

Origins of Halloween & Yule

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For the real origins of Halloween customs and the identity of "Samhain," we have to look a great deal deeper than Christian comic books or Sunday morning sermons to investigate the Paleopagan and Neopagan Celtic and Germanic calendars.

The Ancient Celtic Fire Festivals

There were four Major High Days celebrated by the Paleopagan Druids throughout the Celtic territories: Samhain, Candalmas, Beltane & Lammas. Four additional High Days (Winter Solstice or "Midwinter," Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice or "Midsummer," and Fall Equinox), which are based on Germanic or other Indo-European cultures, are also celebrated in the Neopagan Druid calendar.

The most common practice for the calculation of Samhain, Candalmas, Beltane & Lammas has been, for the last several centuries, to use the civil calendar days or eves of November 1st, February 1st, May 1st and August 1st, respectively. You can see the just-cited essay for other methods used by Neopagans today, however, since we have conflicting evidence on how the Paleopagan Druids calculated these dates, modern Neopagans just use whichever method is most convenient. This means, of course, that we aren't all doing anything uniformly on any given night, which fits perfectly with the Neopagan saying that, "organizing Pagans is like herding cats", but doesn't match the Evil Conspiracy theories about us very well -- which have us all marching to a strict drumbeat in perfect unison.

These four major holy days are traditionally referred to as "fire festivals" because to the ancient Celts, as with all the Indo-European Paleopagans, fire was a physical symbol of divinity, holiness, truth, and beauty. Whether in Ireland or India, among the Germans or the Jews, sacred fires were kindled on every important religious occasion. To this very day, among Eastern and Western Catholics, you can't have a satisfying ritual without a few candles being lit -- of course, the Fundamentalists consider them Heathen too!

Samhain is pronounced "sow-en" -- because "mh" in the middle of an Irish word is a "w" sound. Samhain is the most important of the fire festivals, because it marks the Celtic New Year. Samhain was the original festival that became "All Saints' Day" in the Christian calendar. Since the Celts, like many cultures, started every day at sunset of the night before, this became the "evening" of "All Hallows" ("hallowed" = "holy" = "saint") which was eventually contracted into "Hallow-e'en" or the modern "Halloween."

Among other things, Samhain is the beginning of the Winter Half of the Year (the seasons of Geimredh & Earrach) and is known as "the Day Between Years" (the year, like the day, began with its dark half). The day before Samhain is the last day of the old year and the day after Samhain is the first day of the new year. Being "between years," it is considered a very magical time, when the dead walk among the living and the veils between past, present and future may be lifted in prophecy and divination.

Many important mythological events in Celtic history are said to have occurred on this day. Many of these events had to do with the temporary victory of the forces of darkness over those of light, signaling the beginning of the cold and dark half of the year.

There is some evidence to indicate that three days were spent celebrating this festival. Philip Carr-Gomm, Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, speaking of both Paleopagan and Mesopagan Druids in England, had this to say about it in his *Elements of the Druid Tradition*: Samhain, from 31 October to 2 November was a time of no-time. Celtic society, like all early societies, was highly structured and organised, everyone knew their place. But to allow that order to be psychologically comfortable, the Celts knew that there had to be a time when order and structure were abolished, when chaos could reign. And Samhain, was such a time. Time was abolished for the three days of this festival and people did crazy things, men dressed as women and women as men. Farmers' gates were unhinged and left in ditches, peoples' horses were moved to different fields, and children would knock on neighbours' doors for food and treats in a way that we still find today, in watered-down way, in the custom of trick-or-treating on Hallowe'en.

But behind this apparent lunacy, lay a deeper meaning. The Druids knew that these three days had a special quality about them. The veil between this world and the World of the Ancestors was drawn aside on these nights. And for those who were prepared, journeys could be made in safety to the 'other side'. The Druid rites, therefore, were concerned with making contact with the spirits of the departed, who were seen as sources of guidance and inspiration rather than as sources of dread. The dark moon, the time when no moon can be seen in the sky, was the phase of the moon which ruled this time, because it represents a time in which our mortal sight needs to be obscured in order for us to see into the other worlds.

The dead are honoured and feasted, not as the dead, but as the living spirits of loved ones and of guardians who hold the root-wisdom of the tribe. With the coming of Christianity, this festival was turned into Hallowe'en (31 October), All Hallows [All Saints Day] (1 November), and [All Souls Day] (2 November). Here we can see most clearly the way in which Christianity built on the Pagan foundations it found rooted in these isles. Not only does the purpose of the festival match with the earlier one, but even the unusual length of the festival is the same.

The Christian Church was unable to get the people to stop celebrating this holiday, so they simply sprinkled a little holy water on it and gave it new names, as they did with other Pagan holidays and customs. So when Fundamentalists come to your local school board and try to get Halloween removed from the public schools because it's a Pagan holiday, they are perfectly correct. Of

course, so are Valentine's Day, Easter, and Christmas, so it's hardly fair to toss just one Pagan holiday out -- not to mention grossly unconstitutional!

If we assume that All Saints Day was invented to co-opt the central day of Samhain and was associated originally with the Gods and Goddesses of the Celts, and All Souls Day was supposed to co-opt the worship of the Ancestors, then the modern "Cabbage Night," "Hell Night" (boy does that push the Fundamentalists' buttons!) would correspond to a celebration of the often mischievous Nature spirits. This then nicely covers the Indo-European pattern of the "Three Kindreds" of Deities, Ancestors, and Nature Spirits.

Yule

The origins of our modern Christmas are ancient: in antiquity the winter solstice was celebrated on the 25th day of December, as the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun'. This midwinter festival was a joyous time marked by festal fires to celebrate the slow departure of Winter, and to usher in fertility and good fortune. It was only around the beginning of the 4th Century that Christianity assigned the Nativity of Christ to the date of the existing pagan festival. The revamped festival soon absorbed influences from other sources, including those of the Germanic midwinter feast of 'Yule'. By the 11th Century 'Christ's Mass' had solidified into an uneven fusion of the Christian Nativity with Yule, Roman and pagan customs.

Many of these traditional elements were condemned as superstitious by the Protestant Reformation. Today, recognisable pieces of pagan ritual still remain: the mumming plays, with their pre-Christian themes of death and resurrection; sword dancing and wassailing. One pagan practice that has nearly died out is the wearing of animal disguises at the Winter festival.

In this (European) country the custom lives on in the 'Mari Lwyd' Hobby Horse of Llangynwyd, with its hinged snapping jaws and bottle-glass eyes. Mari Lwyd visits the houses of the village wassailing, drinking toasts and singing the health of everyone on the route.

Memories of the ancient Fire Festivals live on with the Yule log. One Christmas Eve tradition, now sadly in decline, was to carry the new Yule log into the house and set it alight with the remnants of the previous year's; it was commonly believed that to burn the log for twelve hours or more would ensure that the following year would be free of misfortune, and that the charred remains of the Yule log could preserve the house from fire, storms and lightning. Another custom with extremely ancient origins is the decoration of buildings with greenery during the Christmas period. Today we buy our Christmas decorations man-made, pre-cut and shrink-wrapped; but whatever their form, evergreens such as holly, ivy and mistletoe have long been symbols of life and fertility, and their presence at midwinter festivals serves to ensure that life will return again. The Church has found a convenient context for these fundamental beliefs: the berries of the holly symbolise the blood of Christ, and its prickles His Crown of Thorns.

Mistletoe, however, occupies a special place. It has long had sacred and magical associations (it was the Golden Bough of classical legend) and to the Church it remains thoroughly pagan: by tradition it is never allowed to hang in a place of worship. For a long time mistletoe was the centrepiece of the 'Kissing-Bough', a large garland of greenery and ornaments which was hung from the ceiling of the main living-room.

Surprisingly, the Christmas tree is a relatively new tradition; originally of German origin, it spread to America in the 18th century, before coming to England, it is thought, in the early 1800's. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had their first tree in 1841, and its popularity soon spread.