

Origin of Carnival roots

[Mardi Gras](#), [Carnival](#), [Fastnacht](#)—many more names are given to the worldwide tradition of public celebrations, parades, masquerading and general merriment, stretching over a period between the winter of the old year and early spring of the new year. There's more to Carnival though than the obvious party atmosphere. The origin of Carnival roots in an ancient web of cultural and religious practices that reach far deeper than having a good time and getting drunk.

Carnival as we know it today combines two almost diametrically opposed traditions. One is cultural and originated in pre-Christian times. Based on pagan beliefs and primitive nature religions, these festivities celebrated the end of winter and the beginning of spring. Ancient examples include Roman festivals like [Saturnalia](#) and [Bacchanalia](#). While the first one was dedicated to Saturn (the god of crop and harvest), the second honored the Roman god Bacchus. Primarily the god of wine, Bacchus also inspired other pleasurable activities, from music to sexuality to ritual ecstasy and mass madness. In that spirit these festivals ran wild with people eating, drinking, and frolicking, dressed as animals, crop or vines, but also as devils and witches to signify the battle between the evil, dead spirits of winter and the good, budding spirits of spring.

Beginning in the 15th century, reform-minded humanists and church fathers sought to suppress and discredit pre-Lenten festivities, which included satirical theatrics, boisterous games and bodily self-indulgence. The reformers began to associate the "sinful" pleasures of Carnival with the pagan materialism and orgiastic sensuality of ancient Greek and Roman rites, such as the Bacchanalia, Saturnalia and Lupercalia. But that didn't stop Renaissance monarchs and their courtiers from celebrating Carnival in glittering style.

With the advent of Christianity, these pagan and cultural festivities were appropriated into the Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) religious tradition of commemorating the end of the Christmas season. Yet, the merriment and celebrating wasn't cut from the agenda. It now preceded the penance of [Lent](#). A 40-day period of fasting, Lent prepares the believer through prayer, alms giving and self-denial for the annual commemoration of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is celebrated on Easter Day.

Faced with 40 days of abstinence and reflection, of no partying or drinking, not to speak of eating animal products, such as meat, eggs, and milk, it was only human for devout believers to indulge in planned debauchery before surrendering their souls to penance. Therefore, the etymological origin of the word "Carnival" most likely roots in the Latin "carne," meaning meat, and "vale" meaning farewell (good-bye to meat and other desires of the flesh). The word "Mardi Gras" or "Fat Tuesday" originally marks the Tuesday of feasting and merry-making before Lent, which commences the following week on Ash Wednesday.

Carnival (from the Latin words carn-caro levare, meaning "removal of flesh"), is a Christian festival that embodies many traditions that originated with the ancient Greeks and Romans--relating to their gods and religious festivals honoring spring fertility rites.



In the early Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was unable to abolish all of these ancient traditions after converting pagan tribes to Christianity. The Church was forced to adapt many ancient feasts and festivals, originally celebrated in honor of pagan gods, to Christian beliefs. Today, revelers on parade floats still don the regalia of the Greek gods

Due to different religious and cultural influences, the start and length of the worldwide carnival season varies, but the world's longest carnival celebration is held in Brazil. In the U.S., popular celebrations include the [Mardi Gras street parades in New Orleans, Louisiana](#), and [the fantastical masquerade balls in Mobile, Alabama](#).

In Latin America, famous celebrations include the [Carnival in Rio de Janeiro](#) and the [Carnival of Barranquilla in Colombia](#).

Famous merry-makings in Europe take place in [France](#), [Italy](#), and [Germany](#).

No matter where you choose to join the fun, be mindful that you're not just indulging in mindless merriment, but that you are doing your part in keeping one of the world's most religious and culturally sacred pagan tradition alive.

