Pre-Christian Alpine traditions

The central and eastern Alps of Europe are rich in folklore traditions dating back to pre-Christian times, with surviving elements originating from Germanic, Gaulish (Gallo-Roman), Slavic (Carantanian) and Raetian culture.

Survival through the ages

Ancient customs survived in the <u>rural</u> parts of <u>Austria</u>, <u>Switzerland</u>, <u>Bavaria</u>, <u>Slovenia</u>, western and northern <u>Croatia</u> and north eastern <u>Italy</u> in the form of <u>dance</u>, <u>art</u>, processions, <u>rituals</u> and <u>games</u>. The high regional diversity results from the mutual isolation of Alpine communities. In the Alps, the relationship between the <u>Roman Catholic Church</u> and paganism has been an ambivalent one. While some customs survived only in the remote <u>valleys</u> inaccessible to the church's influence, other customs were actively assimilated over the centuries. In light of the dwindling

rural population of the Alps, many customs have evolved into more modern interpretations.

Pastoral traditions

Around September 8, the feast of the Nativity of Mary, it is customary to bring the cattle down from the <u>upland pastures</u> for the winter. In Bavaria, women weave fir wreaths decorated with paper roses and small mirrors to ward off demons during the downhill journey. It has been suggested that this may have been derived from end-of-summer festivals for the Germanic goddess <u>Iðunn</u>; however, it is also appropriate that shepherds would

have come down from the alps on the feast of the birth of Mary as <u>Saint Joachim</u> did on hearing it heralded by an angel while sheltering among Jewish shepherds.[1]

Winter traditions

Krampus

Krampus

The word *Krampus* originates from the <u>Old High German</u> word for <u>claw</u> (*Krampen*). In the Alpine regions, the Krampus is a

mythical horned figure represented as <u>accompanying Saint Nicholas</u>. Krampus acts as an anti-Saint Nicholas, who, instead of giving gifts to good children, gives warnings and punishments to the bad children.[2] Traditionally, young men dress up as the Krampus in the first two weeks of December, particularly in the evening of December 5, and roam the streets frightening children and women with rusty chains, hammers and bells. This figure is believed to originate from stories of <u>house spirits</u> such as <u>kobolds</u> or <u>elves</u>.

Perchten

Originally, the word *Perchten* (plural of *Perchta*) referred to the female masks representing the entourage of an ancient goddess, *Frau Perchta*, or *Pehta Baba* as it is known in Slovenia. Some claim a connection to the Nordic goddess Freyja, though this is uncertain. Traditionally, the masks were displayed in processions (*Perchtenlauf*) during the last week of December and first week of January, and particularly on January 6. The costume consists of a brown wooden mask and brown or white sheep's skin. In recent times Krampus and Perchten have

increasingly been displayed in a single event, leading to a loss of distinction of the two. Perchten are associated with <u>midwinter</u> and the embodiment of <u>fate</u> and the <u>souls</u> of the dead. The name originates from the Old High German word *peraht* ("brilliant" or "bright").

Sometimes, *<u>der Teufel</u>* is viewed to be the most *schiach* ("ugly") **Percht** (masculine singular of *Perchten*) and *<u>Frau Perchta</u>* to be the most *schön* ("beautiful") **Perchtin** (female singular of *Perchten*).

Spring traditions

[Chalandamarz](#) is an ancient festival celebrated by the Romansh speaking part of the Swiss Canton Graubünden. It is celebrated on the first of March and marks the end of winter and the arrival of spring. Its object is to scare away the evil spirits of winter and wake up the good spirits of spring.[3]

Badalisc

The [Badalisc](#) is a "good" mythological animal who lives in the woods of Andrista, in [Val Camonica](#), [Italy](#). During an annual

town festival someone dresses up as the creature and is "captured" and brought to the town. The animal is made to tell the people of the town gossip. At the end of the festival the creature is released until the next year's ceremony.[4]

Gallery

Krampus

Krampus, Salzburg 2008

Procession in <u>Klagenfurt</u>

The Badalisc in <u>Val Camonica</u>

Procession in [Leibnitz](#) ([Austria](#))

The [Bacchu-ber](#), a [sword dance](#), in [Pont-de-Cervières](#) ([France](#))

See also

- Kallikantzari
- Berchtoldstag
- Fasnacht
- Funkenfeuer
- Busójárás
- Kurentovanje
- La Vijanera
- Zvončari
- History of the Alps
- Transhumance in the Alps
- Rhaetians
- Alemanni
- Swiss folklore
- Continental Germanic mythology

- [Pre-Christian traditions of the Low Countries](#)

- [Companions of Saint Nicholas](#)

- [Namahage](#)

[***Christianity portal***](#)

References

1. *Roy, Christian. "Alpine Pastoral Customs", Traditional Festivals, Vol. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2005 (https://books.google.com/books?id=IKqOUfqt4cIC&dq=Pre-Christian+Alpine+traditions&pg=PA77) ISBN 9781576070895*

2. *Billock, Jennifer. "The Origin of Krampus, Europe's Evil Twist on Santa", Smithsonian.com, December 4, 2015 (http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/krampus-could-come-you-holiday-season-180957438/?no-ist)*

3. *Haarmann, Harald. Native Peoples of the World (https://books.google.com/books?id=vf4TBwAAQBAJ&dq=Pre-Christian+Alpine+traditions&pg=PA361) , (Steven L. Danver, ed.), Routledge, Mar 10, 2015, p.361 ISBN 9781317464006*

4. *ADL ©Atlante Demologico Lombardo: Il Bresciano - Festa del Badalisc ad Andrista di Cevo (http://www.demologi*

a.it/brescia/feste/3cevo/basalisk.ht m)

- *Wenn die Hexen umgehen*, Claudia Lagler, 5 January 1999, Die Presse (http://www.diepresse.at) (newspaper), (in German)

External links

- Swiss neopagan site focussing on pre-Christian Alpine traditions (http://altesitte.ch/) (in German)

- Swiss legends (http://www.sagen.at/texte/sagen/schweiz/sagen_schweiz.htm) and Austrian legends (http://www.sagen.at/texte/sagen/oesterreich/sagen_oesterreich.htm) on Sagen.at (in German)

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