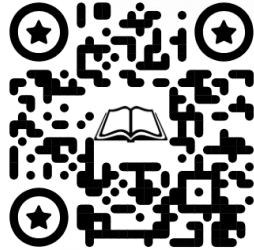


*May you find a path that fills your heart,
and sanctuary wherever you go.*



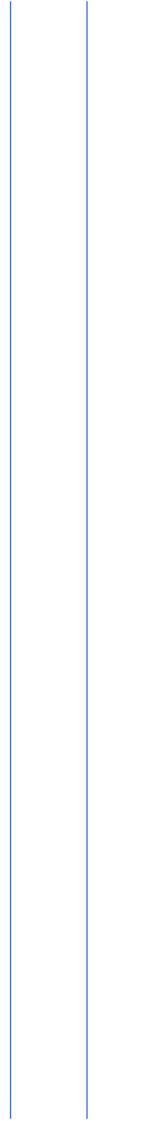
Bright Blessings, and Safe Travels!

Yule
Yule
Yule

Yule



By Ryan Robinson



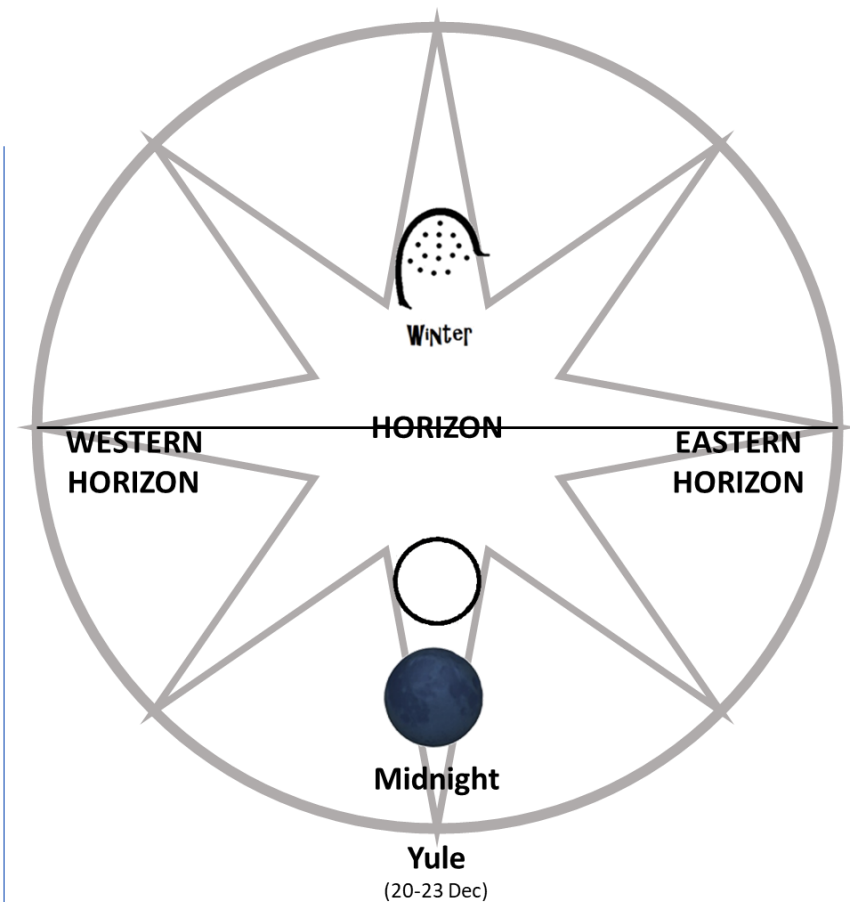
Hear me, oh shadow
Hear me, oh light
Keep me safe, through this longest night.

Hear me, oh hope,
Hear me, oh fear,
I wait sun's rebirth and the turn of the year.

Hear me, oh spirits,
Hear me, mortal family and friends,
Let us gather as darkness passes,
And until sun comes again.

I shall kindle a candle
I shall strike a torch
I shall ignite a blaze
Or stir greater flames
Through this night I keep vigil
Until day comes again.

With each turning of the wheel, you come again;
Bringing hope and promise if we endure the snow and rain.
Oh Solstice, bless us with peaceful night,
And may we bask in the glow of a new year's light.



Yule - Waiting, remembrance, stillness, and patience.

According to the Wheel of the Year, Yule is celebrated at the Winter Solstice; the longest night of the year. The harshest cold is still ahead, but after this night, the sun will begin its return. In the long nights, when the outside world is at its darkest and the light of day disappears, we reflect, remember, feast, and celebrate to stave off the darkness around us and the cold still to come.

In this space we look what the years past have been. We tell the stories of our ancestors and pass myths and lore from generation to generation. We take the time to contemplate new visions and ideas, to dream bold dreams, and make resolutions for the year ahead.

What is Yule?

When we arrive at Yule, the days have been getting shorter and the world cooling for half the year. This is a moment when much of nature is asleep. Smaller plants are gone, either dead or dormant. The mighty oak slumbers and only the evergreens remain. Animals find the season hard. Many find it easiest to follow the plants into slumber. The squirrel and the bee, the bear, and the mouse all live in the world of dreams at this time. Most of the birds have fled, flying to warmer climates for these months.

All but the greatest waters are frozen, the soil hardened to stone, air bites and burns, and fires burn low. The harvests are long since stored, and being eaten away without hope for replenishment until spring. So people gather close, sharing comfort and warmth, waiting for the darkness and cold to pass.

It is the midnight hour. The pre-dawn hours are the coldest part of the night, and the days following Yule are the most frigid part of the year. But, they are also the hours that bring us towards dawn. As the hidden moon is the “new” moon, so too can the longest night of the year mark the beginning of a new set of seasons.

After the long night, the waxing length of each day’s light can easily be identified, marking it as the beginning of a new cycle. Many myths and traditions recognize this moment of renewal. The Druid tale of the cycle of the Oak King and Holly King captures this, with the return of the Oak King overthrowing the Holly King. The Wiccan God/Goddess cycle identifies Yule as the rebirth of the God, an echo of many other ancient gods. The great Egyptian mother goddess, Isis, gave birth to Her son Horus, the sun god, on the Winter Solstice. On the same day of the year, the Greek goddess Leto gave birth to the bright, shining Apollo. Demeter, the great mother earth goddess, bore Dionysus. This shortest day was also the birthday of the Invincible Sun in Rome, as well as that of Mithras, the Persian god of light and guardian against dark evil.

Yule Invocation

Hail to the West;
To the rising sun and the spirits of earth.
I invoke you to break the darkness,
To bless this circle with grounding and nurturing.

Hail to the South,
To the day and spirits of fire.
I invoke you and ask for warmth,
To bless this circle with passion and inspiration,

Hail to the East,
To the dusk and the spirits of water.
I invoke you to help us celebrate and remember the days past,
To bless this circle with love and cleansing,

Hail to the North,
To the night and the spirits of air,
I invoke you in these long hours of shadow.
To bless this circle with insight and vision.

The night is long and the days are short.
The summer is long past,
and the quickening days of autumn ended.
I wait for spring to come.
I know the frost will hold fast,
but on this Solstice the sun begins its return.

So I will seek community
and build sanctuaries against the harsh seasons;
That we may endure until the spring comes.

I build a fire to last until the dawn!
I keep a candle lit to keep illumination alive
through this night and into a new year.

I make offerings to the gods and spirits;
That the dawn will come again
and bring the new beginnings that I seek.
And, having honored the gods and spirits,
So must I honor the things I have achieved this year.
Deeds done, obstacles overcome, and goals accomplished.
May the seeds I prepare for spring be fruitful in their time.

Caroling, Wassailing, and Mari Lwyd

The activity of going from house to house singing carols has fallen out of favor in the last few decades. However, it is deeply etched into the general consciousness as part of the season's activities. So much so that songs for the season are generally called "carols." The term carol itself originally referred to an old type of folk dance performed in the round and the singing or music that accompanied it. The word comes from either ancient Greek 'choros,' which means "dancing in a circle" or Latin 'choraula' which was a "choral song." Many modern "Christmas Carols" use music from older, popular Pagan or secular (drinking) songs with lyrics converted or replaced by Christian clergy.

The activity of going from place to place singing, however, comes from a different source. Called wassailing, it was a ritual performed in parts of England involving drinking and singing the health of trees as a type of fertility rite. This ritual sought to wake the cider apple trees and to scare away evil spirits. The ceremonies varied from village to village, but the core included songs being played or sung as the group moved from one orchard to the next, where one of the presiding party would place toast soaked in an alcoholic drink from a community cup as a gift followed by some type of incantation. Over time, this would develop into a type of adult trick-or-treating. Groups would go from house to house seeking treats and favors, including alcoholic drinks called wassail and even money, in exchange for sung blessings.

One particular wassailing ritual is that of the Welsh Mari Lwyd. It is named after a creature represented by a hobby horse made from a horse's skull mounted on a pole with the bearer hidden under a sackcloth. The Mari Lwyd would be taken by groups of men around the local area to local houses, where they would request entry through song. The householders were expected to deny through song, beginning a contest where the two sides continued their musical responses to one another. If the householders gave up, the group were allowed entry and given food and drink. Other areas have similar figures such as Penglaz from Cornwall and Laare Vane from the Isle of Man.

Some traditional Carols that come from Pagan sources include *Here We Come A-wassailing*, *Deck the Halls*, and *Carol of the Bells* (Shchedryk).

Decorating for Yule

The best-known colors for Yule are the red and green of the berries and leaves of holly. The black and silver of the icy night are also appropriate.

Decorations for Yule are generally shared with Christmas, having been adopted centuries ago, using boughs and entire evergreen trees to celebrate. The yew tree is traditionally associated with eternity and reincarnation. Similarly, sprigs of holly; green and bringing forth berries through the winter. Mistletoe is revered by Druids and the Norse. Found high up in oak and apple trees, it drew in nutrients without any roots in the earth and stayed green even when the host tree would look dead for the season. Such plants that are "evergreen," keeping their color through the cold of winter, represent enduring life.

The circular symbol of a wreath represents eternity, everlasting life, protection, and prosperity. They are typically made from evergreen plants like yew, holly, pine, mistletoe, and ivy.

Another sign of the season are straw goats. These are drawn from ancient traditions of sacrificing a kid goat to aid the return of the sun and ensure prosperity and bounty in the year to come. In modern times, these blood sacrifices have been replaced by straw, though they are still often burned as part of festivities. But, during the Yule season they serve as décor and decorations.

A "traditional" decoration is the Yule log. Originally, this was a tree which could be burned for several days and have remains left for the next year's fire. Over time, this has been simplified to a decorative log of wood with holes for candles drilled in it, and draped with mistletoe, holly, pine, or other seasonal forest cuttings, pine cones, dried berries, feathers, cinnamon, and festive ribbon. This has also led to recipes for "Yule log" cakes.

A decoration of more modern creation is the "witch's ball." A combination of spell jars and other similar magical practices, witch's balls are clear hanging ornaments filled with materials appropriate to intentions for the season.

Celebrations for Yule

One of the most traditional activities for Yule is making decorations. Things to brighten the long nights and indoor spaces. Cut boughs of evergreens can be turned into a variety of decorations including bouquets, garlands, wreaths, and other decorations. Even evergreen crowns are a possible craft. Many of these would be not just removed but possibly burnt at Imbolc, leaving a need for fresh decorations the next Yule.

Yule is also a season for storytelling. Like every holiday there are myths and traditions that are key to the season. But as a time of focus inward and on community, it becomes a time for telling personal and community histories. Bragging and Boasting about the deeds are a way to mark the accomplishments and milestones of the year. Similarly, this is a moment for Oaths, along with other claims and intents for the year to come. This is also a moment for legends and lore of the community to be told. For elders to hand down local wisdom and traditions to keep them alive. The singing of songs, especially those whose lyrics weave in such community histories, are part of this practice.

Many indoor hobbies also become a part of this holiday. Winter is a time for being inside. Shut away from the cold, many things are made for the next year. This also ties to traditions of gift giving. Presents were an important part of many ancient practices at this time of year, including the Roman Saturnalia festival.

Feasting is always a good holiday tradition. Eating a boar was done in honor of Freyr, a Norse god associated with harvest and fertility.

A Yule log's ashen remains were used to ward off evil spirits and other misfortunes, before being ignited again the following year to start the next Yule fire.

Late Yule

Various researchers and historians point to different dates and durations for the historical "Yule" festivals. As a result, reconstructionists will mark Yule at a variety of times. Several of these traditions disconnect Yule from the Solstice, often placing it later.

Many of these place the celebration about the same time as what followers of the Wheel of the Year call Imbolc. One claim is that Old Norse celebrated Yule in the three full moons between the summer moon (Sigurblot) and winter moon (Winter Nights). This would place Yule between mid-January and mid-February. Another attestation is that Yule takes place on the first full moon after the new moon of the Winter Solstice. Again, this places Yule in the timeframe sometime around the end of January and beginning of February.

12 days of Yule

Lunar calendars count each month as about 29.5 days. This is the length of time between the moon being in the same phase. (New moon to new moon, or full moon to full moon.) A year can be counted by the shifting of seasons or the movement of stars and constellations in the sky. Either way, there are 365.25 days to the solar year. The result of these two numbers is that there are about 12 lunar months that fit into a year. However, those twelve lunar months account for about 354 days. Depending on how those half days get accounted for, this leaves a mismatch of 11 or 12 days.

Such leftover nights have become a special time at the end of the year. What is called an "intercalary month" – a month between calendars (years). Often, celebrations abounded during these times. Any such time or space between or outside "normal reckoning" along with periods of darkness and shadow are "liminal," where the everyday rules don't apply and the veil between the worlds is thin.

Yuletide dates have varied through the years. They have almost always been twelve days in length. Some sources say the pre-modern celebrations often started on December 23 and went through January 3. In ancient Rome, the festival of Saturnalia (honoring Saturn) lasted about a week at this time of year.

Other calendars have dealt with these mismatches in other ways, depending on when their calendar starts and how it is constructed. The Coptic calendar, based on the ancient calendar of Egypt, uses 12 months with 30 days each, leaving only 5-6 days which they place in what the West calls September (at the end of the season of Harvest, before the start of Inundation).

Spokes in the Wheel

It is interesting to look at is the spacing of the wheel of the year. There are 12 months in a year, roughly equal to 12 moon cycles. However, there is a spare fraction of a cycle because while the Solar year is ~365.25 days a Lunar year (12 lunar cycles) is ~354.37 days.

The result of having 8 holidays over 12 months is pretty obvious; four months/moon cycles where there is a gap between holidays. Some of that is mitigated by the shift in where during individual months holidays fall. The "customary" dates for the modern holidays put one of those gaps between Ostara and Beltane and another Lughnasadh and Litha, while the last two fall on either side of Yule. This means the long night finds itself on an island amid a long season.

While October 31 / November 1 is the common date for Samhain, there are versions of the calendar that slide it later. The 10-day adjustment for the Julian calendar becoming the Gregorian calendar places it at the 10th or 11th. Some people like to use astronomy to move it to November 7 - halfway between equinox and solstice. Either of these moves that gap between Mabon and Samhain rather than Samhain and Yule – which better mirrors the spring/summer season.

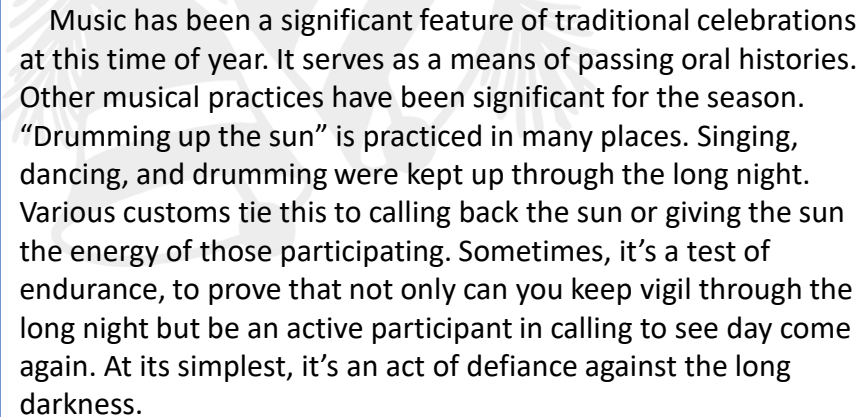
The spacing of these gaps is because half of the Wheel's observations are the equinoxes and solstices and all are tied to seasonal events. This means they're very sensitive to the wobble of the Earth. As a massive body, the planet moves according to laws of physics. A key one is inertia. Inertia means the speed of the Earth's wobble isn't consistent; it slows as it reaches the ends (solstices), speeds up as it moves away from those ends, and moves at its quickest through the middle of its arc (equinoxes).

“Midwinter”

The Celtic and Druid traditions mark the start of the seasons with the four fire holidays. This place the solstices and equinoxes as “midseason.”

Meteorologically, the seasons start at the solstices and equinoxes. The physics of solar heating creates a phenomenon called “seasonal lag” where a season's weather is delayed by 4-8 weeks.

This means each season is reaching the height of weather for that season about time for the fire festival. Thus, while Yule is sometimes “traditionally” called midwinter, the coldest days won't arrive until Imbolc.



Music has been a significant feature of traditional celebrations at this time of year. It serves as a means of passing oral histories. Other musical practices have been significant for the season. “Drumming up the sun” is practiced in many places. Singing, dancing, and drumming were kept up through the long night. Various customs tie this to calling back the sun or giving the sun the energy of those participating. Sometimes, it's a test of endurance, to prove that not only can you keep vigil through the long night but be an active participant in calling to see day come again. At its simplest, it's an act of defiance against the long darkness.

Caroling started as a-wassailing; going from house to house and begging wassail and other treats, like figgy pudding. The tradition originated before Christianity as an orchard blessing ritual. The people believed that the fruit trees went into hibernation when the nights grew longer. So they would gather in the orchards after Mid-winter and make as much noise as they could to wake up the trees and draw on good fortune for the new year.

Wassail itself was an alcohol punch made with spices and fruit juice that was used to make toasts. The word “wassail” translates as “good health.” If the drink also contained eggs, milk, or cream it was called nog.

Yule and Samhain

The time on the calendar between Samhain and Yule is one of the larger gaps between the eight holidays. In different traditions each of these are the beginning of winter. They hold aspects of death and dying. In the darkness and depths of winter, both are tied to the gates of the afterlife. Samhain is a place of passing into, while Yule is the stasis and stillness that waits. Both are times to celebrate the past, those that came before, and the fact that we are still alive. To acknowledge the eternal tug of entropy and stillness, and to make the choices that will turn the dance and bring us again into the life and light.

Samhain: Old age, ancestors, endings, passings, sacrifice, slaughter and butchery, winnowing, and wisdom.

Yule and Imbolc

While the Winter Solstice is the longest night, Imbolc falls in those coldest days and weeks of the year. Like the hours before dawn when the temperature drops, Imbolc is the hours of shadow the harvest festivals and Yule have been preparing for. Plants and animals that venture forth risk being caught in frost and being destroyed. But Imbolc will be the time when the sun is returning, and the longer hours of sunlight start the quickening in the earth that will be the first blushes of spring. New lambs and foals are being born, and the increasing light lets work be done that will be needed for the coming planting. The turn from Yule to Imbolc is the shift from faith brighter days will come to hope for what the lengthening days will bring.

Imbolc – Longing, hope, intention, and preparation.

Yule and Litha

The Summer and Winter solstices are times of extremes and powers. They stand in opposition to one another, the pregnant pause of forced inactivity of the winter versus the indolent lounging and raucous action of summer.

Litha: Adolescence, light, power, leisure, and conflict.

Faith and the Long Winter

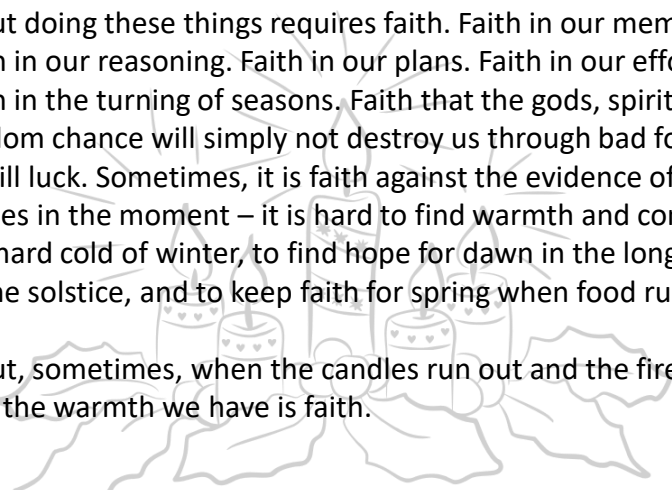
Faith can be a complex topic for Pagans and followers of Earth-centered religions. Belief, especially belief beyond what can be confirmed with your own senses, doesn't have a strong place in most of these traditions. Further, Pagans often come from other religions where faith, especially blind, unquestioning faith, was not only a central feature of the religion, but may have been abused.

However, this doesn't mean that there is no place for faith in Pagan religions. We have faith that day will follow night, that spring will follow winter, and that plants will grow again with the coming warmth. We do not have faith in these things blindly; we question and measure. We believe these things because these are the things that have happened since before humans walked the earth. We believe these things because we know the earth turns, that it orbits the sun, and that the axis tilts causing the changing of seasons.

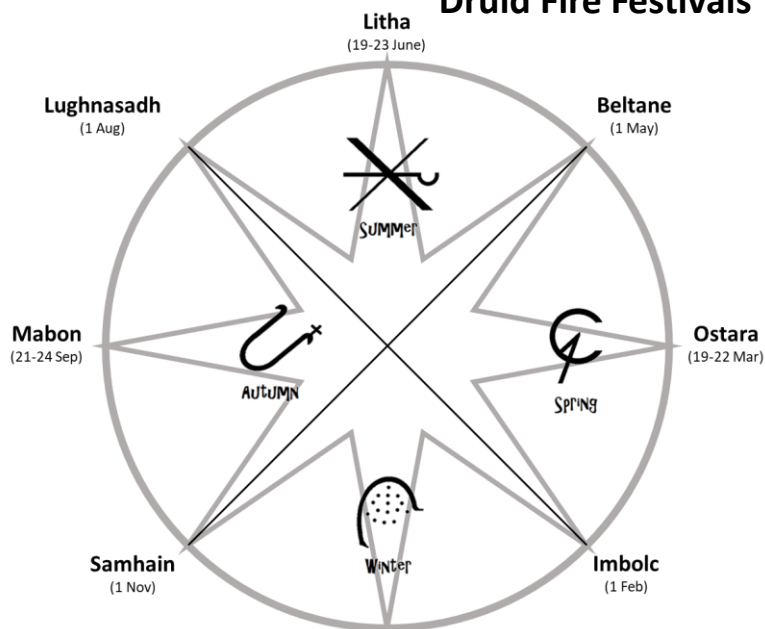
In the days before global transportation, refrigeration, and industrial agriculture we had faith that we would see the spring. Again, this is not blind faith. It is faith born of our ability to remember and plan. We prepared for winter, and for the spring that follows. We measured the days and weeks, setting aside enough so that we would emerge from the long, hard cold. Hungry, but still alive.

But doing these things requires faith. Faith in our memories. Faith in our reasoning. Faith in our plans. Faith in our efforts. Faith in the turning of seasons. Faith that the gods, spirits, or random chance will simply not destroy us through bad fortune and ill luck. Sometimes, it is faith against the evidence of our senses in the moment – it is hard to find warmth and comfort in the hard cold of winter, to find hope for dawn in the long night of the solstice, and to keep faith for spring when food runs low.

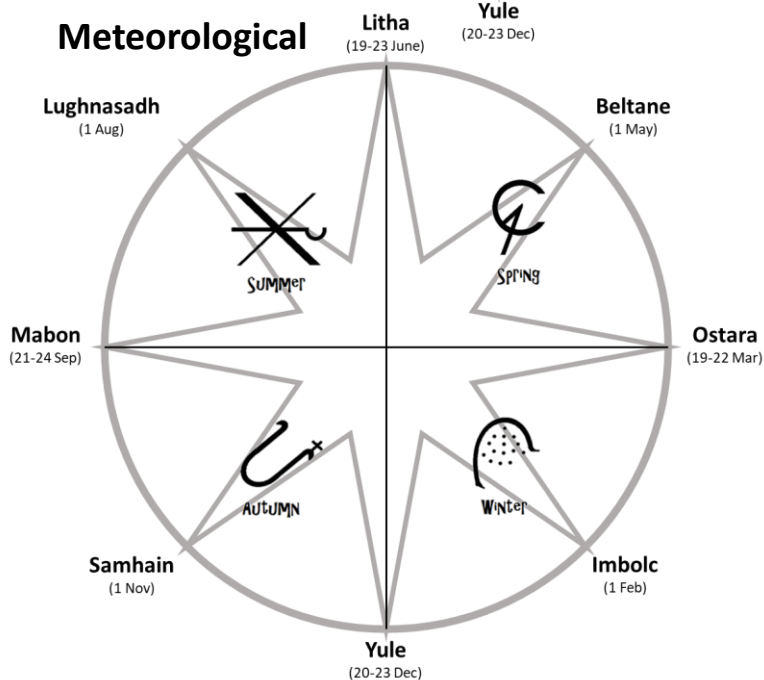
But, sometimes, when the candles run out and the fire burns low, the warmth we have is faith.



Druid Fire Festivals



Meteorological



Other Celebrations

Saturnalia is an ancient Roman festival and holiday in honor of the god Saturn, a god of agricultural bounty. This celebration was held about 17 December for the Julian calendar, and its length varied throughout the history of Rome. Sometimes it was just a day of celebration, other times it was nearly two weeks

Mōdraniht or Modranicht, "Night of the Mothers" or "Mothers' Night," was an event held at what is now Christmas Eve by the Anglo-Saxon pagans. It's been suggested that there are ties to other Germanic festivals, specifically those involving the *dísir* (collective female ancestral beings and possibly deities), the Germanic *Matres* and *Matronae* (female beings attested by way of altar and votive inscriptions nearly always appearing in trios), and Yule.

Similarly, the *Dísablót* was a sacrificial holiday which was held in honor of the *dísir*. Historical descriptions of the *Dísablót* suggest it being held both during Winter Nights, and at the vernal equinox.

Winter Nights, or Old Norse, "*vetrnætr*" was a specific time of year in medieval Scandinavia, the word literally meaning "the three days which begin the winter season." Attestations of the phrase express passage of time; "as autumn turned into winter."

Koliada is the traditional Slavic name for the pre-Christian festival or holiday celebrated at the end of December to honor the sun during the winter solstice. It involves groups of singers who visit houses to sing carols.

While Peru sits in the southern hemisphere and experiences its seasons opposite the north, the winter solstice there includes the *Inti Raymi* Festival which celebrates the Inca god *Inti* (Quechua for "sun") and marks the beginning of the solar return.

Yoruba, and related religions and practices like *Santería*, recognize days of celebration for the *Orisha* throughout the year. Two of the major *Orisha* are celebrated around this time.

December 4 is a day of celebration for *Shango*, *Orisha* of dancing, drumming, virility, lightning, thunder, and fire as well as being associated with rulership and leadership as well as the dispensing of justice and protection.

January 6 is dedicated to *Elegua*, master of roads and paths and the primary means of communication to the *Orisha*.

In Finnish mythology Louhi, the “witch goddess of the North,” is said to have kidnapped the Sun and Moon and held them captive inside a mountain, causing the darkness of winter.

A gnomish little creature called the tomte in Sweden and nisse in Norway is said to be associated with Yule. This figure stands around three feet tall with a white beard and a red cap. He often helps out on a family’s farm, protecting the children and animals. He may take up residence in the farm or live among the dead in a nice cozy burial mound. He is accompanied by the Yule Goat, and sometimes a pig, knocking on people’s doors to distribute presents on Yule eve.

The Yupik peoples, indigenous to the Arctic, tell the story of the Kogukhpak. Subterranean monsters with bulbous bodies and frog-like legs who could only be killed by the sun. On the winter solstice they emerged to hunt. Mammoth carcasses were said to be the corpses of the ones who stayed out too long and died when the sun returned.

The Barbegazi are dwarf-like creatures said to inhabit the Swiss Alps. They have huge flat feet, white beards, white fur all over their bodies, and thrive only in the coldest of weather. They hide underground and hibernate in Summer. They become active in Winter, emerging with the first snow, enjoying the blizzard season, and the growing cold signaled by the winter solstice. They wander, skiing cross-country, through the white mountains on their huge flat feet. They’re benign beings who avoid humans, but have been known to help shepherds find lost sheep, dig people out of avalanches, and whistle warnings of danger.

In Greek mythology the Kallikantzaros were angry, hairy, gnome-like creatures who lived underground and tried to cut down the tree of life. They could only be killed by sunlight, and emerged during the long night of the winter solstice to wreak havoc.

According to folklore, Krampus is a terrifying half-man, half-goat. Said to show up in towns during the night of December 5, which was known as Krampusnacht (Krampus Night). During this night he beats children who are naughty with branches and sticks or puts them in a red basket on his back to be carried away. It is customary to offer a Krampus schnapps.

The Wild Hunt is a name given to gods or fierce spirits who lead their celestial comrades in a hunt across the sky. The most common versions are led by Odin riding Sleipnir. The Wild Hunt can occur at any time, and often before times of trial and outbreaks of war. However, it is said to happen most frequently on winter nights, especially between Yule and Twelfth Night. During this time, ancestors are honored and food is left out for them. Farmers also leave harvested grain in the fields for the hunters’ horses. The Wild Hunt during this time is said to be linked to ancestors returning to collect their earthly gifts and tokens of respect in return for a good harvest next year.

Ded Moroz is a Slavic character like Father Christmas. His name translates as “Old Man Frost,” and he was thought to be a wizard of winter and the son of the gods Mara and Veles. He wears long robes of pale blue, and his head is adorned with a furred hat or a crown with a snowflake motif. With his daughter, the Snow Maiden, he brings presents to children and often delivers them in person.

Perchta or Berchta was once known as a goddess in the Upper German and Austrian regions of the Alps. In some descriptions, Perchta has two forms; appearing beautiful and white as snow or as elderly and haggard. Perchta was said to roam the countryside at midwinter, entering homes during the twelve days following the Solstice. She would know whether the children had behaved well and worked hard all year. If they had, they might find a small silver coin the next day in a shoe or pail. If they had not, she punished them brutally. She gained an entourage, called Perchten, which also took two forms. Some are beautiful and bright, known as the Schönperchten (“beautiful Perchten”) and bring luck and wealth to people. Others are the Schiachperchten (“ugly Perchten”) who have fangs, tusks and horse tails which are used to drive out ghosts and evil spirits.