

The New Year is a time of fresh starts and hopes, a new beginning. It is a time of celebration, family gathering, remembrance and renewal. Out with the old, in with the new. A time to reflect on the past and a time to look towards the future. With this in mind we thought it would be interesting to see how the great cultures of the world celebrated the New Year.

The celebration of the New Year is the oldest of all holidays. It was first observed in ancient Babylon about 4000 years ago. In the years around 2000 BCE, Babylonians celebrated the beginning of a New Year on what is now March 23, although they themselves had no written calendar.

Late March is a logical choice for the beginning of a new year. It is the time of year that spring begins and new crops are planted. January 1 has no astronomical nor agricultural significance.

The Babylonian New Year celebration lasted for eleven days. Each day had its own mode of celebration, and it is safe to say that modern New Year's Eve festivities pale in comparison.

The Romans continued to observe the New Year on March 25, but their calendar was continually tampered with by various emperors so that the calendar soon became out of synchronization with the sun.

In order to set the calendar right, the Roman senate, in 153 BCE, declared January 1 to be the beginning of the new year. But tampering continued until Julius Caesar, in 46 BCE, established what has come to be known as the Julian Calendar. It again established January 1 as the new year. But in order to synchronize the calendar with the sun, Caesar had to let the previous year drag on for 445 days.

During the first centuries CE, the Romans continued celebrating the New Year, but the early Catholic Church condemned the festivities as paganism. However, as Christianity became more widespread, the early Church began having its own religious observances concurrently with many of the pagan celebrations, and New Year's Day was no different. New Years is still observed as the Feast of Christ's Circumcision by some denominations.

As far back as the Middle Ages, the Church remained opposed to celebrating the New Year, and January 1 has been celebrated as a holiday by Western nations for only about the past 400 years.

The tradition of making New Year's resolutions dates back to the early Babylonians. While modern resolutions include promises to lose weight and quit smoking, the most popular resolution of early Babylonians was to return borrowed farm equipment.

Many of the traditions of New Years, as we know them, also date back to ancient cultures. Using a baby to signify the New Year was begun in Greece around 600 BCE. Their tradition, at the time, was to celebrate their god of wine, Dionysus, by parading a baby in a basket, representing the annual rebirth of that god as the spirit of fertility. Early Egyptians also used a baby as a symbol of rebirth.

Although the early Christians denounced the practice as pagan, the popularity of the baby as a symbol of rebirth forced the Church to reevaluate its position. The Church finally allowed its members to celebrate the New Year with a baby, which was to symbolize the birth of the baby Jesus.

The use of an image of a baby with a New Year's banner as a symbolic representation of the New Year was brought to early America by the Germans. They had used the effigy since the fourteenth century.