Krampus: History and Culture

Holidays usually have a folkloric symbol or animal to represent it. Easter has a bunny, Saint Patty's Day has a leprechaun, Cupid for valentines day, and Saint Nicholas for Christmas. Some holidays have multiple symbols and representations, for a majority, they are all bright and pleasant, but for one it is the opposite. Originating in Europe Saint Nicholas got a sidekick and helper named Krampus. There is only speculation about where Krampus came from with no definitive proof. There are many different depictions of Krampus depending on the region, as well as celebrations and various festivals.

Krampus goes by many different names such as Belsnicker and Knecht Ruprecht in different parts of Germany. France calls him Hans Trapp or Père Fouettard, and the Netherlands has the controversial Zwarte Piet, or Black Peter (Little). Depending on whom you ask most say the name Krampus was derived from the German word “krampen,” meaning claw in old German (Basu). This is debatable for some would also argue that his name is from the Bavarian word “krampn,” which means lifeless or dried out (Ferrell). Krampus is described as Saint Nicholas’s helper, while he takes care of all the good children Krampus takes care of all those who did not make the nice list. There are many versions of the storytelling what he does with the unfortunate children. Some say he takes the bad children in a basket he carries on his back, to the underworld to either serve for a particular time or to live for the rest of their lives, while others say he puts the unfortunate children in his basket then tosses it into the nearest
Krampus is depicted as a half-goat, half-demon, bearing horns, dark hair, and fangs, the anti-St. Nicholas comes with a chain and bells that he lashes about, along with a bundle of birch sticks meant to swat naughty children (Basu). He is also usually shown with having a forked tongue, ram’s horns, cloven hooves, and a long tail. This legendary beast also shares characteristics with other scary, demonic creatures in Greek mythology, including satyrs and fauns (Basu).

Krampus seems to be made up of many different animals or a more demonic version of other folklore creatures. Krampus like satyrs and fauns in Greek mythology are covered in fur that stands on two legs with hooves. With real-life animals though he shares an elongated tongue with iguanas, frogs, and woodpeckers. The tongue said to be used in both cases for catching and trapping prey. There is also the debate on if Krampus could have descended from the extinct order Mesonychid, predatory land ungulates or a relative of the long-extinct Artiodactyla Andrewsarchus, which some paleontologists interpret as a cloven-hoofed carnivore (Lamb). Cryptozoologists have tried to find ways to explain the creation of Krampus and how he was created and designed through the years. The legend can be traced back to pre-Christian folklore. It was used as a cautionary avatar of the hazards of going abroad on a dark and snowy night (Farrell). It has also been proposed that Krampus is of Norse origins, some believe he is the son of the Norse God, Hel. While others think that Krampus represents the Horned God, a popular figure in witchcraft and that his birch rods have a connection with the initiation rites of witch-covens; rites which entailed binding and scourging as a form of mock-death (Bruce). Some of the customs are also thought to possibly be from Austria and their traditions surrounding the pagan goddess Perchta and her consort of frightening and unruly Schiachperchten which is another form of Krampus (Lamb). When the Christians arrived and
replaced the pagan winter festivals with Christmas, Krampus became associated with the devil and was placed in a subservient position to Saint Nicholas, forced to wear chains to show his inferiority (Geller). During the Winter Solstice festivities, Villagers across the continent dressed up as animals, wild-men and mythic figures to parade and perform humorous plays. This ancient guising and masking tradition continues to this day as the primary source for our modern Halloween with its costumes, trick-or-treat, and pagan symbolism (Who). Among the most familiar figures in these folk rituals were Old Man Winter and the horned Goat-Man — archetypes now found in the forms of Saint Nick/Santa Claus, and the Devil (‘Old Nick’), aka Krampus (Who).

In Europe, especially Germany, Krampus is a big part of their celebrations and traditions. As the years continue, more and more countries are adopting these festivities and traditions with some minor or major changes to fit the countries culture. According to folklore, Krampus purportedly shows up in towns the night before December 6, known as Krampusnacht, or Krampus Night (Basu). Nikolaustag or Saint Nicholas Day is celebrated on December 6th along with Krampusnacht. Today it serves as a preliminary round for Christmas as well as its original purpose of seeing whos been good and whos been bad. One of the biggest celebrations is the Krampuslauf (or “the running of the Krampus”) it is held in many regions of Germany and Austria, in which revelers don elaborate costumes and parade through the crowded streets twirling blazing sparklers, dragging clattering chains, and swinging whips and staves at anyone not quick enough to get out of their way (Ferrell). Once the parade passes through, there’s nothing but cheering spectators — and quite a few weeping children — left in its wake (Farrell). A few American cities, scattered from coast to coast, now conduct a Krampuslauf or a Krampusfest in early December (HF). Portland, Oregon will conduct its sixth annual
Krampuslauf. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania holds what is termed a “family friendly” Krampuslauf that features a “Parade of Spirits,” mask-making and other craft workshops (HF). There are also Krampus events in Los Angeles, Bellingham, Washington; Burlington, Vermont; San Francisco, and Denver (HF). There are a few places where the Krampus ceremony has become more of a mid-winter, testosterone-fueled alcoholic binge, where scaring kids takes a back seat to heavy drinking and harassing women. However, for the most part, the 450-year tradition (no written records before 1582) is appropriately observed and is making something of a comeback in Austria after being discouraged by a church and civic authorities in the recent past (HF). For the most part, it is a time where people dress up in elaborate costumes of Krampus and run through the streets terrorizing anyone in their way with no leader or hierarchy of power to control the mob.

Krampus is an elaborate and mystified legend told to terrify kids into doing what is deemed suitable. All that is known is the legend originated in Europe around Germany and Austria pre-Christian era. Krampus is depicted as a scary, terrifying creature that provides a ghastly sight to those who see him. Despite all this, around the world, Krampus is memorialized and celebrated through festivities and throughout pop culture more recently in movies, television shows, and comics. Krampus has been around for many generations told from family to family, parents to kids, the knowledge of Krampus is only spreading throughout the countries.
Bibliography


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