

What is the origin of Halloween?

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In A.D. 835, Pope Gregory IV designated November 1 as All Saints Day or All Hallow's Day (the term "Hallow" refers to saints). The day before this, October 31, was known as All Hallow's Evening. The term "Halloween" is a contraction of "Hallow's Evening".

Long before the church gave this name to the evening before All Saints Day (a celebration in remembrance of saints and martyred saints), it had been celebrated in various ways in many places around the world. One writer is correct when she observes that it "probably combines more folk customs the world around than will ever be sorted out, catalogued and traced to their sources." ¹

It is generally agreed that, in church history, Halloween took the place of a special day celebrated by the ancient Druids, who were the learned or priestly class of the Celtic religion. ² The Celts were the first Aryan people who came from Asia to settle in Europe. In fact, we can see certain similarities between Druidism and the religion of India: "Celtic religion, presided over by the Druids (the priestly order) presents beliefs in various nature deities and certain ceremonies and practices that are similar to those in Indian religion. The insular Celts and the people of India also shared certain similarities of language and culture, thus indicating a common heritage." ³

For example, the Indian gods Siva Pasupati ("lord of the animals") and Savitr ("god of the sun") are, respectively, similar to the Celtic gods Cernunnos, a horned god who appears in the yoga position, and the god Lug or Lugus (perhaps originally a sun god). As in Hinduism, the Druids also believed in reincarnation, specifically in the transmigration of the soul, which teaches that people may be reborn as animals." ⁴

These Celtic people lived in northern France and the British Isles. They engaged in occult arts, worshiped nature, and gave it supernatural, animistic qualities. Certain trees or plants, such as oak and mistletoe, were given great spiritual significance. (According to Celtic authority Lewis Spence, the original meaning of the term druid implies a priest of the oak-cult.) Interestingly, fully ninety percent of the world's sometimes mysterious crop circles lie within the geographical proximity of the ancient and possibly druidic ruins of Stonehenge. At least some of these phenomena may be considered supernatural.

The Celts worshiped the Sun God (Belenus) especially on *Beltane*, May 1, and they worshiped another god, apparently the Lord of Death or the Lord of the Dead, on *Samhain*, October 31. Beltane ("Fire of Bel") was the time of the Summer festival while Samhain was the time of the Winter festival. Human sacrifice was offered at both festivals. According to Julius Caesar ⁵ in his *Commentaries*, and other sources, the Celts believed they were descended from the god *Dis*, a tradition handed down from the Druids. *Dis* was the Roman name for the god of the dead.

Of the 400 names of Celtic gods known, Belenus is mentioned most often. "Samhain" as the specific name of the Lord of Death is uncertain, but it is possible that the Lord of Death was the chief druidic deity. We'll follow the lead of several other authors and call him Samhain.

The Celts and their Druid priests began their New Year on November 1, which marked

the beginning of Winter. They apparently believed that on October 31, the night before their New Year and the last day of the old year, the Lord of Death gathered the souls of the evil dead who had been condemned to enter the bodies of animals. He then decided what animal form they would take for the next year. (The souls of the good dead were reincarnated as humans.) The Druids also believed that the punishment of the evil dead could be lightened by sacrifices, prayers and gifts to the Lord of Death.

Druid worshipers attempted to placate and appease the Lord of Death because of his power over the souls of the dead, whether these souls were good or evil. For those who had died during the preceding 12 months, Samhain allowed their spirits to return to earth to their former places of habitation for a few hours to associate once again with their families. ⁶

Thus, the Celts believed that on their New Year's Eve (our Halloween) ghosts, evil spirits and, some say, witches roamed about. In order to honor the Sun God (Belenus), and to frighten away evil spirits who allegedly feared fire, large bonfires were lit on hilltops.

For several days before New Year's Eve, young boys would travel the neighborhood begging material for the great bonfires. The fires were believed to not only banish evil spirits but to rejuvenate the sun. Until fairly recent times, the hilltop Halloween fires of the Scots were called *Samhnagan*, indicating the lingering influence of the ancient Celtic festival. ⁷

On this night, evil or frustrated ghosts were also supposed to play tricks on humans and to cause supernatural manifestations. As part of the celebration, people donned grotesque masks and danced around the great bonfires often pretending they were being pursued by evil spirits. And while these bonfires were lit to scare away evil spirits, food was put out to make the ghosts or souls of the good dead that Samhain had released feel welcome and at home.

Because Samhain marked the beginning of a new year, an interest in divination and fortune-telling became an important part of this holiday. For example, the Druids believed that the particular shape of various fruits and vegetables could divine the future. Victims of human sacrifice were used for the same purpose. When the Romans conquered Britain, some of their customs were added to those of the Druids while others, such as human sacrifice, were banned.

Of course, the Samhain celebration was not unique. Many festivals worldwide celebrate a time when the dead return to mingle with the living. The Hindus have their night of Holi. The Iroquois Indians celebrate a Feast of the Dead every 12 years, when all those who have died during the 12 years are honored with prayers. A national holiday in Mexico, the Day of the Dead, begins on November 2 and lasts several days. In this gruesome festival, death becomes a kind of neighborly figure, appearing on candy, jewelry, toys, bread, cakes, and so on. This is the time when the souls of the dead return and when the living are to honor them: for example, doors are decorated with flowers to welcome the *Angelitos*, the souls of dead children.

One study of festivals and special days points out that Halloween "rivals St. John's Eve for omens, spells and all sorts of mystic practices, which, in its case, are connected with the waning power of the sun and with the great druidical festival of Samhain." ⁸

For the most part, then, our modern Halloween appears to initially be traced to the practices of the ancient Druids at their Winter festival on October 31.

Notes:

- ¹ Ruth Hutchison and Ruth Adams, *Every Day's A Holiday* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 235.
- ² Some facts about the Druids are disputed or uncertain; there are differences plus geographical peculiarities between early and late Druidism.
- ³ Q.v., "Celtic Religion," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Macropedia, vol. 3.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1069-70.
- ⁵ Julius Caesar, *Commentaries*, Book 6, Chapter 18.
- ⁶ Becky Stevens Cordello, *Celebrations* (Butterick Publishing, 1977), p. 112.
- ⁷ Robert J. Myers, *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 259
- ⁸ Ethel L. Urlin, *Festivals, Holy Days and Saint's Days: A Study in Origins and Survivals in Church Ceremonies and Secular Customs* (London: Simpkins, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1915, republished Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1979), p. 190.