

aspects of themselves, according to their own interpretations of the term. Some women find it immensely liberating or empowering to play an ugly or fearsome role for a while, in a patriarchal world that strives to forbid them to be either.

Midwinter Solstice (December 21)

This solstice is the year's shortest day and longest night, a circumstance that caused the ancients considerable anxiety. They worried each year that the sun might not be able to gain its warmth back again. (In northern countries, the onset of doomsday was believed to be marked by continuous winter for three full years.) Midwinter festivals therefore centered around the idea of rebirth, to assist the "newborn" sun to grow in strength when it emerged from the dark womb of night.

Savior cults like those of Attis and Jesus also appropriated this traditional birth season for their particular heroes, because people were used to the celebration of a divine birth at this time, nine months after the god's death and re-conception at the Vernal Equinox—which Christians renamed the feast of annunciation, or Lady Day. The real birthdate of Jesus or any other savior god was, and is, quite unknown. When the church finally decided in the fourth century to adopt Christmas from the pagans, it was more closely aligned with the solstice, which has since precessed.

As for the Vernal Equinox, prepare the Antiphonal Chant:

- N: What is this night?
S: It is the night of the Midwinter Solstice.
E: What is the meaning of this night?
W: It is a peak of power.
N: What is the element that rules this night?
S: Tonight the darkness reaches the limit of its power over light.
E: After this night of power, what is the element that will wane?

- W: From this night forward, the darkness will wane and the light will grow.
- N: How do we recognize ourselves on this night?
- S: We greet the moon and glory in the darkness.
- E: Who helps us?
- W: Our Goddess helps us.
- N: What is our Goddess?
- S: She is the cold of space, the lightless womb of existence, the deepest abyss.
- E: Who is our Goddess?
- W: She is the Virgin of Light, the Crone of Darkness, the Mother of Time.
- N: Where is our Goddess?
- S: She is in our hearts in all seasons of the turning year.
- E: Who is our Goddess?
- W: Behold, she is ourselves.

Holly is a highly appropriate decoration for this festival, because it was adopted from the pagan Yule, and was originally named for the dark underground Crone-goddess Holle, or Hel, from whose womb the sun arose. The red berries of the holly symbolized the Goddess's holy blood, shaper of all life, according to the oldest beliefs. England still has many "Hollywells" or "Holywells" once considered yonic shrines of this Goddess. The ever-green leaves of the holly represented ongoing life, retaining vitality through the winter, with an implied promise of immortality.



The theme of this solstice is birth—or rather rebirth—with emphasis on the divine birthgiver rather than on the one who is born, as in the Christian revision. The birthgiver is Hel or the Dark Goddess, also known as Mother Night, Hecate, Myrrha, Cerridwen, Cybele-Nana, Black Demeter, and many other names. All participants may personify her midwife-priestess assistants. The youngest member of the group might be hidden under a dark veil, touched by all hands, and then brought forth as a personification of the sun's new daughter (for the ancient Yule celebrants regarded the sun as female).

It is also a good time to find ways of overcoming patriarchally instilled fears of feminine darkness, through realizing the hidden gestations necessary to all manifestations of brilliance or enlightenment. This can be symbolized in many ways: facing and dancing with one's own shadow; retiring under a covering like the Sun Maiden in order to come forth again; lighting new candles; looking "backward" through one's own legs; turning away from the circle in silence and solitude for a short space of meditation, then returning with joyful singing.

Decorating a tree, giving gifts (especially to children), roasting a pig with an apple in its mouth, burning a Yule log, harvesting mistletoe, and hanging up evergreen boughs were all purely pagan practices that came gradually into Christian tradition. Any modifications of these practices could be reclaimed, therefore, in a solstice celebration.

Candlemas (February Eve)

Candlemas stands opposite Lammas in the sacred calendar, and was probably one of the oldest of all seasonal festivals. It used to be called Imbolg or Imbolc, meaning something like "in the belly," a reference to the new gestation of the world spirit within the Mother. It became a fire festival, betokening the potential heat of a new growing season, and the Goddess's sexual fires, and the lighting of a purificatory "new fire" on every hearth—eventually including even the altars of churches, where new can-