

Pre- Christianity Winter Celebrations



Yule

- Began as a Pre-Christian celebration that originated in Scandanavia thousands of years ago
- Celebrated on the winter solstice (21st December)
- Themes of fire, light and feasting
- Sacrifices and offerings made to gods or to the dead
- Feasting and celebrations could go on for up to 12 days
- Elements absorbed into Christmas celebrations, even the term Yule



Traditions adopted by Christianity

- Yule log – adopted by Christmas into a cake but originally a large wooden log that would be kept burning for the whole of the celebration
- "12 days of Christmas"
- Yule Goat – Still created out of straw in Sweden, originally a tribute to the Goats that pulled Thor's chariot, now he's a companion to Santa Claus
- Feast day



Celtic Solstice Traditions



- Celtic Pagans lived in the UK, Ireland and parts of France
- Solstice celebrations could have been undertaken as far back as 5000 years
- Stone circles and monuments such as Cairns were raised and aligned with key times of year such as the Winter and Summer solstice
- The most famous of these is Broga Cairn in Newgrange, Ireland. The entrance precisely aligns with the rising sun on the winter solstice



- In Celtic myth there is another race in a realm beneath the earth called the Tuatha de Danann, who are like elves or fairies
- There are 2 rulers as part of this world called The Holly King and The Oak King, the solstices are a time the kings do battle to control the sun and crops. The Oak King wins at the winter solstice and the sun gradually returns until the summer solstice where The Holly King wins and takes over



- Celts also worshipped a winter Goddess called the Cailleach who ruled the land between Samhain (31st Oct) and Bealltain (1st May)
- Her name translates to 'old hag'
- Her staff freezes the ground and her cloak covers the land in snow and frost, she also has the ability to control the weather and create storms
- Some legends say on the longest night of the year (Winter Solstice) it marks the end of her reign as she drinks from the well of youth and starts to become a young woman ready for spring



Celtic Traditions adopted by Christianity

- Holly and Ivy were used to decorate doorways to stop bad spirits from entering the home
- Evergreen branches would be placed on monuments for the same protection
- Mistletoe was sacred to Druids (Celtic religious leaders) and was used for a number of things from healing, fertility and good luck (the berries are also poisonous!). People would use the plant to decorate homes and encourage good luck in the coming year
- Decorating of trees with items that represented the sun, moon and stars



Saturnalia

- A Roman holiday that ran from 17th – 23rd December
- Celebrated the Sun God Saturn
- Sacrifices would be made to the God at the temple of Saturn and then feasting and festivities would begin
- Public banquets, gift giving and gambling would all be a part of the celebrations
- Slaves were seen as equals for the 7 days and would be waited on by their masters
- A 'King of Saturnalia' was elected by the people to preside over the events



Traditions adopted by Christianity

- Feasting
- Gift giving to celebrate the season

Post - Christianity

- A lot of elements of these ancient festivals were adopted by Christians as it became a dominant religion
- Emperor Constantine became baptized in 312AD and issued a proclamation for the toleration of Christianity across the empire in 313AD
- From there, what was a persecuted religion began to be the dominant western religion and areas that celebrated Yule and the Solstice were all under Roman control

- This led to Christianity adopting many elements of Pagan traditions and celebrations to ease the transition for conversion to what would become the official religion of the Empire
- The biggest thing they adopted was the date itself, there is no real evidence within the Bible to suggest Jesus was born in December so early Christian leaders took over the winter celebration of the Pagans, not quite the solstice itself but within the period of the traditional holiday

Neo-Pagan and Wiccan Celebrations

- Wiccans celebrate the Winter Solstice as the second sabbat in the Wheel of the Year
- The Wiccan year begins at Samhain (Halloween) where the God dies only to be reborn by the Goddess on the Solstice and bring the return of light
- Altars are decorated with Holly, Ivy, Evergreen and pine cones
- Fires are lit to celebrate the fire festival and bring back the light
- People may stay awake to watch the sunrise on the 22nd



Blessed Yule!

