



Inventing the Christmas Tree

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Bernd Brunner

Translated from the German by Benjamin A. Smith

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS
new haven and london

An earlier version of this book was published as *Die Erfindung des Weihnachtsbaums*, © 2011 by Insel Verlag, Berlin.

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Designed by Sonia Shannon.

Set in Stempel Schneidler type by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brunner, Bernd, 1964– [Erfindung des Weihnachtsbaums. English]

Inventing the Christmas tree / Bernd Brunner; translated from the German by Benjamin A. Smith.

p. cm.

“An earlier version . . . was published as *Die Erfindung des Weihnachtsbaums*, c. 2011 by Insel Verlag, Berlin”—T.p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-300-18652-9 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Christmas trees—History.

2. Christmas trees—Germany—History. I. Title.

GT4989.B78 2012

394.2663—dc23

2012012737

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Contents

Inventing the Christmas Tree 1

Selected Bibliography 95

Illustration Credits 99

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A Tree Full of Mystery

A colorfully decorated, fragrant tree, lit with strings of twinkling lights—the most important and enduring symbol of Christmas, the major annual festival in the Christian world. When it's snowy and dark outside and the days are short, the tree lets us dream of nature's life force returning. Its deep evergreen is the symbol of life long-lasting, and its decorations—anticipating the buds and blossoms of the coming season—give the tree a hint of fairyland. A visual magnet, it lightens the gloom of winter, delivers a slice of the forest within the walls of the home, and, on Christmas Eve, awakens joy and hope that the sun will soon return for longer hours.

Sometimes it can be useful to make the familiar seem alien. Of course, trees are not normally found in houses, nor are they decorated with candles, straw stars, tinsel, or glass balls. Instead, they are more likely to bear blossoms, fruits, or pinecones, or the weight of birds and squirrels. And most trees have roots that stretch deep into the ground. But the tree in this book usually has only its crown and trunk—and its place is in the home. A wholly remarkable tree, in short, one in need of an explanation. Although now inseparable from Christmas for us, the tree isn't found in this form in early Christianity at all. It is missing even from



Isn't this tree a bit too big?

church songs and prayers. Something mysterious surrounds this tree that first appeared in the German cultural context, before it literally branched out into other central and northern European countries, America, Russia, and beyond, capturing the imagination of many people. This book also tells a small global story.

What drove people to go off into the forest, chop down a tree, put it in their house, and decorate it in the first place? Is it really just a pagan remnant—as conventional wisdom has it—or is the history behind it more complex? What is the symbolic message it conveys?

The Search for the First Tree

And then, all of a sudden, there it was. It seems to have appeared *ex nihilo*; first only here and there, and soon all the more frequently. Scant notes, censures, and prohibitions in yellowed documents and notebooks of old testify to its existence, but even these are mostly indirect. A precise record of its appearance is nowhere to be found. In 1419 the Freiburg Fraternity of Baker's Apprentices appears to have seen a tree decorated with apples, wafers, gingerbread, and tinsel in the local Hospital of the Holy Spirit. Another document claims that the first Christmas tree was erected in Tallinn, Estonia, in the year 1441. There the tree was set up in front of the town hall for a dance. The record is ambiguous, though, for the Middle Low German word that was used—*bom*—could also have referred to a decorated mast or pole.