Samhain Women’s Celebration - Goddess

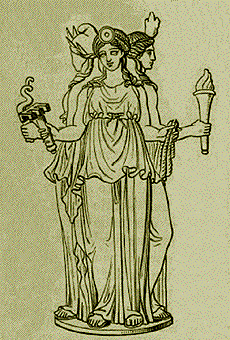
With the earth entering into its winter phase, people celebrated their dead ancestors, who now lived in the Otherworld, for, at Samhain, the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest. It was believed that by honoring them, the ancestors would ensure the return of fertility to the land at winter’s end. People would put food out for their dead ancestors

As a symbol of the earth, the goddess takes on her crone aspect. The Serpent Goddess reigns at Samhain as the deadly Queen of the Underworld. Imagery of death, such as serpents and skulls, abound, and are given their due respect. Underlying this imagery is the recognition of renewal, like the snake who enters a deathlike phase only to emerge anew from its old skin. Several Celtic myths tell about a hero summoning his courage to kiss the hag of winter, often three times, after which she turns into the beautiful maid of summer. This suggests that one must face death in order to find the source of renewal.

The Greek goddess, Hecate, is a popular goddess to invoke at Samhain. She combined fertility with death; by day, she ensured abundant crops; by night, she was the goddess of magic, ghosts, and tombs. Originally, Hecate was a powerful and benevolent lunar goddess, honored above all others by Zeus. She became associated with the underworld, ghosts and tombs, as well as magic.

Hecate is a goddess of cyclical phases, including death and rebirth. Robert Graves described her as the Snake Goddess of Tartarus, the underworld. He believed that the twelfth labor of Heracles, the capture of the snake-tailed, three-­headed dog, Cerberus, was derived from an icon showing Hecate, as goddess of the dead, welcoming Heracles to Tartarus. She took the form of a three-headed monster, with, perhaps, each head corresponding to a season.

As a goddess of the underworld, Hecate’s role was to search for the souls of the dead in the wasteland between the worlds. In the myth of Demeter and her abducted daughter Persephone, Hecate helped Demeter search for her daughter, and later acted as Persephone’s guide between the worlds.



As a form of the Serpent Goddess, Hecate was often  
depicted holding snakes, being entwined by snakes, or  
with a head of snakes. An ivory plaque from the Spartan  
sanctuary of Artemis (8th century BCE) shows her as a  
winged goddess with a snake meandering up to her  
arm. Robert Graves believed that the myth about the  
death by snakebite of the wood nymph, Eurydike, and  
the subsequent failure by Orpheus to retrieve her from  
the underworld, was mistakenly derived from pictures  
showing Orpheus entering Tartarus and encountering  
the Serpent Goddess, possibly in the form of Hecate. It  
was Eurydike’s victims, not herself, who died of  
snakebite. Male human sacrifices were accomplished  
by viper bites and offered to the serpent-grasping  
Queen of the Underworld.

The Goddess, in her deadly serpentine form, is seen in  
many myths, such as the Egyptian myth in which Isis  
creates a serpent to bite her ailing father, Ra, to force  
him to give her his secret name that would allow her to  
restore the wasteland to abundant life. A similar myth of  
the Zimbabwe people tells about the first man, Mwuetsi,  
who was bitten by a snake that was the lover of his wife,

Hecate, Greek goddess of the crossroads; drawing by Stéphane Mallarmé in Les Dieux Antiques, nouvelle mythologie illustrée in Paris, 1880

Morongo. As Mwuetsi grew sicker, the land became barren and people began to die. Finally, his children strangled him and appointed a new king, revitalizing the land. This story may have reflected the ritual murder of the king in medieval Zimbabwe, who was killed every four years and replaced with a new king. The last Egyptian pharaoh, Cleopatra VII, also faced death by snakebite, possibly reflecting a similar practice of sacrificing the Pharaoh at the end of her/his reign by the bite of a viper. An ancient Egyptian belief was that death by snake bite would secure immortality.

Supernatural beings, such as vampires, come into their fully glory at Samhain. One of the earliest sources for the vampire legends was the Mesopotamian goddess of death, Lamashtu. She was depicted on protective amulets as a terrifying creature with the head of a lion and talons of a bird, suckling a piglet and a dog, and holding a snake in each hand. From Lamashtu came other goddess who took the form of succubi, or seductive women who drained men’s life blood as they slept. The succubi included Lamia and Lilith, again forms of the Serpent Goddess. In one of the stories about Lamia, she appeared as a rich Phoenician woman. She was about to marry a young man when a philosopher exposed her true nature as a snake. Accordingly, she disappeared, together with her house and all her riches, leaving her young fiance bereft. Lilith, said in some medieval mystical texts to be the first wife of Adam, was also described as a snake. She could take the form of a beautiful, seductive woman, who would kill her lovers, give birth to demons, and murder children. She came to epitomize the evil of sexuality and men’s fear of women’s seductive powers.

The Serpent Goddess symbolizes the bridge between the worlds, death, and renewal. Samhain is a time to remember and celebrate those who died during the year, and for reflection on the mysteries of death.