s downfall. Boniface had faced the mighty Thor and the slender monk had won!

The “Apostle of Germany” continued to preach to the astounded Germanic peoples, who were in disbelief that this slayer of Thor’s Thunder Oak had not been struck down by their god. Boniface looked beyond where the oak lay, pointing to a small, unassuming fir tree, said:



“This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the **wood of peace**... It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness.”

TODAY

And so, the Germans began a new tradition that night. By bringing a fir tree into their homes, decorating it with candles and ornaments, and celebrating the birth of a Savior, Boniface and his flock gave us what we now know as the Christmas tree. The legend spread, and soon Christmas trees became the norm in the newly converted Bavaria, and eventually extended out to become today's tinsel strewn, electric lit, bauble hung festival, worthy of a cosmic battle indeed. Though these trees of ours started as *an ordinary reminder of the everlasting life of the unassuming child born to save the world*, to bring **peace** into the darkest of forests and the darkest of hearts.

The Christmas Tree is "the wood of peace," a symbol of the everlasting peace made by Jesus' sacrifice, not our own, a reminder that heaven and earth come together through this unassuming child whose birth we celebrate. The Christmas tree has become so common and so prolific at this time of year that it seems to just fade into the marvelous background of the season. Even the ones in our homes become like white noise amidst all the presents surrounding them and the events of the holidays.

In some way, the universality of the tree, which has brought it so much acclaim, has also caused it to disappear not from sight but at least from reflection. Perhaps though, we can look through the trees adorning our living rooms, and catch a glimpse of the peace brought in such humble form as a newborn child that would one day hang upon a tree for our sake:

"For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Jesus to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace** by the blood of the cross."

(Colossians 1:19-20)

