



## WAS THERE NO FESTIVAL OF SOL ON 25 DECEMBER BEFORE 324 AD?

Most of us are aware that the 25th December is labelled as the “Natalis [solis] Invicti” in the *Chronography of 354*; specifically in the 6th part, which contains the so-called “Calendar of Philocalus” ([online here](#)), listing the state holidays. Sol Invictus was introduced into Rome by Aurelian in 274 AD as a state cult, and it seems reasonable to suppose that this state holiday was introduced at the same time. The *Chronography* also lists the saints’ days, in another calendar dating from 336 ([online here](#)), including Christmas on 25 December. It is often supposed, therefore, that the date of Christmas was selected precisely to coincide with this solar holiday. This theory was advanced by H. Usener in his book *Das Weihnachstfest* (1889, rep. 1911) with a follow-up in his posthumous article on Sol Invictus in 1905.<sup>[1]</sup>

However I have lately seen claims that, far from Christmas being located on the date of a pagan holiday, the truth is that Julian the Apostate (or someone) established a solar festival on the pre-existing date of Christmas! These claims seem to derive from an interesting article by Steven Hijmans, “Usener’s Christmas”.<sup>[2]</sup> Hijman is a revisionist, so it is necessary to be wary, but I thought that it might be useful to review some of the evidence.

In the *Chronography of 354*, in the “Filocalian calendar”, some holidays – all associated with emperors or gods – are marked by chariot races (circenses missus). These are also in multiples of 12 races, with one exception. The sole exception is the entry for 25 December:

N·INVICTI·CM·XXX

Which is the *natalis* of Invictus (rather than Sol) and 30 races, rather than a multiple of 12. It is, therefore, an anomalous entry.

Hijmans makes some very interesting points about this.

- Firstly, he argues that celebrating festivals with chariot races rather than sacrifices was an innovation of Constantine, introduced after Constantine defeated Licinius in 324. It’s not an ancient thing. So all these chariot races were introduced then.
- Secondly, since all the ancient festivals were multiples of 12, it is clear that no festival of Sol existed on 25 December at that time. If it had, it too would be a multiple of 12. Therefore it is a later addition; as the irregular naming also indicates.
- Thirdly he speculates that this entry may not even have been present in the original copy made in 354, but added later.
- This leaves the first definite mention of a solar festival on this date to Julian the Apostate’s *Hymn to King Helios*, in December 362.

This is an interesting argument indeed. What do we make of it?

Hijmans does not detail his first point, merely referring to M. Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol*

(2001), p.132, "citing Eusebius". Unfortunately the Wallraff volume is inaccessible to me. So we have to leave this point unchecked.

The second point relies on the accurate transmission of numerals in copies of the *Chronography*. I am not clear whether this is actually reliable, or whether the text printed by Mommsen – which is the basis for the online version – is a critical text or not. The Dec. 25 date could really have read "XXXVI" for all we know.

Obviously speculation, as in the third point, is not evidence. I would suggest that we should not infer interpolation without need.

All the same this is a very interesting point. Is it really possible that this was the case?

1. <sup>[1]</sup>H. Usener, "Sol Invictus", *RhM* 60 (1905) pp. 465-491.↩

2. <sup>[2]</sup>Steven Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas: A contribution to the modern construct of late antique solar syncretism", in: M. Espagne & P. Rabault-Feuerhahn (edd.), *Hermann Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2011. 139-152. Online [here](#), although the online version appears to be a draft. However Hijmans' full thesis, with extensive plates, is online [here](#).↩

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