

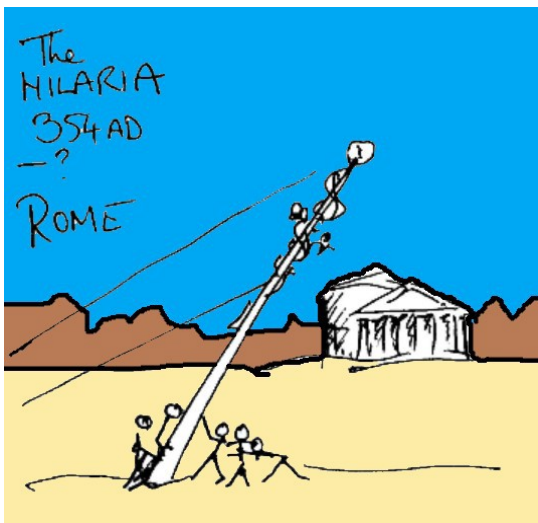
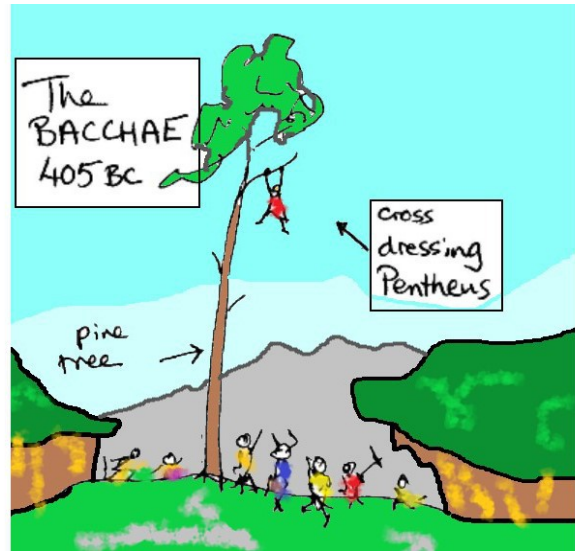
## A New Way of Looking at Maypole Heritage

If you had been in Rome in March of 354AD you may have been lucky enough to see a musical and dancing procession bearing rushes to a sacred building. Any self respecting morris dancer of the Lancashire tradition would have felt at home. However, this was no church, but a pre-Christian temple that was the destination. The temple that the procession was dancing towards was that of Cybele, mother goddess with warlike attendants. She had been brought from the East, in 204BC, from Phrygia in modern day Turkey, which was then outside the area of Roman control.

A week later and you would have seen a pine tree brought from outside the city, decorated with wool and violets and erected as the focus of the customary activities for the next two days.

So, first rush bearing, and then as near as you could expect, a Maypole just as recognisable as in medieval England. The ribbons came much later. This custom in Rome was not directly to do with Cybele, but to remember her male companion, Attis.

I had never heard of these two, until I did, but they were well known hundreds of years before even coming to Rome. Attis was an alter-ego for Bacchus, or Dionysus, or Bromius, and in 405 BC when Rome was a small city state, and Phrygia was part of the Persian empire, he and Cybele feature in the play *The Bacchae* by Euripedes, performed in Athens. In the play a pine tree plays a crucial, though off-stage role.



So this pole raising custom already seems to have had a long cross-cultural heritage well before it was recorded in Rome. Rome at that time was increasingly dominated by the Roman Christian church. But how could a pagan ritual make the journey from Rome to England and from March to May? Well, probably in much the same way that the celebration of the birth of Christ moved from January to December, became surrounded by pagan Saturnalian festivities and came to England. That is, through the church and with the missionaries led by St Augustine in 597AD.

There is plenty of evidence of church flexibility in nudging converts to accept Christianity. Sometimes this meant adding importance to a date significant in the Roman secular tradition, like moving the Feast of All Saints to November 1. This happened across Europe. The changing of the name of Pascha to Easter because it fell in the Anglo-Saxon month of Eostur only happened in England. Likewise, the Attis-pinetree pole custom happening on Mayday, only seems to have taken root in England. It then appears to have transferred to Germany with a second wave of missionaries led by St Boniface.

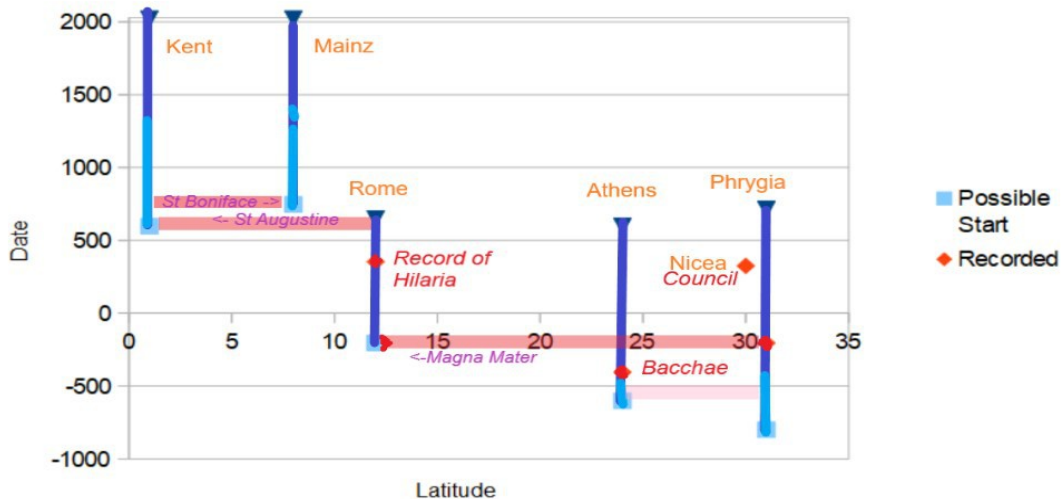
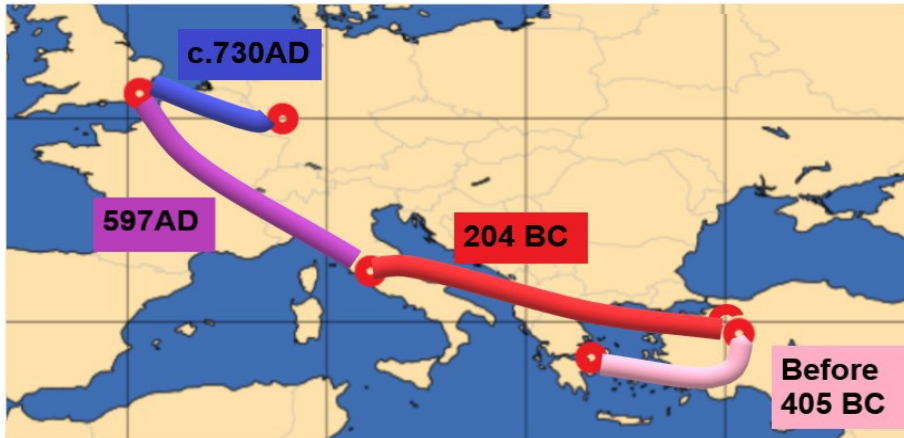


Pieter Brueghel 16th Century

In this diagram below I summarise the development of the maypole story. First from earth goddess in Phrygia who was associated in myths with pine trees but with no surviving records of rituals, to well recorded rituals in Rome, coexisting with Christian Popes. Next to strikingly similar customs emerging in England which had been converted to Christianity by St Augustine and finally to effectively identical 'Maibaum' traditions in Germany. ~

Read the diagram from right to left, from bottom to top.

### Journeys of Customs through Space and Time



#### Footnote



Here is a photo of a present-day annual custom, in mid-April, erecting a prayer-flag pole in sight of Mount Kailish in Tibet.

On the face of it, there are relatives of the English Maypole further east than Turkey, throughout India as well as in Tibet.

And why not?