

Christmas, 2000

Dear Friends,

This season, I would like to talk about a legendary figure of Christmas: Rudolph. What do we know of Rudolph anyway? He doesn't appear in the earliest of the Clausian manuscripts, which speak only of Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner (or Donder), and Blitzen. (And some of these earlier stories may be somewhat legendary anyway. It is certainly convenient that the number of flying reindeer is exactly eight, a number of special meaning to the celebrants of winter holidays. Cupid, for example, is the Roman god of love (Eros in Greek), and “vixen”—literally a female fox—is an old derogatory term for a woman of questionable sexual ethics. Given that the records list no specific deeds of these reindeer, it might be possible that these reindeer never existed at all, and that these names might have been borrowed from other cultures so that the number of reindeer would coincide with the nights of Hanukkah. The fact that the names of these reindeer hint at certain ribald antics indicates the age of these legends; cultural folklore tends to lack the prudishness of modern times. Indeed, every so often, one hears rumors of “Lost Reindeer” turning up at various zoos and preserves, keeping alive the question of whatever happened to Cupid and Vixen, assuming they existed in the first place).

But what of Rudolph? Was he real, or just an insertion by pious transcribers? We are told that Rudolph's nose was so shiny that one might even have said it glowed. Most secular portrayals of Rudolph have attributed an independent luminescence to his nose, and such a phenomenon would not be unique; fireflies, for example, emit their own light. But the text is notably unclear on this fact, indicating instead that the nose only appeared to glow. It is very possible that the nose was highly reflective, but not actually a power source in its own right.

There has also been much debate by scholars on the color of Rudolph's nose. Conventional wisdom has it that the nose was red; after all, his full name is Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. However, a careful reading of the text will demonstrate that no mention is ever made of the color of Rudolph's nose aside from the listing of Rudolph's full name. Might the name refer to something else? Oxford scholars think so, citing the fact that the ancient Celtic word for reindeer is “etnis.” It is no secret that the political status of the North Pole is under constant scrutiny. While the USA maintains that North Pole lies in international waters, both Canada and Russia have staked a claim there. Additionally, the fact that the North Pole observes Greenwich Mean Time would seem to indicate an alliance of sorts with the United Kingdom. If, indeed, the British Isles does claim the North Pole, it would tend to explain the appearance of “St. Etnis” or “Sir Etnis” in Gaelic folklore. One might well claim that the original manuscripts spoke of Rudolph “Sir Etnis” Reindeer, without any specific mention of his nose. Alternatively, “red-nosed” could simply be a mistranslation of “nose of reeds,” or perhaps the nose really was red; there seems to be no sure way of knowing.

Another very interesting theory that has been offered in recent years concerns the idea that Santa Claus asked Rudolph merely to guide his sleigh rather than to fly it for him. While medieval artists have portrayed Rudolph as being the lead reindeer, it is very possible that Rudolph couldn't fly at all. It may well be that he sat at the right hand of Santa in the sleigh using his nose as a beacon for Santa. Additionally, when one considers that the records never actually give a clear reason for his being excluded from reindeer games, it makes sense to envision Rudolph as a flightless reindeer who simply was unable to participate in such games. While modern interpretations of this story portray the other reindeer as heartless bigots incapable of appreciating the beauty of differently-nosed organisms, it is fallacious either to attribute a notion of political correctness to the chroniclers of ancient civilizations, or to presume that the reindeer of previous eras were more shallow than modern reindeer. It might well be that the story of Rudolph was about how the physically handicapped could develop their other attributes to become contributing members of society. Rudolph could then be viewed as, perhaps, the Stephen Hawking of reindeer.

Now, much of the story conflicts with the historical records of other cultures. The Weather Channel, for example, has not listed a single instance of a foggy Christmas Eve at the North Pole in a thousand years. One realizes why this must be when one considers that Christmas Eve at the North Pole occurs after three months of continuous night; it is far too cold for fog to form. The skies are generally clear year-round at the pole, which is why some geologists refer to it as the northernmost desert region in the world. It may be that ancient chroniclers may have combined the story of Rudolph's ascension with a sighting of Halley's comet. Or perhaps, a subtler astronomical occurrence, such as a convergence of two or more celestial bodies may have been recorded as an appearance of a single bright nose, for lack of a clearer explanation.

In any case, most scholars agree that the Historic Rudolph will never be truly understood. However, Christmas is not supposed to be about deconstructing the legends of influential reindeer. Christmas is about celebrating the life of a reindeer, real or imagined, who, although of humble birth, although unaccepted by his peers, rose to sit at the right hand of Santa himself, making Christmas possible in the first place.

Happy Holidays!

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