



**Christmas and New Years  
customs, traditions and celebrations  
in Cyprus**

In Cyprus , when we talk about the "holidays" we are referring to the holiday period of Christmas, New Year and Epiphany. Traditionally the Christmas holiday period lasts 12 days in Cyprus. There are many customs associated with the "twelve day of Christmas," some very old and others relatively recent, like the decorated tree and the turkey on the Christmas-day table.

## The 12 days of Christmas



**CHRISTMAS**  
25<sup>th</sup> of  
December



**NEW YEAR**



**EPIPHANY**  
6<sup>th</sup> of  
January

**Christmas in Cyprus**, or "the holidays," are not what they were 50 years ago. Over the years we notice a universal culture developing as the western European customs spread more and more change.

Today Christmas in Cyprus appears more impressive, glossier and more glamorous. Store windows are decorated almost a month in advance, and in the cities the streets and town squares are lit with colourful lights.





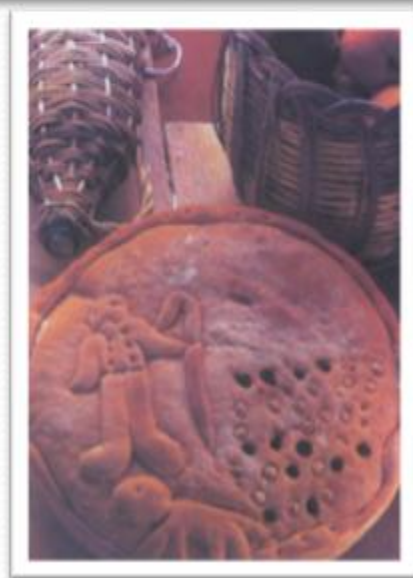
The traditions and customs are still alive in the villages. The housewives clean with extra care their homes and a few days before Christmas they prepare the Christmas cookies. The most famous cookies are the honey cookies called “melomakarona” and the “kourabiedes”.





**In the villages also, the housewives bake the bread in the traditional ovens.**

**The most famous bread for the days of Christmas is the bread made for Jesus Christ, called “Christopsomo” or “Gennopitta”.**





**A Christmas custom that all the children love are the carols. On Christmas Eve, children go from door to door in groups of two or more, singing the carols, while accompanied by the sounds of the triangle and sometimes guitars or drums.**





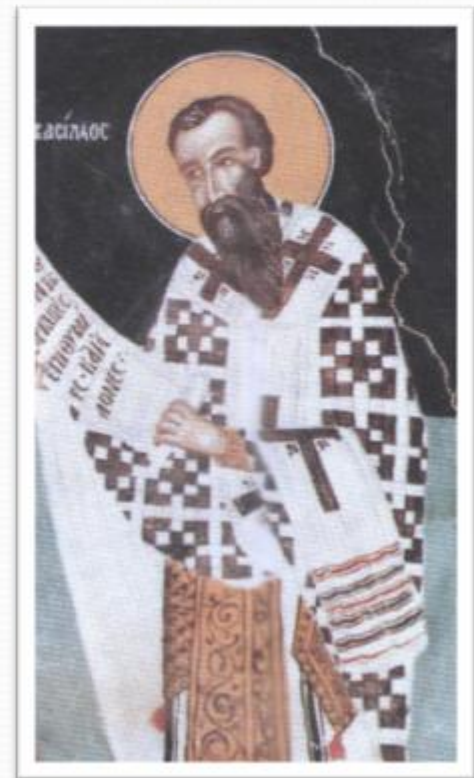
**In some villages, the villagers hang an olive branch to the front door to keep away any evil spirits and bring peace to their houses and to their hearts.**



**Another custom connected with the olive tree is the following: On New Years Eve, families gather around the fire place and throw olive leaves into the coals, asking Saint Basil to show, if for example somebody loves them. If the leaf starts jumping and “dancing” in the fireplace, this means that the person they had in mind loves them. But if the leaf burns without any moving, it means that, that person doesn’t love them.**



**Vasilopita** is the Greek and Cypriot New Year's cake. **Vasilopita** is associated with Saint Basil's day on January 1<sup>st</sup>. On New Year's Day families cut the **Vasilopita** to bless the house and bring good fortune for the new year. It is traditional to have a coin in the **Vasilopita** (St. Basil's cake). The one who gets the coin is considered to be especially blessed for the year. Each member of the family gets a slice of the **Vasilopita** and whoever else is present at the time. Slices are also cut for various other people or groups, depending on local and family tradition. They may include St. Basil and other saints, the Virgin Mary, the Church and the poor.



**Epiphany in Cyprus** is known as *Theofania* or *Fota*. The first sanctification of the Epiphany (The Enlightenment) takes place in church on the Eve of the holiday. Afterwards, the priest goes from house to house holding a cross and a basil branch. As he walks through each house, he uses the basil to sprinkle the Holy water in all the areas of the house in order for the evil spirits to go away.



The big sanctification takes place the following day, January 6, the day of the Epiphany in Cyprus. After church, the priest throws a cross into the water, thus blessing the waters. Then, those who dare - mostly the younger people - jump into the usually icy water and compete in retrieving the cross. The one who brings the cross up to the surface will enjoy good luck and health for the entire year.

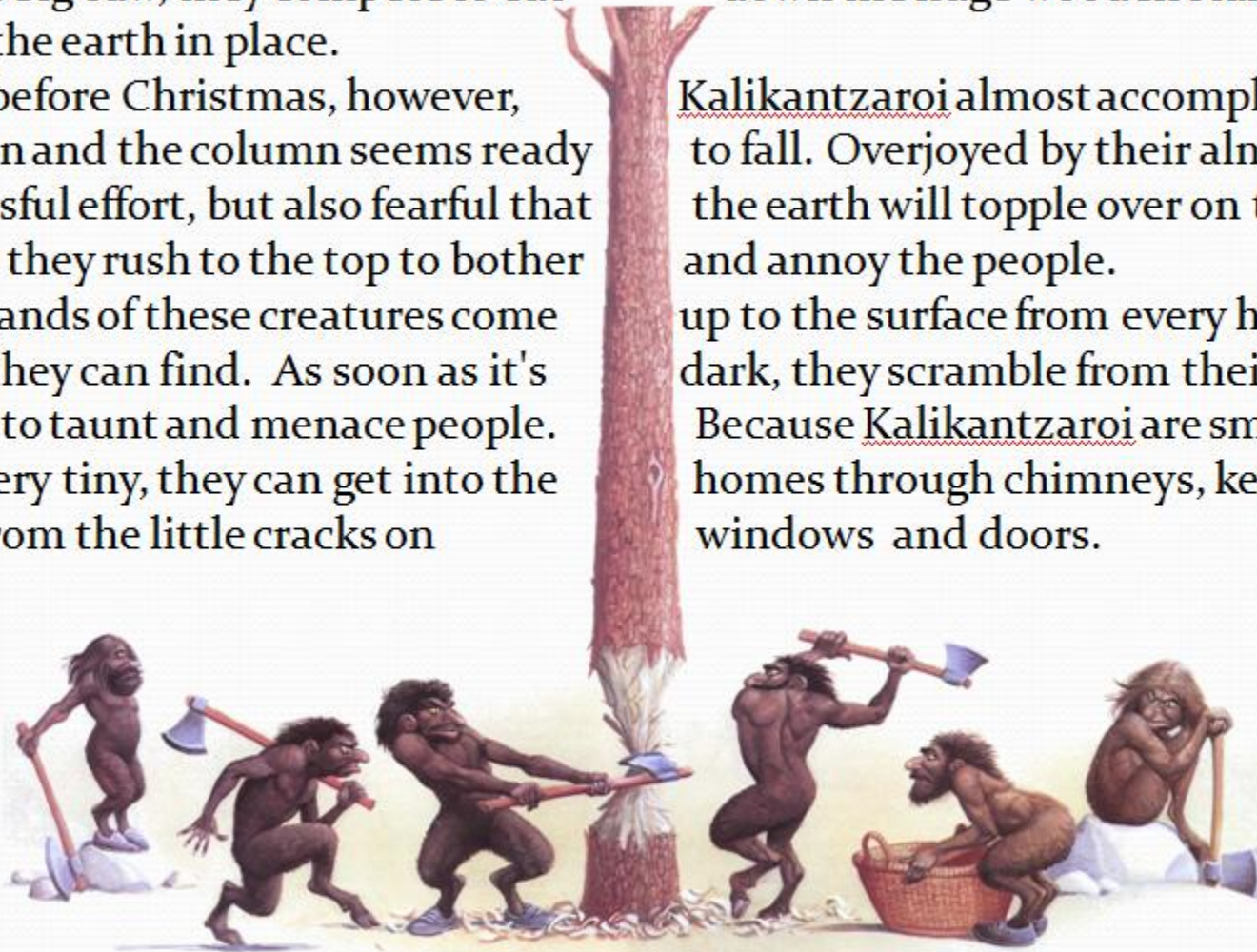


Kalikantzaroi, or the **Greek Christmas Sprites**, are small blackish and hairy creatures, with long arms and tail, who reside in the bowels of the earth. With a big saw, they compete to cut down the huge wooden stake which holds the earth in place.

Right before Christmas, however, mission and the column seems ready successful effort, but also fearful that heads, they rush to the top to bother Thousands of these creatures come crack they can find. As soon as it's places to taunt and menace people. even very tiny, they can get into the even from the little cracks on

Kalikantzaroi almost accomplish their to fall. Overjoyed by their almost the earth will topple over on their and annoy the people.

up to the surface from every hole or dark, they scramble from their hiding Because Kalikantzaroi are small, some homes through chimneys, keyholes, windows and doors.



Kalikantzaroi disappear during the celebration of the lights, after the waters are blessed by the priests. As those pesky little creatures depart, you can hear them saying: "Leave we shall, because the crazy priest has arrived with his incense burner and his holy water sprinkler . . ."



When they return back to the bowels of the earth, they find the tree as it was before they cut it, and they start cutting it again until the next Christmas...



Housewives, in order to send away the Kalikantzarous, prepare very delicious cookies, called "loukoumades" and throw some on the roofs of their houses, in order Kalikantzaroi to eat them and to go away.