

Week Eight



The Jewish people's tendency to adopt the neighboring pagan practices, denounced as it had been by the Jewish prophets, returned with force during the [Talmudic](#) period (200 – 500 CE). However, almost no mythology was borrowed until the Midrashic and Talmudic periods.

The authorities of the Talmud seem to be particularly influenced by popular conception in the direction of [folk medicine](#). A belief in the [Evil eye](#) was also prevalent in Talmudic times, and occasionally omens were taken seriously, though in some cases recognized as being merely popular beliefs. Thus, while it is declared to be unlucky to do things twice, as eating, drinking, or washing,^[4] Rabbi Dunai recognized that this was an old tradition.^[5] A remarkable custom mentioned in the Talmud is that of planting trees when children are born and intertwining them to form the huppah when they marry.^[6] Yet this idea may be originally Persian and is also found in India.

Jewish [folktales](#) were those stories usually containing incidents of a superhuman character, spread among the folk either by traditions from their elders or by communication from strangers. Folktales are characterized by the presence of unusual personages (dwarfs, giants, fairies, ghosts, etc.), by the sudden transformation of men into beasts and vice versa, or by other unnatural incidents (flying horses, a hundred years' sleep, and the like). Of a similar kind are the drolls of

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the nursery, generally consisting of a number of simple "sells." A number of haggadic stories bear folktale characteristics, especially those relating to Og, King of Bashan, which have the same exaggerations as have the "Lügenmärchen" of modern German folktales^[8] There are signs that a certain number of fables were adopted by the Rabbis either from Greek or, indirectly, from Persian and Indian sources.^[citation needed]
[edit]

Rabi Loew and Golem by Mikolas Ales (1899). The earliest stories of golems date to early Judaism. In the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 38b), Adam was initially created as a golem when his dust was "kneaded into a shapeless husk". Like Adam, all golems are created from mud.

There are a few definitely Jewish legends of the Middle Ages which partake of the character of folktales, such as those of the Jewish pope Andreas and of the golem, or that relating to the wall of the Rashi chapel, which moved backward in order to save the life of a poor woman who was in danger of being crushed by a passing carriage in the narrow way.



Statue of King Arthur, [Hofkirche, Innsbruck](#), designed by [Albrecht Dürer](#) and cast by [Peter Vischer the Elder](#), 1520.

King Arthur is a legendary [British](#) leader of the late 5th and early 6th centuries, who, according to Medieval histories and [romances](#), led the defence of Britain against [Saxon](#) invaders in the early 6th century. The details of Arthur's story are mainly composed of [folklore](#) and literary invention, and his historical existence is debated and disputed by modern historians.

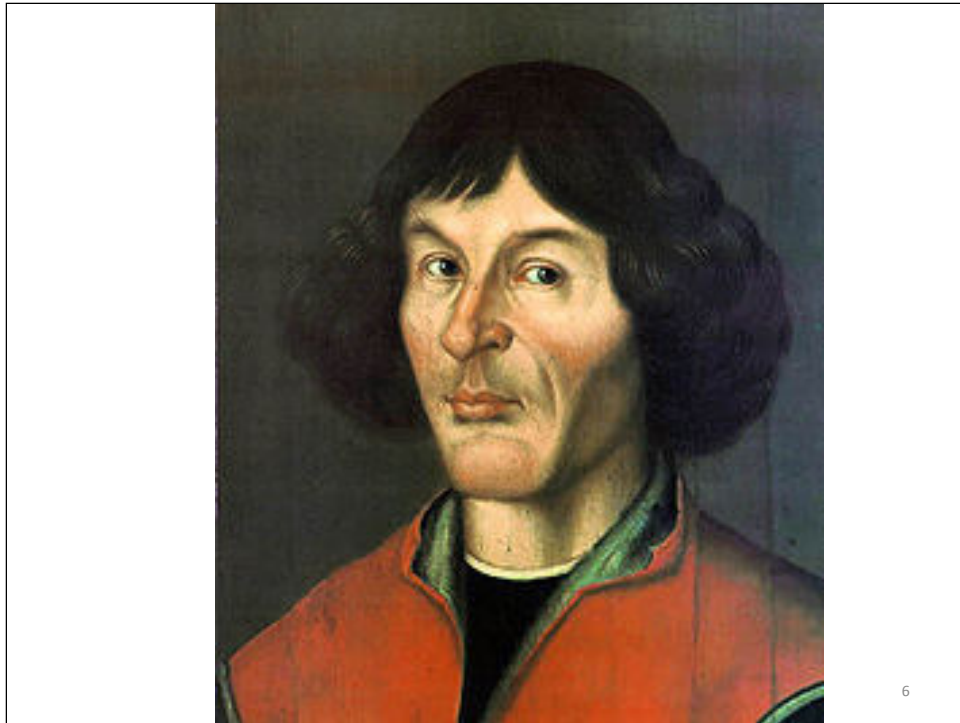
The historical basis for the King Arthur legend has long been debated by scholars. The first datable mention of King Arthur is in a 9th century [Latin](#) text. One school of thought, citing entries in the [Historia Brittonum](#) (*History of the Britons*) and [Annales Cambriae](#) (*Welsh Annals*), sees Arthur as a genuine historical figure, a [Romano-British](#) leader who fought against the invading [Anglo-Saxons](#) sometime in the late 5th to early 6th century. The *Historia Brittonum*, a 9th-century [Latin](#) historical compilation attributed in some late manuscripts to a Welsh cleric called [Nennius](#), lists twelve battles that Arthur fought. These culminate in the [Battle of Mons Badonicus](#), or Mount Badon, where he is said to have single-handedly killed 960 men. Recent studies, however, question the reliability of the *Historia Brittonum* as a source for the history of this period.^[6]

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The other text that seems to support the case for Arthur's historical existence is the 10th-century *Annales Cambriae*, which also link Arthur with the Battle of Mount Badon. The *Annales* date this battle to 516–518, and also mention the Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut (Mordred) were both killed, dated to 537–539. These details have often been used to bolster confidence in the *Historia*'s account and to confirm that Arthur really did fight at Mount Badon. Problems have been identified, however, with using this source to support the *Historia Brittonum*'s account. The latest research shows that the *Annales Cambriae* was based on a chronicle begun in the late 8th century in Wales. Additionally, the complex textual history of the *Annales Cambriae* precludes any certainty that the Arthurian annals were added to it even that early. They were more likely added at some point in the 10th century and may never have existed in any earlier set of annals. The Mount Badon entry probably derived from the *Historia Brittonum*.^[7]

This lack of convincing early evidence is the reason many recent historians exclude Arthur from their accounts of sub-Roman Britain. In the view of historian Thomas Charles-Edwards, "at this stage of the enquiry, one can only say that there may well have been an historical Arthur [but ...] the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him".^[8]



Nicolaus Copernicus ([German](#): *Nikolaus Kopernikus*; [Italian](#): *Nicolò Copernico*; [Polish](#): *Mikołaj Kopernik*; in his youth, *Niclas Koppernigk*;^[1] 19 February 1473 – 24 May 1543) was a [Renaissance astronomer](#) and the first person to formulate a comprehensive [heliocentric cosmology](#) which displaced the [Earth](#) from the center of the [universe](#).^[2]

Copernicus' epochal book, [De revolutionibus orbium coelestium](#) (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres), published just before his death in 1543, is often regarded as the starting point of modern [astronomy](#) and the defining [epiphany](#) that began the [scientific revolution](#). His [heliocentric model](#), with the Sun at the center of the universe, demonstrated that the observed motions of celestial objects can be explained without putting Earth at rest in the center of the universe. His work stimulated further scientific investigations, becoming a [landmark](#) in the [history of science](#) that is often referred to as the [Copernican Revolution](#).

At original publication, Copernicus' epoch-making book caused only mild controversy, and provoked no fierce sermons about contradicting [Holy Scripture](#). It was only three years later, in 1546, that a [Dominican](#), [Giovanni Maria Tolosani](#), denounced the theory in an appendix to a work defending the absolute truth of *Scripture*.^[87] He also noted that the Master of the Sacred Palace (i.e., the Catholic Church's chief [censor](#)), [Bartolomeo Spina](#), a friend and fellow Dominican, had planned to condemn *De revolutionibus* but had been prevented from doing so by his illness and death.

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It has been much debated why it was not until six decades after Spina and Tolosani's attacks on Copernicus's work that the Catholic Church took any official action against it. Proposed reasons have included the personality of Galileo Galilei and the availability of evidence such as telescope observations.

In March 1616, in connection with the Galileo affair, the Roman Catholic Church's Congregation of the Index issued a decree suspending *De revolutionibus* until it could be "corrected," on the grounds that the supposedly Pythagorean doctrine^[92] that the Earth moves and the Sun does not was "false and altogether opposed to *Holy Scripture*."^[93] The same decree also prohibited any work that defended the mobility of the Earth or the immobility of the Sun, or that attempted to reconcile these assertions with *Scripture*.

On the orders of Pope Paul V, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine gave Galileo prior notice that the decree was about to be issued, and warned him that he could not "hold or defend" the Copernican doctrine.^[94] The corrections to *De revolutionibus*, which omitted or altered nine sentences, were issued four years later, in 1620.^[95]

In 1633 Galileo Galilei was convicted of grave suspicion of heresy for "following the position of Copernicus, which is contrary to the true sense and authority of *Holy Scripture*,"^[96] and was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.



Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," it says in the book of Exodus (xxii, 18). This and other Biblical admonitions and commands both defined the witch and prescribed his or her fate. A witch is someone in consort with [Satan](#), the Evil One, the spirit who rebelled against God but whom God suffered to live. Today, the typical witch is generally portrayed as an old hag in a black robe, wearing a pointed black cap and flying on a broomstick across a full moon. Children dress up as witches on Halloween, much to the dismay of certain pious Christians. Hollywood, on the other hand, conjures up images of sexy women with paranormal powers such as [psychokinesis](#), [mind-control](#), hexing, and an array of other occult talents. "Pagan" or anti-Christian New Age religions are sometimes identified with witches because some pious Christians think they practice witchcraft or because those in the religions claim to practice ["magick"](#) or "the craft." Some of the members of these groups refer to themselves as "witches" and their groups as "covens." (Some male witches are very touchy about being called ["warlocks"](#).) Some of the members of these groups call themselves ["sorcerers"](#) and worship Satan, i.e., they believe in Satan and perform rituals which they think will get them a share of Satan's supernatural occult powers. (Some are very touchy about being called "sorcerers".) Most New Age witches do not worship Satan, however, and are very touchy about the subject. They would rather be associated either with the [occult](#) and magick or with attempts to re-establish a kind of nature religion

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which their members associate with ancient, pagan religions, such as the ancient Greek or the Celtic, especially Druidism. The neo-pagans also refer to both men and women witches as witches. One of the largest and most widespread of these nature religions is Wicca.

The witches of Christian mythology were known for their having sex with Satan and using their magical powers to do evil of all sorts. The culmination of the mythology of witchcraft came about from the 15th to the 18th centuries in the depiction of the witches' Sabbath. The Sabbath was a ritual mockery of the Mass. Witches were depicted as flying up chimneys at night on broomsticks or goats, heading for the Sabbath where the Devil (in the form of a feathered toad, a crow or raven, a black cat, or a he-goat) would perform a blasphemous version of the Mass. There would also be obscene dancing, a banquet and the brewing of potions in a huge cauldron. The banquet might include some tasty children, carrion, and other delicacies. The witches' brew was apparently to be used to hurt or kill people or to mutilate cattle (de Givry, 83). Those initiated into the satanic mysteries were all given some sort of physical mark, such as a claw mark under the left eye. The Devil was depicted as a goat or satyr or some sort of mythical beast with horns, claws, tail, and/or strange wings: a mockery of angel, man, and beast. One special feature of the Sabbath included the ritual kiss of the devil's ass (de Givry, 87), apparently a mockery of the traditional Christian act of submission of kneeling and kissing the hand or ring of a holy cleric. Numerous testimonials to having witnessed the witches' Sabbath are recorded. For example, a shepherdess, Anne Jacqueline Coste, reported in the middle of the 17th century that during the night of the feast of St. John the Baptist she and her companions heard a dreadful uproar and looking on all sides to see whence could come these frightful howlings and these cries of all sorts of animals, they saw at the foot of the mountain the figures of cats, goats, serpents, dragons, and every kind of cruel, impure, and unclean animal, who were keeping their Sabbath and making horrible confusion, who were uttering words the most filthy and sacrilegious that can be imagined and filling the air with the most abominable blasphemies (de Givry, 76).

Such stories had been told for centuries and were accepted by pious Christians without a hint of skepticism as to their veracity. Such tales were not considered delusions, but accurate histories.

Pierre de l'Ancre, in his book on angels, demons and sorcerers published in 1610, claims he witnessed a Sabbath. Here is his description:

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Here behold the guests of the Assembly, having each one a demon beside her, and know that at this banquet are served no other meats than carrion, and the flesh of those that have been hanged, and the hearts of children not baptized, and other unclean animals strange to the custom and usage of Christian people, the whole savourless and without salt.

The claims made in books such as de l'Ancre's and the depictions of Sabbath activities in works of art over several hundreds of years were not taken as humorous fictions or psychological manifestations of troubled spirits. These notions, as absurd and preposterous as they might seem to us, were taken as gospel truth by millions of pious Christians. What is even stranger is that there are many people today who believe similar stories about child-eating and ritual killing of animals, combined with sexual abuse and satanic influences.

I will leave it to the Freudians to interpret these persisting myths of satanic creatures with horns, big red tails, and huge sexual appetites; of kidnapping and sexually abusing, mutilating or killing children; of women who put long sticks between their legs and rub on a magic unguent and fly to a sexual liaison with a demonic he-goat; and of creatures with supernatural powers such as metamorphosis. My guess is that witchcraft and sorcery were for the most part brewed in the cauldron of sexual repression and served up as a justification for the public trading in art and literature, if not in life, of Church-created, sanctified, and glorified pornography.

To be sure, there was undoubtedly some persecution of those, especially in the countryside, who maintained a connection with their pagan past. But it is difficult to believe that the descriptions of witchcraft wrenched from tortured and mutilated victims century after century were not mostly created in the imaginations of their tormentors. The inquisitors' power was so great, their tortures so varied and exquisitely sadistic, that they had thousands of their victims deluded into believing they were possessed and wicked. The cruelties and delusions went on for centuries. Witch-hunting was not abolished in England until 1682. The hunt spread to America, of course, and in 1692, in Salem, Massachusetts, nineteen witches were hanged. (In 1711, the Massachusetts State Legislature exonerated all but six of the accused witches. In 1957 the state legislature passed a resolution exonerating Ann Pudeator "and certain other persons," who were named in a bill exonerating them in 2001.)

The last judicial execution for witchcraft in Europe took place in Poland in 1793, when two old women were burned. A wizard, however, died as a result of an unofficial ordeal by water in England in 1865, and in 1900 two Irish peasants tried to roast a witch over her own fire (Smith, 295).

Whatever the psychological basis for the creation of an anti-Church with witches and sorcerers joined with Satan to mock and desecrate the symbols and rituals of the Church, the practical result was a stronger, more powerful

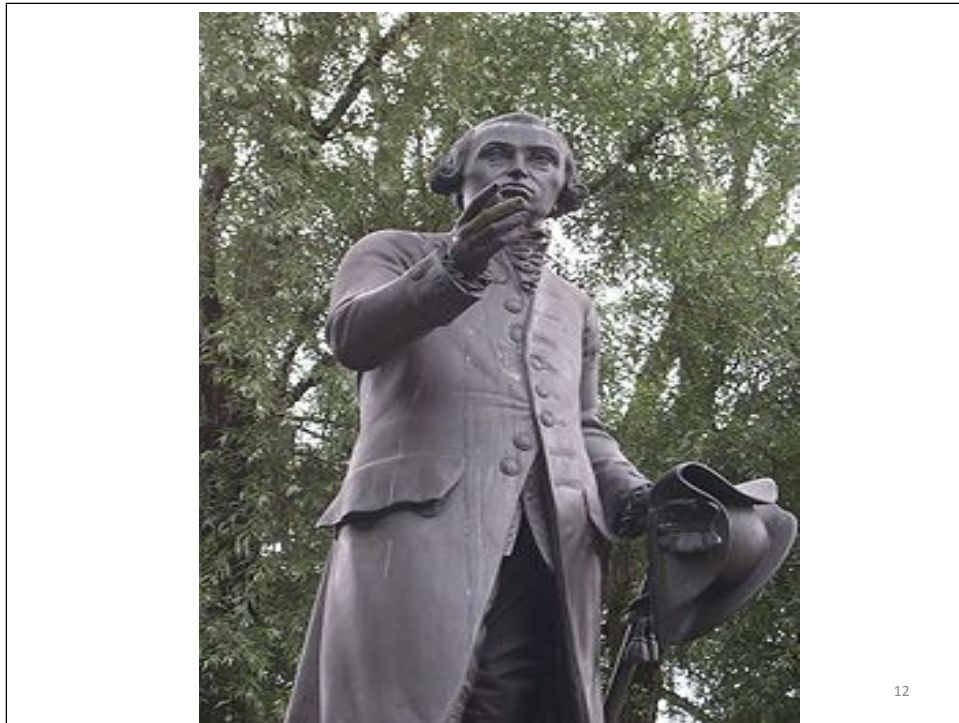
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Church. No one knows how many witches, heretics, or sorcerers were tortured or burned at the stake by the pious, but the fear generated by the medieval and Spanish Inquisitions* must have affected nearly all in Christendom. Being accused of being a witch was as good as being convicted. To deny it was to prove your guilt: Of course a witch will say she is not a witch and that she does not believe in witchcraft. *Throw her in the river! If she sinks and drowns that will prove she is not a witch; if she swims, we will know the devil is assisting her. Pull her out and burn her to death, for the Church does not like bloodshed!* In truth, the Church ran a Reign of Terror the superior in many ways to those of Stalin or Hitler. Obviously, in terms of absolute numbers terrorized or killed, Stalin and Hitler far surpassed the Church. But their Terrors lasted only a few years and were restricted to limited territories; the Church's Terror lasted for several centuries and extended to all of Christendom.

The Church's Terror, while aimed at both men and women, has left a legacy that it was aimed mainly at women. This may be due to such things as the Salem witch trials, which, of course, had nothing to do with the Church's Terror. In any case, those religions today whose members call themselves witches or sorcerers are often anti-Christian, pagan, and woman-centered, or satanic. New Age religions often exalt whatever the Church condemned (such as egoism and healthy sexuality in adults whether homosexual or not) and condemn whatever the Church exalted (such as self-denial and the subservient role of women).

Witchcraft and sorcery are still practiced in many countries around the world. For example, in Malaysia a witch, her husband and assistant were recently hanged to death for a grisly murder. Before killing their victim, they had him lie on a floor and wait for money to fall from the sky. "He was then beheaded with an axe, skinned and chopped into 18 parts before being buried in a hole and covered over with cement" (Reuters news service). In Tanzania, an elderly man was beaten to death after he claimed to have used witchcraft to cause a road accident in which 32 people died. The man had been collecting heads and other body parts of victims at the crash scene (Reuters news story). In Saudi Arabia, Hassan bin Awad al-Zubair, a Sudanese national, was beheaded after he was convicted on charges of sorcery.



Statue of [Immanuel Kant](#) in [Königsberg](#), Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)

The **Age of Enlightenment** (or simply the **Enlightenment** or **Age of Reason**) was an elite [cultural movement](#) of intellectuals in 18th century [Europe](#) that sought to mobilize the power of reason in order to reform society and advance knowledge. It promoted intellectual interchange and opposed intolerance and abuses in Church and state. Originating about 1650–1700, it was sparked by philosophers [Baruch Spinoza](#) (1632–1677), [John Locke](#) (1632–1704), and [Pierre Bayle](#) (1647–1706) and by mathematician [Isaac Newton](#) (1643–1727). Ruling princes often endorsed and fostered Enlightenment figures and even attempted to apply their ideas of government. The Enlightenment flourished until about 1790–1800.

According to Kant, The Enlightenment was "Mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error." According to historian [Roy Porter](#), the thesis of the liberation of the human mind from the dogmatic state of ignorance that he argues was prevalent at the time is the epitome of what the age of enlightenment was trying to capture.^[3] According to Bertrand Russell, however, the enlightenment was a phase in a progressive development, which began in antiquity, and that reason and challenges to the established order were constant ideals throughout that time. Russell argues that the

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enlightenment was ultimately born out of the Protestant reaction against the Catholic counter-reformation, when the philosophical views of the past two centuries crystallized into a coherent world view.

Zafirovski, (2010) argues that The Enlightenment is the source of critical ideas, such as the centrality of freedom, democracy, and reason as primary values of society—as opposed to the divine right of kings or traditions as the ruling authority.^[35] This view argues that the establishment of a contractual basis of rights would lead to the market mechanism and capitalism, the scientific method, religious tolerance, and the organization of states into self-governing republics through democratic means. In this view, the tendency of the *philosophes* in particular to apply rationality to every problem is considered the essential change.^[36]

MYTHOS vs LOGOS



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Karen Armstrong

Karen Armstrong

Mythos and logos: Armstrong v Dawkins

by Andreas Kluth on September 22, 2009

Richard Dawkins

I admire people like [Albert Einstein](#) and [Carl Jung](#) (both characters in my book) who were able to feel *awe*. They retained their ability to be amazed by the world, and derived out of that amazement what Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences.”

I also admire people like [Richard Dawkins](#) (and of course Charles Darwin) who are able to use the precision-scalpels of their minds for clear thinking and shocking insight. Eg: Evolution. Eg: No God.

So I very much enjoyed [this little contest in the Wall Street Journal](#) between Karen Armstrong, a religious scholar [I have a lot of time for](#), and Richard Dawkins, the world’s most famous atheist. They were both asked: “Where does evolution leave God?”

Dawkins, true to take-no-prisoners form, answered:

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The kindest thing to say is that it leaves him with nothing to do, and no achievements that might attract our praise, our worship or our fear. Evolution is God's redundancy notice, his pink slip.

Armstrong responded brilliantly too, by avoiding the embarrassing efforts of certain people to deny the evidence of evolution and instead going a level deeper.

Richard Dawkins has been right all along, of course—at least in one important respect. Evolution has indeed dealt a blow to the idea of a benign creator, literally conceived....

No wonder so many fundamentalist Christians find their faith shaken to the core.

But then she expands the topic:

Most cultures believed that there were two recognized ways of arriving at truth. The Greeks called them **mythos** and **logos**. Both were essential and neither was superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary, each with its own sphere of competence. Logos ("reason") was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled us to function effectively in the world and had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. But it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggle. For that people turned to mythos, stories that made no pretensions to historical accuracy but should rather be seen as an early form of psychology; if translated into ritual or ethical action, a good myth showed you how to cope with mortality, discover an inner source of strength, and endure pain and sorrow with serenity...



Modern Pagans and Mythology

Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, an 18th century advocate of atheism. *"The source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of Nature. The pertinacity with which he clings to blind opinions imbibed in his infancy, which interweave themselves with his existence, the consequent prejudice that warps his mind, that prevents its expansion, that renders him the slave of fiction, appears to doom him to continual error."* The System of Nature

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (8 December 1723 – 21 January 1789^[1]) was a French-German author, philosopher, encyclopedist and a prominent figure in the French Enlightenment. He lived and worked mainly in Paris, where he kept a salon. He is best known for his atheism and for his voluminous writings against religion, the most famous of them being the System of Nature (1770).

"...this book describing the universe in terms of the principles of philosophical materialism: The mind is identified with brain, there is no "soul" without a living body, the world is governed by strict deterministic laws, free will is an illusion,^[2] there are no final causes, and whatever happens takes places because it inexorably must. Most notoriously, the work explicitly denies the existence of God, arguing that belief in a higher being is the product of fear, lack of understanding, and anthropomorphism. (**Determinism** is the general philosophical thesis that states that

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for everything that happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen. Reality follows sort of a predetermined path.)

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*.



The full Humanism logo.

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.

Modern Humanists, such as [Corliss Lamont](#) or [Carl Sagan](#), hold that humanity must seek for truth through reason and the best observable evidence and endorse [scientific skepticism](#) and the [scientific method](#). However, they stipulate that decisions about right and wrong must be based on the individual and common good. As an ethical process, Humanism does not consider metaphysical issues such as the existence or nonexistence of supernatural beings. Humanism is engaged with what is human.^[54]

Optimism

Contemporary Humanism entails a qualified [optimism](#) about the capacity of people, but it does not involve believing that human nature is purely good or that all people

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can live up to the Humanist ideals without help. If anything, there is recognition that living up to one's potential is hard work and requires the help of others. The ultimate goal is human flourishing; making life better for all humans, and as the most conscious species, also promoting concern for the welfare of other sentient beings and the planet as a whole. The focus is on doing good and living well in the here and now, and leaving the world a better place for those who come after. In 1925, the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead cautioned: "The prophecy of Francis Bacon has now been fulfilled; and man, who at times dreamt of himself as a little lower than the angels, has submitted to become the servant and the minister of nature. It still remains to be seen whether the same actor can play both parts."^[55]



Edward Herbert, portrait by [Isaac Oliver](#) (1560–1617).

[Lord Herbert of Cherbury](#) (d. 1633) is generally considered the "father of English deism", and his book *De Veritate (On Truth, as It Is Distinguished from Revelation, the Probable, the Possible, and the False)* (1633) the first major statement of 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**.



[Heathen](#) altar for [Haustblot](#) in [Björkö](#), [Westgothland](#), [Sweden](#). The big wooden idol represents god [Frey](#) (Ing), the picture in front of it goddess [Sunna](#), and the small red idol god [Thor](#)

Paganism, which is also referred to as **contemporary Paganism**, **Neo-Paganism** and **Neopaganism**,^[1] is an [umbrella term](#) used to identify a wide variety of [modern religious movements](#), particularly those influenced by or claiming to be derived from the various [pagan](#) beliefs of pre-modern [Europe](#).^{[2][3]} Contemporary Pagan religious movements are extremely diverse, and there is no set of beliefs shared by all of them, although there are commonalities shared by most of them. These include an approach to [theology](#) that embraces such beliefs as [polytheism](#), [animism](#), and [pantheism](#). Many Pagans practise a [spirituality](#) that is entirely modern in origin, while others attempt accurately to [reconstruct](#) or revive indigenous, ethnic religions as found in historical and folkloric sources.

Contemporary Paganism is a development in the [industrialized countries](#), found in particular strength in the [United States](#) and [Britain](#), but also in [Continental Europe](#) ([German-speaking Europe](#), [Scandinavia](#), [Slavic Europe](#), [Latin Europe](#) and elsewhere) and [Canada](#). The largest Contemporary Pagan religion is [Wicca](#), though other significantly sized Pagan faiths include [Neo-druidism](#), [Germanic Neopaganism](#), and [Slavic Neopaganism](#).

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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.

Neo-Druidism or **Neo-Druidry**, commonly referred to as **Druidism** or **Druidry** by its adherents,^{[1][2][3]} is a form of modern [spirituality](#) or religion that generally promotes harmony and worship of nature, and respect for all beings, including the environment. Many forms of modern Druidry are [Neopagan](#) religions, whereas others are instead seen as philosophies that are not necessarily religious in nature.^{[4][5]} Originating in Britain during the 18th century, it was originally a cultural movement, only gaining religious or spiritual connotations in the 19th century. The core principal of Druidry is respect and veneration of nature, and as such it often involves participation in the [environmental movement](#). Another prominent belief amongst modern Druids is the veneration of ancestors, particularly those who belonged to prehistoric societies.

Beliefs vary widely, and there is no set dogma or belief system which all adherents follow.^[8] Indeed, it is a key component of many Druidic groups that there should not

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be strict dogmas. There is no central authority over the entire movement, nor any central religious text or religious leader. In most cases, the ideas and inspiration of all Druids is respected. Core ideas shared by many Druids, according to Emma Restall Orr, the founder of The Druid Network, include "honouring of the ancestors and honouring of the land".^[9] Orr also commented that "Druidry connects with all the other Earth-ancestor traditions around the globe, such as the Native American, the Maori and Huna, the Aboriginal, the Romany and the indigenous spiritualities of Africa and Asia",^[10] a view supported by leading British Druid Philip Carr-Gomm.^[11]

Nature-centered spirituality

Druidry largely revolves around the veneration of nature. Phil Ryder stated that "within Druidry, Nature is considered to be unconditionally sacred and an expression or manifestation of deity and divinity".^[12] Many Druids are animists, though animism is sometimes misnamed by modern commentators as "nature worship." Most Druids see the aspects of nature as imbued with spirit or soul, whether literally or metaphorically. Some Druids consider animals and plants to be members, like the deities of the Celts, of a túath, or tribe^[13] and therefore honored. Celtic author J.A. MacCulloch wrote of this in depth in a book published in 1911 entitled Religion of the Ancient Celts.

Because they view the natural world as sacred, many Druids are involved in environmentalism, thereby acting to protect areas of the natural landscape that are under threat from development or pollution.^{[14][15]}

Theology



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Wicca

This [pentacle](#), worn as a [pendant](#), depicts a [pentagram](#), or five-pointed star, used as a symbol of Wicca by many adherents.

Wicca (pronounced [/'wɪkə/](#)), also known as **Pagan Witchcraft**, is a [Pagan new religious movement](#). Its adherents are referred to as Wiccans, though the terms **Witches** or **Crafters** are also sometimes used.^[1] Developing in England in the first half of the 20th century,^[2] Wicca was popularised in the 1950s and early 1960s by a Wiccan High Priest named [Gerald Gardner](#), who at the time called it the "witch cult" and "witchcraft," and its adherents "the Wica."^[3] From the 1960s onward, the name of the religion was normalised to "Wicca."^[4]

Wicca is typically a [duotheistic](#) religion, worshipping a goddess and a god, who are traditionally viewed as the [Triple Goddess](#) and [Horned God](#). These two deities are often viewed as being facets of a greater [pantheistic godhead](#), and as manifesting themselves as various [polytheistic](#) deities. Nonetheless, there are also other [theological](#) positions within Wicca, ranging from [monotheism](#) to [atheism](#). The religion also involves the ritual practice of [magic](#), largely influenced by the [ceremonial magic](#) of previous centuries, often in conjunction with a broad code of morality known as the [Wiccan Rede](#), although this is not adhered to by all Pagan

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Witches. Another characteristic of this religion is the celebration of seasonally-based festivals, known as Sabbats, of which there are usually eight in number annually. There are various different denominations within Wicca, which are referred to as *traditions*. Some, such as Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca, follow in the initiatory lineage of Gardner; these are often collectively termed British Traditional Wicca, and many of their practitioners consider the term *Wicca* to apply only to these lineaged traditions. Others, such as Cochrane's Craft, Feri and the Dianic tradition, take primary influence from other figures and may not insist on any initiatory lineage. Some of these do not use the word "Wicca" at all, instead preferring to be referred to only as "Witchcraft," while others believe that all traditions can be considered "Wiccan."^[5]^[6]



Wicca

A painted Wheel of the Year at the [Museum of Witchcraft, Boscastle, Cornwall, England](#), displaying all eight of the Sabbats.

Wiccans celebrate several seasonal festivals of the year, which are known as [Sabbats](#); collectively these occasions are often termed the Wheel of the Year.^[62] Many Wiccans, such as [Gardnerians](#) and most eclectics celebrate a set of eight of these Sabbats, though in other groups, particularly those that describe themselves as following "[Traditional Witchcraft](#)", such as the [Clan of Tubal Cain](#), only four are followed, and in the rare case of the Ros an Bucca group from [Cornwall](#), only six are adhered to.^[63] The four Sabbats that are common to all these groups are the [cross-quarter days](#), and these are sometimes referred to as Greater Sabbats. They originated as festivals celebrated by the ancient [Celtic](#) peoples of [Ireland](#), and possibly other Celtic peoples of western Europe as well.¹

"the four great Sabbats are Candlemass [*sic*], May Eve, Lammas, and Halloween; the equinoxes and solstices are celebrated also."^[65]

The other four festivals commemorated by many Wiccans are known as Lesser Sabbats, and comprise of the [solstices](#) and the [equinoxes](#), and were only adopted in 1958 by members of the Bricket Wood coven,^[66] before subsequently being adopted

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Mabon aka Modron^[69] 21st or 22 September 21st historical pagan equivalent Autumn Equinox. The harvest of fruit.

Samhain, aka Halloween 31 October 30 000 Celtic paganism (*see also* Celts) Death and the ancestors.

Imbolc, aka Candlemas 1st or 2 February 1st Celtic paganism (*see also* Celts) First signs of spring.

Ostara 21st or 22 March 21st Germanic paganism Spring Equinox and the beginning of spring.

Litha 21st or 22 June 21st Neolithic Summer Solstice.

Beltaine aka May Eve, or May Day 30 April or 1 May 1st (Celtic Paganism) The full flowering of spring. Fairy folk.

Lughnasadh aka Lammas 1st or 2 August 1st Celtic paganism The harvest of grain.

Yuletide 21st or 22 December 21st Germanic paganism Winter Solstice and the rebirth of the sun.

Mythological and Pagan Roots of Holidays

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



Winter Solstice - Yalda

Yalda ([Persian](#): [یلدا](#)), **Yalda Night / Shab-e Yaldâ** ([Persian](#): [شب یلدا](#)) or **Shab-e Chelleh** ([Persian](#): [شب چله](#)) is the [Persian](#) Winter Solstice Celebration^{[1][2]} which has been popular since ancient times. *Yalda* is celebrated on the [Northern Hemisphere](#)'s longest night of the year, that is, on the eve of the [Winter Solstice](#). Depending on the shift of the calendar, Yalda is celebrated on or around December 20 or 21 each year. 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 angel of light and truth. At the morning of the longest night of the year the [Mithra](#) was born.

In Zoroastrian and ancient Iranian traditions, 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. To commemorate, people have small parties and gatherings and eat the last remaining fresh fruits from summer.

The Eve of the Yalda has great significance in the Persian/Iranian calendar. It is the eve of the birth of Mithra, the Sun God, who symbolized light, goodness and strength on earth^{[[citation needed](#)]}. Shab-e Yalda is a time of joy.

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Yalda is a Syriac word meaning birth^[citation needed] . Mithra-worshipers used the term 'yalda' specifically with reference to the birth of Mithra. As the longest night of the year, the Eve of Yalda (Shab-e Yalda) is also a turning point, after which the days grow longer. In ancient times it symbolized the triumph of the Sun God over the powers of darkness^[citation needed] .

The Cult of the Mithra was first introduced to Iran thousands of years ago by migrant Aryans^[citation needed] . Mithra, the Sun God remained a potent symbol of worship throughout the following centuries. Centuries later, during the Achaemenid era, Mithra became a principal deity, equal in rank to Ahura Mazda (the god of all goodness) and Anahita (goddess of water and fertility)^[citation needed] .



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).

Newgrange ([Irish: Sí an Bhrú](#)) is a [prehistoric monument](#) located in [County Meath](#), on the eastern side of [Ireland](#), about one kilometre north of the [River Boyne](#).^[1] It was built around 3200 BC^{[2] [3]}, during the [Neolithic](#) period. There is no agreement about what the site was used for, but it has been speculated that it had some form of [religious significance](#) because it is aligned with the rising sun on the [winter solstice](#), which floods the stone room with light.^[4] It is in fact just one monument within the Neolithic [Brú na Bóinne](#) complex, alongside the similar passage tomb mounds of [Knowth](#) and [Dowth](#), and as such is a part of the Brú na Bóinne [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#).

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Today, Newgrange is a popular tourist site, and according to the archaeologist Colin Renfrew, is "unhesitatingly regarded by the prehistorian as the great national monument of Ireland" and is also widely recognised as one of the most important megalithic structures in Europe.

Newgrange contains various examples of abstract Neolithic rock art carved onto it which provide decoration.^[8] These carvings fit into ten categories, five of which are curvilinear (circles, spirals, arcs, serpentiniforms and dot-in-circles) and the other five of which are rectilinear (chevrons, lozenges, radials, parallel lines and offsets). They are also marked by wide differences in style, the skill-level that would have been needed to produce them, and on how deeply carved they are.^[9] One of the most notable examples of art at Newgrange is the triskele-like features found on the entrance stone, which has been described as "one of the most famous stones in the entire repertory of megalithic art."^[10] Archaeologists believe that most of the carvings were produced prior to the stones being erected in place, although the entrance stone was instead carved in situ before the kerbstones were placed alongside.



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



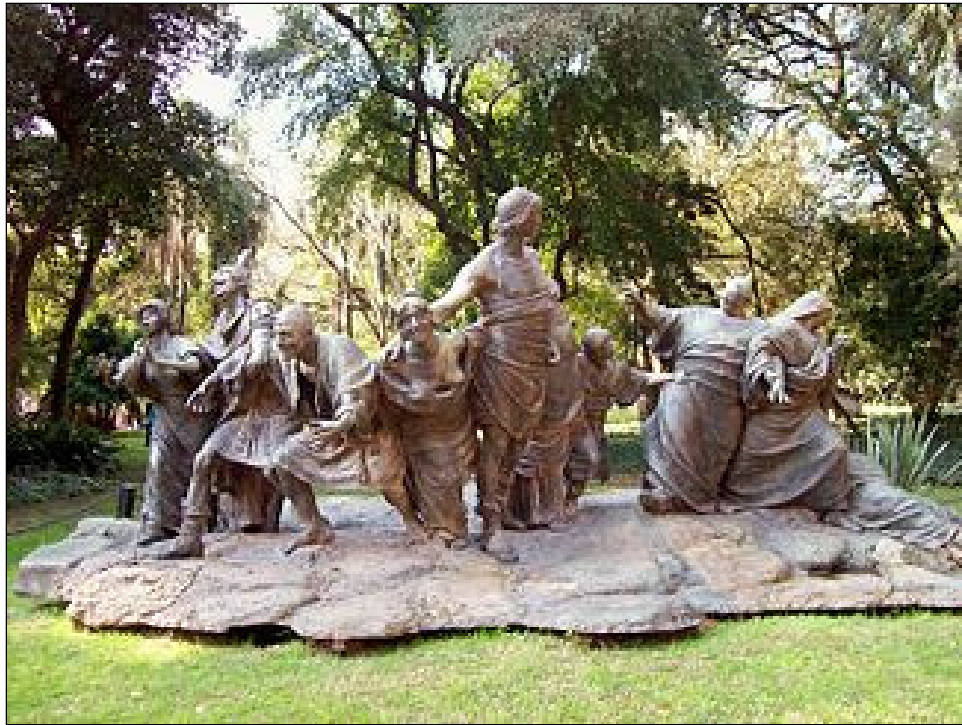
The wild hunt: *Åsgårdsreien* (1872) by [Peter Nicolai Arbo](#)

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.



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 BC](#) to raise citizen morale after a crushing military defeat at the hands of the [Carthaginians](#).^[2] Originally celebrated for a day, on [December 17](#), its popularity saw it grow until it became a week-long extravaganza, ending on the 23rd.^[citation needed] Efforts to shorten the celebration were unsuccessful. [Augustus](#) tried to reduce it to three days, and [Caligula](#) to five. These attempts caused uproar and massive revolts among the Roman citizens.

Saturnalia involved the conventional sacrifices, a couch ([lectisternium](#)) set out in front of the temple of [Saturn](#) and the untying of the ropes that bound the statue of Saturn during the rest of the year. A *Saturnalicus princeps* was elected master of ceremonies for the proceedings. Besides the public [rites](#) there were a series of [holidays](#) and customs celebrated privately. The celebrations included a school holiday, the making and giving of small presents (*saturnalia et sigillaria*), and a special market (*sigillaria*). Gambling was allowed for all, even slaves.

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The toga was not worn, but rather the synthesis, i.e. colourful, informal "dinner clothes"; and the pileus (freedman's hat) was worn by everyone. Slaves were exempt from punishment, and treated their masters with (a pretense of) disrespect. The slaves celebrated a banquet: before, with, or served by the masters. Yet the reversal of the social order was mostly superficial; the banquet, for example, would often be prepared by the slaves, and they would prepare their masters' dinner as well. It was license within careful boundaries; it reversed the social order without subverting it.

The customary greeting for the occasion is a "Io, Saturnalia!" — *Io* (pronounced "e-o") being a Latin interjection related to "ho" (as in "Ho, praise to Saturn

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

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.



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

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.



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

A contemporary Imbolc fire ceremony, 2007.

Imbolc is the day the [Cailleach](#) — the [hag](#) of Gaelic tradition — gathers her firewood for the rest of the winter. Legend has it that if she intends to make the winter last a good while longer, she will make sure the weather on Imbolc is bright and sunny, so she can gather plenty of firewood. Therefore, people are generally relieved if Imbolc is a day of foul weather, as it means the Cailleach is asleep and winter is almost over.

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.



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.

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.

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.

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Eastore, “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

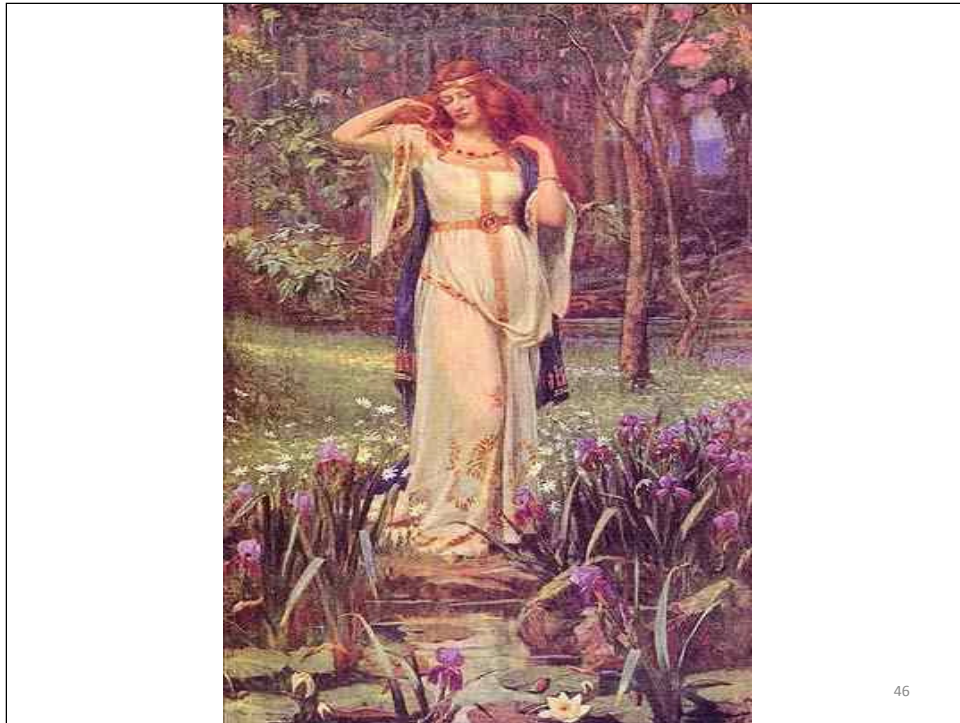
Asasa Ya (Western Africa) is the earth goddess of fertility of the Ashanti of Ghana. Prepares to bring forth new life in the spring, honored at the festival of Dunbar, alongside Nyame, the sky god who brings rains to the fields.

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.

As she talks, her lips breathe spring roses: I was Chloris, who am now called Flora."

[Ovid](#)

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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.

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. Freya 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

A 1907 postcard



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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



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

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.



Yakut dance with traditional costumes.

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

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

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