

Paganism

- What are Pagans?
- We all are pagans depending on definitions. Welcome to the club.
- Eligibility requirements and ways to join follows.

Pagans: Definitions

- Websters: From the Latin *paganush* country dweller or *pagus* country district. Akin to *pangere* to fix.

1: Heathen, esp. a follower of a polytheistic religion (as in ancient Rome). My note: Not a follower of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

2: One who has little or no religion and who delights in sensual pleasures and material goods: an irreligious or hedonistic person.

Pagans: Definitions 2

- Most modern persons who consider themselves neopagans or pagans interpret the word to mean “rustic,” “hick” or “*country bumpkin*” – a pejorative term.
- The implication was that those in the country were much slower in adopting the new religion of Christianity than were urban dwellers.
- Many rural dwellers still followed Greek state religion, Roman state religion, Mithraism, various mystery religions, etc., long after urban areas had converted.

Source: Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance.

Pagans: Definitions 3

- Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance indicates several meanings:
 1. Pagans consist of Wiccans and other neopagans.
 2. Pagans are people to hate.
 3. Pagans are ancient polytheists.
 4. Pagans follow aboriginal religions.
 5. Pagans are non-Abrahamic.
 6. Pagans don't belong to any of the main religions of the world.
 7. Pagans are atheists, agnostics or humanists.

Pagan Behaviors

- Badness, greed and evil.
- Filled with spite, murder, fighting, trickery and pessimism.
- Gossips, backbiters, God-haters, jerks, showoffs and con artists.
- Inventors of evil, disobedient to parents.
- Impudent, contrary, unsympathetic and unmerciful.

Source: Cited as Paul's list, Biblical.

- "Polytheism and immorality are the pagan way."

Source: Grace Communion International.

Pagans: Definitions 4

- By the 3rd century BCE, along with all non-Christians, it eventually became an evil term that implied Satan worship. The terms are still in wide use today.
- Most academics would not use good or evil in classifying pagans.
- However, pagans is also a “skunk” word that has varied meanings to various people. There is not a generally accepted, single current definition of the word “pagan.”
- Of interest to us are pagan practices, the reasons for their occurrence, whether they are in a sense mythologies, and the impact of paganism and mythology on our lives today.

Pagans

➤ Pagans may also be considered a positive attribute.

➤ Questions to consider:

What were or are the reasons for paganism?

Are pagans any less (or more) moral than other people?

Head Hunting and Cannibalism

- Intimately associate with notions of warfare, death and regeneration, cannibalism had less to do with eating people for food than with concepts of **social identity, kinship, and the transference of soul** essence from one person to another.
- “Exo-cannibalism” involved the actual or symbolic eating of an enemy’s flesh as an expression of **martial ferocity and as ultimate humiliation and revenge.**
- Cannibal tribes were greatly feared as their warriors were believed to be possessed by fierce jaguar-spirit, which encouraged them to savage and then devour their prey.
- “Endo-cannibalism” had a more respectful motivation. It involved grinding to powder a dead person’s bones, which were then added to manioc beer and drunk by family members and friends.
- The deceased’s bones were thought to **retain vital elements of the persons spirit,** which could be perpetuated in the lives of those who took part in the ritual consumption of the dead.

Head Hunting and Cannibalism 2

- Cannibalism was a widespread feature of Amerindian ritual belief, and various forms are historically well documented throughout South America.
- The Tupinamba, better known as the Tupi, of Brazil were important first contacts for 16th century Europeans who were horrified at cannibalism.
- A Tupi prisoner of war would be pampered and treated well, but on the appointed day killed and prepared for a feast.
- Smeared blood from the victim and the heart symbolized absorbing the courage of the enemy. The body was roasted and eaten by the entire village.
- Only the executioner was forbidden to feast; he had to go into seclusion to protect himself and the village from the prisoner's ghost.



Carib family (by [John Gabriel Stedman](#)), Natives of the Lesser Antilles Islands, origins lie in the southern West Indies and the northern coast of South America, Orinoco River area. Carribean Sea named by Spanish after peoples, also term cannibal stems from the name. People did not practice cannibalism per se but did engage in as part of war trophies not to satisfy hunger.



Amerindian children enjoying their history. Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Mexico, Guatemala, Columbia and Ecuador have relatively high percentages of indigenous people.



Original [1557 Hans Staden woodcut](#) of the Tupinambá portrayed in a [cannibalistic](#) feast. The usages and habits of the Tupinambas were abundantly described in the *Cosmographie universelle* (1572) of [André Thevet](#), and in *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* (1578), by [Jean de Léry](#). They story inspired the work of [Montaigne](#) *Des Cannibales* (*Essais*, Book 1, Chap.31), and they influenced the creation of the myth of the "[Bon sauvage](#)" during the [Enlightenment](#).

Cannibalism for food

- There are isolated instances of homicidal cannibalism for food.
 - Famine
 - In cases of extreme mental health or criminal behavior.
 - Rumored through libelous accusations.
- It does not appear to be a widespread practice based on archeological or written evidence.
- War starvations, shipwrecks, famines from the Neanderthals to the present, Colonial Jamestown, Donner party of settlers, North Korea between 1995-1997 are examples.

Cannibalistic Women

- In **Polynesia**, tales of cannibalistic women are known from Tahiti and the Chatham Islands just east of New Zealand.
- One Tahitian myth recounts the story of a female ancestress, “Rona long-teeth” whose daughter Hina grew into a lovely young woman and fell in love with a man called Monri.
- Rona, however, trapped Monri and ate him. Hina then enlisted the aid of the “hairy chief,” No’ahuruhuru, to put an end to the rapacious cannibal.
- The competitive **abutu** exchanges, in which modern Goodenough Islanders (Solomons) challenge each other to present the largest gifts of garden produce, began as a ritual to satisfy the appetite of Malaveyoyo, a voracious cannibal who is said to have roamed the interior of the island.
- The islanders believed that if they gave Malaveyovo enough vegetables to eat, he would not need to eat humans. Cannibalism occurs in mythology throughout Oceania and is characterized by a **strong theme of inter-sexual hostility**.



View of Raiatea Mountain. The mummies of Tahitian rulers were formerly deposited on this mountain, traditionally considered sacred (tapu)



Marae Arahurahu Open-air Temples where the ancient Polynesians worshipped their gods

Human Sacrifice

- **Human sacrifice** was more common than cannibalism. Human sacrifice is the act of killing one or more human beings as part of a **mythological or religious ritual**. It has been practiced in various cultures throughout history.
- Offerings were to the deities as **payments for favorable interventions and to forestall unfavorable events**. Victims were typically ritually killed in a manner that was supposed to please or appease the gods, spirits or the deceased, for example, as a **propitiatory offering**.
- To placate the god(s), expiate the sins of the people.
- **Divination**: A priest would try to predict the future from the body parts of a slain prisoner or slave. Attempts to determine disclosures about the physical world and the future. Celts interpreting body spasms is an example.

Human Sacrifice 2

- Sacrifice to the gods. **Aztecs/Mayans most often cited.** Thanking or appeasing the gods. Estimates of thousands of sacrifices in ceremonies over centuries.
- Ward off droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions with a gift to the gods. Warfare was helpful in capturing prisoners for sacrifice.
- Sacrifice to accompany the dedication of a new building or temple. Chinese legends regarding thousands of people entombed in the "Great Wall."
- Burial of children alive in foundations of new courts – Jericho.

Human Sacrifice in Aztec Culture

- Practiced in the Aztec Empire and throughout pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.
- **Millennia-long tradition of human sacrifice.**
- Sacrifice victims on each of 18 festivals, one for each 20-day month.
- Belief that a great on-going sacrifice sustains the Universe.
- Everything — earth, crops, moon, stars, people — springs from the severed or buried bodies, fingers, blood or the heads of sacrificed gods.



A [tzompantli](#), or skull rack, as shown in the post-Conquest [Ramirez Codex](#). 15
Century Aztec

Human Sacrifice in Aztec Culture 2

- Sacrifice of animals common — dogs, eagles, jaguars and deer. Cult of Quetzalcoatl also sacrifices butterflies and hummingbirds.
- Most common form is heart-extraction.
- Ritual includes the priest grabbing the heart and tearing it out, still beating.
- It would be placed in a bowl held by a statue of the honored god, and the body thrown down the temple stairs.



A jaguar-shaped [cuauhxicalli](#) in the [National Museum of Anthropology](#). This altar-like stone vessel was used to hold the hearts of sacrificial victims. See also [chacmool](#) (Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican stone art).

Human Sacrifice in Aztec Culture 3 Politics

- High profile nature of sacrificial ceremonies.
- Used sophisticated psychological weaponry to maintain their empire aimed at instilling a sense of fear in their neighbors.
- The Aztecs controlled a large empire of tribute-paying vassal tribes.
- The population of native Aztecs was very small, compared to the population of the area they controlled.

Aztec Human Sacrifice – Politics 2

- To sow dissension among the vassals, the Aztecs demanded human victims as part of the annual tribute.
- The vassals would raid each other to capture prisoners.
- This encouraged animosity between the vassals and strengthened the Aztec political center rule.
- This was a method of political control which was innovative and perhaps unique in human history.

Human Sacrifice 3

- Rituals upon the death of a king, high priest, or great leader.
- Servants, slaves, concubines and other persons to accompany the deceased into the afterlife.
- Practiced by Mongols, Scythians, Egyptians, Mesoamericans, but many others.
- Sacrifice of the deceased's or family possessions and valuables, i.e. slaves.
- Modern times: honor killings in some societies, Italian opera, some primitive ethnic and religious groups. An extreme example is the occasional stoning or killing of females in Islamic families by immediate family members.

Child Sacrifice

- Armstrong indicates that human sacrifice was common in the pagan world. The first child was often believed to be the offspring of a god, who had impregnated the mother in an act of *droit de seigneur* (medieval right of lord to deflower the virgins of the estate).
- In begetting the child, the god's energy had been depleted, so to replenish this and to ensure circulation of all available *mana*, the firstborn was returned to its divine parent.
- The parents considered it a great honor to throw the child into the mouth of Molach, sun god of the Canaanites.



An 18th century German illustration of Moloch ("Der Götze Moloch" i.e Moloch, the false god). Can refer derogatorily to any person or thing which demands or requires costly sacrifices. Burning children alive sacrifices.

Exposure/Infanticide

- Not one's favorite topic but throughout history infanticide has been common.
- Child sacrifice to supernatural figures or forces, such as practiced in ancient Carthage, may be only the most notorious example.
- You could appease the gods or show one's love and respect while conveniently reducing the number of family members.
- Laila Williamson notes that "Infanticide has been practiced on every continent and by people on every level of cultural complexity, from hunter gathers to high civilizations, including our own ancestors.

Exposure/Infanticide 2

- Many Neolithic groups routinely resorted to infanticide in order to control their numbers so lands could support them (15% to 20% or more).
- In more advanced societies and in some situations it was a way to reduce the number of potential heirs for the rich.
- Abandonment, leaving the infant to die by exposure (hypothermia, hunger, thirst or animal attack) occurred. as well as suffocation, drowning, cannibalism and sacrifice.
- Fortunately the practices slowed by the High Middle Ages as churches and the first orphanages took over responsibility for unwanted infants.

Rituals

- Rituals both for religious and other purposes have existed since ancient times and in all cultures.
- They can help satisfy the emotional needs of practitioners, strengthen social bonds, provide social and moral education, demonstrate respect or submission, convey one's affiliation, help obtain social acceptance, indicate approval of some event—or, sometimes, just provide the pleasure of the ritual itself.

Sacrifice and Animal Sacrifice

- As we have seen, sacrifice or the offering of food or objects (typically valuables) or the lives of animals or people to the gods as an act of propitiation to gain favor or goodwill or for worship was common in mythology and religion.
- Animism is a philosophical or spiritual idea that souls or spirits exist not only in humans but also in animals, plants, rocks and natural phenomena such as thunder, geographic features such as mountains and rivers, and other entities of the natural environment.
- So what of animal sacrifice versus just meeting food needs of humans?

Animal Sacrifice

- Animal sacrifice has turned up in almost all cultures, from the Hebrews to the Greeks and Romans and from the Aztecs to the Hindus.
- Remnants of ancient rituals are apparent in many cultures, for example sacrificial lambs, Spanish bullfights and kapparos in Judaism. Ritual slaughter procedures like shechita (Kosher) or dabiha (Halal) in Judaism and Islam have a long history.



Lithography of a man holding fowl for Kapparot, late 19th/early 20th century. In modern times, is performed with a live chicken (rooster for men, hen for women), mainly in Haredi (conservative Orthodox Jews) communities. In other communities money may be substituted for the chicken and then given to charity. Animal rights groups have concerns. The ritual consists of swinging the live bird three times around the head symbolically transferring one's sins to the chicken or the coins. The chicken is then slaughtered and donated to the poor for consumption at the pre-fast meal before Yom Kippur.

Sex

- Ancient cultures generally had one or more deities associated with sexual love, lust or sexuality.
- Love deities in mythology include Xochiquetzal (Aztec); Aizen Myo-o (Buddhism); Astarte (Canaanite); Aine (Irish); Bes, Hathor and Bastet (Egyptian); Aphrodite, The Erotes including Eros (Greek); Kamadeva and Rati (Hindu); Inanna or Ishtar (Mesopotamian), Freyja (Norse) and Mami Wata (Yorba).
- Fertility rites are rituals that reenact, either actually or symbolically, sexual acts and/or reproductive processes.
- Ancient peoples wanted to ensure good fortune (in harvests or hunting or warfare or other sympathetic magic in which the forces of nature are to be influenced by the example acted out in the ritual).

Hieros gamos

- Also known as Hierogamy (holy marriage), refers to a sexual ritual that plays out **between a god and goddess**. It is a harmonization of the opposites.
- The notion does not presuppose actual performance in ritual, but is also used in purely symbolic or mythological context.
- **Sacred prostitution** was common in the ancient Near East as a form of “sacred marriage” between the king of a Sumerian city-state and the High Priestess of Inanna.
- There were many shrines and temples. In Uruk the temple of Eanna meaning “house of heaven” was the greatest of these.
- *Hieros gamos* was celebrated during the annual Akitu (New Year) ceremony, at the spring equinox.

Hieros gamos 2

- The **spring ceremonies served a practical purpose**: since commoners frequently took this opportunity to have sex with their own spouses, it coordinated the births of children so that they would be born in the winter, when there was more time to take care of them.
- Other mythologies tell of an ancient union of Demeter with Iasion, son of Zeus, enacted in a thrice-plowed furrow. They had intercourse as Demeter lay on her back in a freshly plowed furrow. When they rejoined the celebration, Zeus guessed what had happened because of the mud on Demeter's back, and promptly killed Iasion with a thunderbolt.
- In Tantric Buddhism of India, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet, yab-yum is a sexual ritual of the male deity in sexual union with his female consort. Yab-yum is generally understood to represent the primordial (or mystical) union of wisdom and compassion.



Demeter: Goddess of the Earth, Agriculture, Harvest, and Forests. Sister of Zeus, Hades, Hera. Children include Persephone, goddess of the harvest, who presided over grains, the fertility of the earth, the seasons, sanctity of marriage, the sacred law and the cycle of life and death.

Sacred Prostitution

- Herodotus, Greek historian, stated: “The **foulest Babylonian custom** is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger once in her life.”
- “Once a woman has taken her place there, she does not go away to her home before some stranger has cast money into her lap, and had intercourse with her outside the temple.”
- Sumerian and Akkadian **Entu** were top-ranking priestesses who were distinguished with special ceremonial attire and held equal status to High Priests. They owned property, transacted business, and initiated the *hieros gamos* ceremony with priests and kings.

Sacred Prostitution 2

- In the Hebrew Bible, **Qedsha** were temple prostitutes usually associated with the goddess Asherah. The male equivalent of a *qedsha* is a **qadesh**. Hierodules served as assistants to the priestess.
- In Southern India, **devadasi** (meaning a woman who serves god) performed rituals that included hierodulic (child) prostitution. The practice was outlawed in 1988 but still exists today according to Human Rights Watch.
- The Mayans maintained several phallic religious cults, possibly involving homosexual temple prostitution. Aztec religious leaders were heterosexually celibate and engaged in homosexuality. The Inca sometimes dedicated young boys as temple prostitutes.

Sexual Carvings

- Sheela na Gig, stone carvings, are surviving visual representations found in Romanesque Christian churches scattered across Europe.
- The figurative carvings are said to be there to drive off evil spirits. The concept may have survived from ancient forms of yoni (female genitalia) worship and sacred prostitution practiced in ancient goddess temples that the churches replaced.



Sheela na Gig at [Kilpeck](#), England



A stone yoni found in Cát Tiên sanctuary, [Lam Dong, Vietnam](#). Yone is the Sanskrit word for female genitalia, the source of all life. Its counterpart is the lingam, the phallus. It is also *the divine passage, womb or sacred temple*.

Miraculous Births

- Miraculous births are a **common motif in historical literature and religious texts.**
- Stories often include miraculous conceptions and features such as intervention by a deity, supernatural elements, astronomical signs, hardship or, in the case of some mythologies, complex plots related to creation.
- Miraculous births (with or without God's intervention) include Immanuel, Moses, Isaac born of sterile and aged Sarah; John the Baptist son Zachariah, an old man, and his wife Elizabeth who was sterile; and the historical Jesus, born of Mary, who learns from the angel Gabriel that the holy spirit will "come upon her" and that nothing will be impossible with God.
- Other stories include Marduk in the Akkadian "Creation Epic"; the Hindu avatar concept of descending deities and Buddha's appearance in the mother as a shining gem; Krishna descending into the womb of Devaki; Perseus as the son of Danae (who was locked away to prevent her having children) then impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold; Vedas Mithra born from a rock; and Zoroaster's birth foretold from the beginning of time and born conceived by a shaft of light in the womb of his virgin mother, Dughdova.

Slavery

- Slavery is a system in which people are the property of others. Slaves can be held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase or birth, and deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work or to demand compensation.
- The number currently remains as high as 12 million to 27 million, though this is probably the smallest proportion of the world's population in history. Debt bondage of males and females and human trafficking of females and children are typical circumstances.
- Evidence of slavery predates written records and has existed in many cultures. It is rare among hunter-gather populations requiring economic surpluses and a high population to be viable. Hence it has emerged during Neolithic agricultural societies.
- **Pagan slaves were good value** since they had no holy day off.

Pagan Practices and Issues

- Money changers at temples, vendors, taxes on sacrifices, cost or economic loss of sacrifices.
- Animal sacrifices, blood and guts, fat of calves, blood of bulls and goats, reeking blood that smoked from holocausts.
- Buying and selling of priesthoods, qualifications of practitioners, lucrative posts, hereditary rights that could be sublet.
- Hierarchies of gods. Many gods and cults—imperial, provincial, city or estate. Mysteries, philosophies, dreams, spells, divinations, magic and chicanery.
- Social wickedness, holy prostitution, effigies of pagan gods, idols.
- Fear of gods leading to persecution of atheists.

Modern Pagans

- **Atheists:** Rejection of belief in the existence of deities or in a narrow sense that there are no deities. Today about 2.3 percent of the world's population, while a further 11.9 percent is described as nonreligious.
- Tend to lean toward skepticism regarding supernatural claims. Rationales include the problem of evil, inconsistent revelations and nonbelief. Includes members of Jainism and some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism.
- **Agnosticism** is the view that the truth of certain claims—especially claims about the existence or non-existence of any deity, but also other religious and metaphysical claims—is unknown or unknowable. A doubting or a skeptical approach, *noncommittal*.

Modern Pagans 2

- **Humanism** is an approach in study or philosophy that focuses on human values and concerns. A variety of perspectives in philosophy and social science which affirm some notion of “human nature.”
- A secular ideology which espouses reason, ethics and justice while specifically **rejecting supernatural and religious dogma as a basis for morality** and decision making.

Deism

- **Deism** is the standpoint that reason and observation of the natural world, without the need for organized religion, can determine that a supreme being created the universe. Further, the term often implies that this **supreme being does not intervene** in human affairs or suspend the natural laws of the universe.
- Deists typically **reject supernatural events** such as prophecy and miracles, tending to assert that God has a plan for the universe that is not to be altered by intervention in the affairs of human life. Most deists see **holy books** not as authoritative divine revelations but as **human interpretations**.

Neopaganism

- The term is an umbrella used to identify a wide variety of modern religious movements, particularly those influenced by pre-Christian religious beliefs of Europe. Beliefs include polytheism, animism, pantheism (universe and god are identical) and other paradigms.
- Neopaganism is strongest in the United States and Britain, but also appears in Continental Europe and Canada. The largest religion is Wicca. Others of note include Neo-druidism, Germanic Neopaganism, Slavic Neopaganism and Shamanism.

Neopaganism 2

- Beliefs are not solely concerned with gods, but focused on ritual, tradition (*ethos*) and notions of virtue (*arete, pietas*). An Earth or Mother Goddess is emphasized in Dianic Wicca. Male counterparts are usually also evoked, such as the Green Man and the Horned God.
- There often is strong desire to incorporate the female aspects of the divine in worship and in lives.
- Practices can include ceremonial magic and rituals, humor, joy, abandonment, even silliness and outrageousness as valid parts of spiritual experience.
- Most Neopagan religions celebrate the cycles and seasons of nature through a festival calendar (Wheel of the Year) that honors these changes.



Three female druids on the morning of the summer solstice at Stonehenge after sunrise. They wear brown and green robes in sympathy with Mother Earth and carry wooden staffs. Their headdresses contain tree leaves (poplar & beech?), ferns and honeysuckle.

Mythological and Pagan Roots of Holidays

- Emphasis on the Northern Hemisphere
- Emphasis on Western cultures.

Winter Solstice - Yalda

- Yalda has a history as long as the Mithraism religion. The Mithraists believed that this night is the night of the birth of Mithra, Persian god of light and truth. At the morning of the **longest night of the year** the **Mithra is born from a virgin mother**.
- In Zoroastrian tradition, the winter solstice with the longest night of the year was an auspicious day, and included customs intended to protect people from misfortune. On that day, people were advised to stay awake most of the night. They have small parties and gatherings and eat the last remaining fresh fruits from summer.
- The Persians adopted their annual renewal festival from the Babylonians and incorporated it into the rituals of their own Zoroastrian religion. The occasion was celebrated in the festival of '**Daygan**' dedicated to **Ahura Mazda**, the Lord of Wisdom.

Winter Solstice

- The **winter solstice** occurs exactly when the Earth's axial tilt is farthest away from the sun at its maximum of $23^{\circ}26'$. The *first day of winter* occurs on the shortest day, and longest night, and the sun's daily maximum position in the sky is the lowest.
- The solstice itself may have been a special moment of the annual cycle of the year even during Neolithic times.
- The winter solstice is attested by physical remains in the layouts of late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeological sites such as **Stonehenge in Britain and New Grange in Ireland**. The primary axes of both of these monuments seem to have been carefully aligned on a sight-line pointing to the **winter solstice sunrise** (New Grange) and the **winter solstice sunset** (Stonehenge).



An altar dating to 1800 BCE within an astronomically aligned [Monte Alto](#) complex in [Guatemala](#).



Hundreds of people --- including pagans and druids -- showed up at dawn today at Stonehenge to celebrate the winter solstice, despite morning fog that obscured the sun. Dec. 22, 2009

Yule

- **Yule** or **Yule-tide** is a winter festival that was initially celebrated by the historical Germanic peoples as a pagan religious festival. The festival was originally celebrated from late December to early January on a date determined by the lunar Germanic calendar.
- Scholars have connected the celebration to the **Wild Hunt**, and some have theorized a connection to the Roman festival of Saturnalia.
- The Wild Hunt is an ancient folk myth prevalent across Northern, Western and Central Europe. The fundamental premise in all instances is the same: a phantasmal group of huntsmen with the accoutrements of hunting, horses, hounds, etc. in mad pursuit across the skies or along the ground, or just above it.
- The hunters may be the dead or the fairies (often in folklore connected with the dead). The hunter may be an unidentified lost soul, a deity or spirit of either gender, or may be a historical or legendary figure.



The wild hunt: *Åsgårdsreien* (1872) by [Peter Nicolai Arbo](#)

Saturnalia

- **Saturnalia** is an Ancient Roman festival that was held in honor of the god Saturn.
- Saturnalia became one of the most popular Roman festivals. It was marked by tomfoolery and reversal of social roles, in which slaves and masters ostensibly switched places.
- Saturnalia was introduced around 217 BCE to raise citizen morale after a crushing military defeat at the hands of the Carthaginians. Originally celebrated for a day, on December 17, its popularity saw it grow until it became a **week-long extravaganza**, ending on the 23rd.
- Saturnalia was a time to eat, drink and be merry. The toga was not worn, but rather the synthesis, i.e., colorful, informal "dinner clothes"; and the pileus (freedman's hat) was worn by everyone.

December 25

- Christmas draws extensively upon ancient roots of mythology and paganism.
- Winter solstice was recognized for thousands of year even in Paleolithic hunter-gatherer times.
- Birthday of Saturnalia, honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture. A festival of joy and giving.
- *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, Birthday of the Unconquered Sun was the winter season of celebration.
- Mummers – origins of caroling? Medieval England and the Lord of Misrule. Roving street carousers.
- Yule symbolic of the pagan Sun God, Mithras.



Coin of Emperor [Probus](#), circa 280, with *Sol Invictus* riding a [quadriga](#), with legend SOLI INVICTO, "to the Unconquered Sun". Note how the Emperor (on the left) wears a radiated solar crown, worn also by the god (to the right). Dies Natalis Solis Invicti. Cult created by Aurelian in 274 AD

December 25, continued

- Yule logs in honor of the sun, mistletoe a sacred plant, holly berries food of the gods, and kissing under the mistletoe a fertility ritual.
- Decorating homes with **evergreen boughs**, ivy and bits of metal was a ritual of **Romans** in recognition of their god, **Bacchus** (Greek Dionysus, god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, of ritual madness and ecstasy, inspiration for joyful worship, festivals and celebration). Mistletoe was considered sacred by the Druids and Romans.
- The earliest known candles were made from whale fat by the Chinese, during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). Candle wax goes back to ancient Egyptian veneration rites.
- The **evergreen tree** in European tradition was especially a reminder that soon crops would grow again. It was a **pagan religious symbol of the Druids**.
- January 6 originally was an Egyptian date for the winter solstice and became linked with the Magi as representatives of Zoroaster and the ancient Persians.

December 25, continued 2

- Santa Claus originated from the Dutch Sinterklaas. The original Santa Claus may also have lived in Persia (Turkey) and was known as a generous man, especially with children.
- A modern Neopagan ritual would be to reclaim Santa Claus as a pagan Godform. Today's Santa is a folk figure with multicultural roots. He embodies characteristics of Saturn (Roman agricultural god), Cronos (Greek god, also known as Father Time), The Holly King (Celtic god of the dying year), Father Ice/Grandmother Frost (Russian winter god), Thor (Norse sky god riding the sky in a chariot drawn by goats) and Tomte (a Norse Land Spirit known for giving gifts to children).
- Santa's reindeer can be viewed as forms of Herne, the Celtic Horned God.
- In 350, Pope Julius I declared that the historical Jesus or Christ deity's birthday would be celebrated Dec. 25. This was deliberate to make it easy for pagan Romans to maintain their traditional feasts.



[Sinterklaas](#) or [Saint Nicholas](#), considered by many to be the original Santa Claus.



Herne is an equestrian ghost associated with Windsor Forest and Green Park in the English county of Berkshire. His appearance is notable for the antlers upon his head. However, there are several theories attempting to place the origins of Herne as predating any evidence of him by connecting his appearance to pagan deities or ancient archetypes. Slide compliments of Brenda Cheadle of OLLI

Groundhog Day

- The name February comes from the Latin februare, which means “to purify.” In February they prepared for various activities coming in the spring, making a fresh start.
- In Neopagan nature religions, February 2 is a cross-quarter day or four-quarters day, a mid-point between solstices and equinoxes.
- This day is named **Imbolic** or Imbolog, which may come from a term for “sheep’s milk,” a reference to the first milking of the ewes in the spring in Celtic pagan tradition.
- The Christian Church appropriated the day and renamed it Candlemas, partly because of the tradition of lighting candles and perhaps to retain the fire imagery of a **large fire for purification**.
- Germans watched hedgehogs on this day as a means of divining the length of the winter, good weather implying a long winter, bad weather and no shadow a short winter.



A contemporary Imbolc fire ceremony, 2007.

Valentine's Day

- The Romans celebrated a holiday on February 14th to honor Juno Fructifier, Queen of the Roman gods and goddesses as well a goddess of marriage.
- In one ritual, women would submit their names to a common box and men would each draw one name. These two would be a couple for the duration of the festival (and at times for the following year).
- On February 15th, Romans celebrated Luperaclia, honoring Faunus, god of fertility. Men would go to a grotto dedicated to Luperaclia, the wolf god. The men would sacrifice a goat, don its skin and run around hitting women with small whips, an act which was supposed to ensure fertility.

Spring Equinox

- **Nowruz** is the traditional celebration of the ancient Persian New Year. Originally a **Zoroastrian festival with unknown roots**. Important since the time of the Achaemenids (c. 648-330 BCE). The sun leaves the zodiac of Pisces and enters the zodiacal sign of Aries (March 21). Babylon, 2400 BCE in the city of Ur, had a celebration dedicated to the moon and spring equinox held during March or April. The ancient Babylonians celebrated the equivalent of New Years Day for several days.
- **Ostara from the Eostre, a Germanic lunar goddess of spring**. For early pagans a time to celebrate planting and the new crop season. Ostara mated with a fertility god and then gave birth later at Yule.
- In ancient Rome, the followers of **Cybele** believed that their goddess had a consort who was born via a virgin birth. His name was **Attis**, and he died and was resurrected each year during the time of the vernal equinox. My note: Rather wild cults whose most ecstatic followers were males who ritually castrated themselves. Cult's roots originated several centuries BCE and continued up to at least the 3rd century.



[Bas-relief](#) in [Persepolis](#). A [Zoroastrian](#) symbol of Nowruz - on the [vernal equinox](#) the powers of the eternally fighting bull (personifying the [Earth](#)) and lion (personifying the [Sun](#)) are equal.

Spring Equinox Celebrations

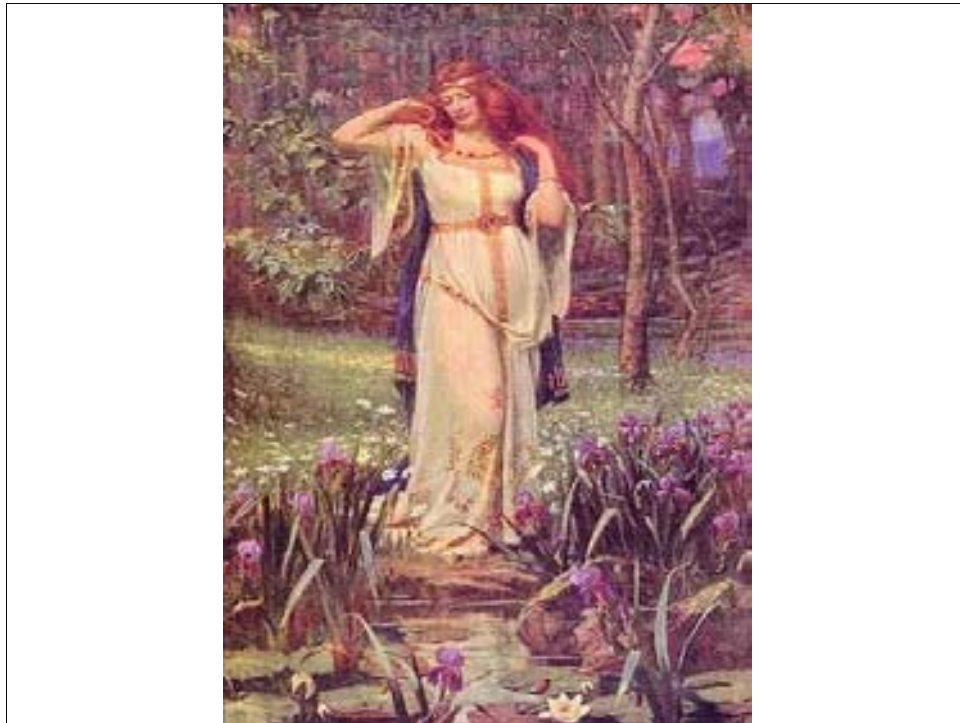
- Eastre, “Great Mother Goddess” of the Saxon people in Northern Europe.
- Similarly, the Teutonic dawn goddess of fertility known variously as Ostare, Ostara and Eostre.
- Similar Goddesses were known by other names in ancient cultures around the Mediterranean and were celebrated in springtime. Some were:
 - Aphrodite from ancient Cyprus
 - Ashtoreth from ancient Israel
 - Astarte from ancient Greece
 - Hathor from ancient Egypt
 - Ishtar from Assyria
 - Kali, from India
 - Ostara, a Norse Goddess of fertility.

Spring Equinox Celebrations 2

- Asasa Ya (Western Africa) is the earth goddess of fertility of the Ashanti of Ghana. Prepares to bring forth new life in the spring, honored at the festival of Dunbar, alongside Nyame, the sky god who brings rains to the fields.
- Flora, Roman goddess of spring and flowers. Her festival *Floralia* symbolized the renewal of the cycle of life, drinking and flowers. Her Greek equivalent was Chloris, abducted by (and later married to) Zephyr, the god of the west wind.
- Freya, this Norse fertility goddess, abandons the earth during the cold months, but returns in the spring to restore nature's beauty. She wears a magnificent necklace called Brisingamen, which represents the fire of the sun.



As she talks, her lips breathe spring roses: I was Chloris, who am now called
Flora." [Ovid](#)



Freyja by (1862-1932) In [Norse mythology](#), **Freyja** ([Old Norse](#) the "[Lady](#)") is a goddess associated with love, beauty, fertility, gold, witchcraft ([seiðr](#)), war, and death. Freyja is the owner of the necklace [Brísingamen](#), rides a chariot driven by two cats, owns the boar [Hildisvíni](#), possesses a cloak of [falcon](#) feathers, and, by her husband [Óðr](#), is the mother of two daughters; [Hnoss](#) and [Gersemi](#).

Eostre's Symbols – The Hare

- **The hare** (both because of its fertility and because ancient people saw a hare in the full moon).
- The saying "**mad as a March hare**" refers to the wild capering of hares as the males fight over the females in the early spring, then attempt to mate with them.
- Since the females often rebuff the males' advances before finally submitting, the mating behavior often looks like a crazy dance; these fights led early observers to believe that the advent of spring made the hares "mad."
- **Eggs were dyed scarlet by the Druids** to honor the sun. Pagan Anglo-Saxons made offerings of their colored eggs to the Goddess Eostre.
- **Hot cross buns** were consumed by the Greeks in their celebrations of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and the Egyptians ate a similar cake in the worship of their goddess Isis. Saxons ate buns in honor of Eostre.



A 1907 postcard

Other Holidays

- Wiccans and other Neopagans symbolically celebrate several holidays over the summer months.
- The Spiral Dance Beltaine around May 1 is the beginning of the Celtic Summer. It is a time to communicate with spirits, particularly those held in nature. The word seems to originate from "Bel Fire," and Beltane is associated with the Celtic god Balor, a god of Light.

Fires were traditionally built at Beltane, and people would jump over the fire. Young, unmarried people would leap the bonfire and wish for a husband or wife; young women would leap it to ensure their fertility and couples leap it to strengthen a bond.

The maypole, still used in Mayday festivities, may have originated in Germanic paganism of the Iron Age. The old European traditions of celebrating May Day by dancing and singing around the maypole, tied with colorful streamers or ribbons has survived as a part of English tradition.



A maypole at the Viktualienmarkt in Munich, Germany

Litha or Midsummer

- Summer celebrations centered upon the **summer solstice**. Sometimes know as **Litha** by Neopagans. The fire festival is a tradition for many pagans. Bonfires were lit from ancient times to **protect against evil spirits**. Dancing or leaping or diabolical chants are often part of the celebrations.
- In Slavonic neo-paganism, **Kupala** is the goddess of herbs, sorcery, sex and midsummer.. She is also the Water Mother, associated with trees, herbs, and flowers. Her celebration falls upon the Summer solstice honoring the two most important elements of Fire and Water.
- Austrians enjoy a parade of ships on the Danube.
- Brazilians enjoy square dancing or *quadrilha*.
- In Poland people wear traditional polka dress and girls throw wreaths made of flowers into the Baltic Sea and into lakes or rivers.
- In Russia the Yakut people of the Sakha Republic celebrate a solstice ceremony, *Ysyakh*, involving tethering a horse to a pole and circle dancing around it. Betting on reindeer or horse racing would often take place afterward. The traditions are derived from Tengriism, the ancient sun religion of the region



Midsummer bonfire in [Seurasaari](#). Bonfires are very common in Finland, where many people spend their midsummer in the countryside outside towns.



Yakut dance with traditional costumes.

Pagans

- Rational?
- Morality?
- Mythology: What can we conclude?

The End

- Spirit of Life, come unto me.
- Sing in my heart, all the stirrings of compassion.
- Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
- Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
- Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
- Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

Neopagan ritual