

## Samhain and the Origins of Halloween

Text of this video : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_N\\_ACvveTFw&](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_N_ACvveTFw&) (31 oct 2016)

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## Introduction

To begin with, this episode is available in French and English. So choose the one that you are most comfortable with! We also need to credit Ronald Hutton, whose work we heavily relied on for this video.

Halloween ! The name comes from the contraction of "All Hallows' Eve", meaning the eve of All Hallows Day, or All Saints' Day. Hallow is an old english word linked to sanctity, to the sacred, which you might remember from the 21st of december 2006 when the title of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was announced and everybody on the internet turned into a linguist and tried to understand what it meant.

Thus it's one of those holiday that's split between a christian feast, well, two : All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on the first and second of november, and a more folkloric feast, Halloween on the night of the 31st of october.

With its ghostly image, one can wonder: are Halloween's roots in this Christian holiday, or are they to be found in a pagan festival, specifically the Gaelic feast of Samhain? (Yes, it's "sawain", not "samain": Celtic languages are not easy to transcribe and we apologize for all our coming mispronunciations.)

The problem with the Celts - at least with the British and Gaulish celts - is that because of a series of factors including the roman invasion and colonisation of much of their territories, the arrival of christianity and finally the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain, they didn't leave writings predating Christianity. So when we want to know more about their culture, we're dependent on Roman sources, which are not really objective nor always accurate, Irish and Welsh medieval texts which often are influenced by the christian context in which they were written, and folklore collected over the last three centuries, which can only give a very rough picture of their culture's evolution, and only in the very limited perimeter of the British Isles and Brittany.

Despite this lack of sources, there are many people today who rely on Samhain to prove the pagan origins of Halloween, and I think we can distinguish three major trends.

1. First, Christians - especially but not limited to *evangelical* Christians - for whom Halloween is a kind of pagano-satanic feast. We find echoes of this kind of moral panic in France, for example, with Damien Le Guay's polemical<sup>1</sup> pamphlet "La face cachée d'Halloween" in 2002, reacting mainly to Halloween beginning to take hold in France and the rest of continental Europe as a children's holiday in the mid-nineties.<sup>2</sup> (1994-5)
2. Second, neo-pagans, Wiccans and other New Age types (Hutton 360) who counter these attacks by insisting on the antiquity of Samhain, to legitimize Halloween. In France an example is this 2000 book by Jean Markale, an enthusiastic celtic revivalist, often criticized for its celtomaniac lack of method.<sup>3</sup>
3. And third, fiction. Cinema and literature use Samhain as a dramatic device, especially in horror stories. And as you can imagine, it's not necessarily well done from a scholarly point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> Le Guay Daniel, *La Face Cachée d'Halloween*, Cerf, 2002. En dehors de son ton catastrophique, le livre est relativement mesuré pour ce genre de discours.

<sup>2</sup> 1994-5, jusqu'en 1996, les journaux ne parlent que de Halloween dans un contexte fictif ou américain. [Journal de Genève 1 nov 1996, 1 nov 1996, p.35](#)

<sup>3</sup> Markale Jean, *Halloween : Histoire et traditions*, Imago, 2000, 168p. D'ailleurs cité par Le Guay (pp. 54-5).

## Pagan Halloween in Fiction

Ray Bradbury's *The Halloween Tree* (1972) and its cartoon adaptation (1993)

In 1993, the year Lays and I were born, an animated tv movie adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *The Halloween Tree* produced by Hannah Barbera came out on Cartoon Network which would often air around Halloween.

Its plot? Four children are running after the soul of one of their friends, discovering somehow the origin of some Halloween customs through ancient Egypt, the medieval... Celtic... witches... of Stonehenge, the gargoyles of Notre dame and the feast of the dead, dia de los muertos in Mexico City, where Moundshrew, played by Leonard Nimoy, can supposedly teach them something about Halloween's roots, each era allowing one of them to understand the reason behind their costume.<sup>4</sup>

And most people who talk about this film seem to be convinced that this is an educational film ...

"It sounds more educational than scary - Education - education isn't a bad thing !" "[isn't it scary reviews - the Halloween Tree](#) (3'24)

... that it's a true exploration of the real roots of Halloween

"It's one of the best Halloween specials i can recommend the visuals are jaw-dropping it's a nice history lesson about the holiday" ([Familiar Faces: Top 13 Weirdest Halloween Specials Part 2, 6'58](#))

"the Halloween tree ! how often do you come across a halloween special that actually teaches you something well that's exactly what this one does and it surprisingly does it very well [...]" Doug Walker "Nostalgia Critic" ([Top 11 Halloween Guilty Pleasures](#), 28 oct 2015, 13'37-15')

"The movie does have one element that goes for it and that's the history while most holiday special take place on halloween very rarely do they talk about the history of its origins. The film takes an innovative approach to educating its audience about the history of the holiday they use the characters costumes as a start on how each tradition comes to play one key dresses as a mummy then they go to ancient Egypt on a night when families light candles and celebrate the dead" ([Cartoon Palooza Review-The Halloween Tree](#), 24 oct 2015, 4'36-5'06)

But seriously: this is not history, Ancient Egypt has nothing to do with Halloween. And Joey here *does* realize that the Gargoyles and Dia de los Muertos are off topic:

"one kid's a monster and then they take him to Notre-Dame... because... of gargoyles ?...<sup>5</sup> yeah it's still pretty cool even the other kids dresses a skeleton is brought to one of the first Dia de los Muertos even though it's not Halloween but I think its intentions are good" ([Cartoon Palooza Review-The Halloween Tree](#), 24 oct 2015, 5'11-5'29)

And when they get to witches making... brooms ? It's just there to regurgitate a romantic or new age view of witchcraft. In the book, Moundshrew makes it out to be a mix of Greek, Roman and Celtic paganism, witches having somewhat inherited these traditions and practicing magic, even if their magic of course does not work.<sup>6</sup>

It's probably wrong. Despite all the efforts of Michelet, Wiccans and other neo-pagans<sup>7</sup> to romanticize them, the average alleged witch burned at the stake was not part of a secret sect of alchemists, and neither did she inherit the Gaelic tradition of Samhain.

<sup>4</sup> "All dressed up for all hallow's eve but you don't know why or what or even from where !" Moundshrew, *The Halloween Tree* (1993)

<sup>5</sup> Son costume d'un bossu avec un masque laisse penser à un mélange entre Quasimodo et les gargouilles, d'où Notre-Dame-de-Paris.

<sup>6</sup> "Every town has its resident witch. Every town hides some old Greek pagan priest, some Roman worshiper of tiny gods who ran up the roads, hid in culverts sank in caves to escape the Christians ! [...] You saw the druids cut and chopped, eh ? They hid from the Romans. And now the Romans, who fed the Christians to lions, run themselves to hide." ([Bradbury 85](#))

<sup>7</sup> Eg Michelet, [La Sorcière](#) (1862).

Moreover, in the movie they just show a holiday celebrated by celtic pagan witches at Stonehenge with souls turning into black cats (???), but in the novel, Bradbury paints Samhain as a kind of god of death, autumn and harvest, who also has a scythe (because death and harvesting, you see) (Bradbury 70-71; 75-6).

Samhain is not a deity, by the way, but we'll come back to that later.

The Halloween Franchise (1978 -)

The association between Samhain and the supernatural does not stop there and can be found in a lot of horror movies.

*Halloween*, the John Carpenter cult film from 1978 ... did not explicitly allude to the supernatural. It was the story of Michael Myers, who killed his sister on Halloween when he was six years old and who, fifteen years later, escapes from the asylum where he was detained to kill again in his hometown.

But **Debra Hill**, who co-wrote the film with Carpenter, says that while Samhain is not mentioned in the movie they did have it in mind

We went back to the old idea of Samhain, that Halloween was the night where all the souls are let out to wreak havoc on the living, and then came up with the story about the most evil kid who ever lived.<sup>8</sup>

The novelisation in 1979 wanted to clarify this connection and made Michael Myers the reincarnation of a celt who, on the eve of Samhain, had sacrificed a girl who rejected his advances, along with her fiance. The other members of the village killed him in retaliation, cursing his soul to wander the earth forever.<sup>9</sup>

In *Halloween 2* (1981), Debra Hill made this connection with Samhain clearer. At one point, Michael Myers breaks into a primary school and writes the word Samhain with blood on a blackboard. Dr. Loomis points out that it's the name of the Celtic lord of the dead.<sup>10</sup>

As we will see in just a moment, this is plain wrong. But anyway, Michael Myers is destroyed by fire so in *Halloween 3* (1982) the villain is an Irishman who tries to sacrifice lots of children using masks that contain a miniaturized chip and a piece of stone from Stonehenge, combined with a television ad that tricks insects into eating them? In short a Celtic sacrifice to the forces of darkness.

*Halloween 4* and *5* do not innovate much, Michael Myers was resurrected through the power of Hollywood loving profits and in *Halloween 6*, it's stated that this serial killer genetic curse with Celtic time travel comes from the Thorn rune - which comes from a Germanic alphabet, not from any Celtic language - and is manipulated by a druidic cult - while the actual Druids prohibited the use of writing.

Okay. Why not. One could maybe imagine Celts starting to use runes because of anglo-saxon influence in the Middle Ages? But in any case this depiction is really representative of the way ancient Celts are treated in general. We have so little information about them that it's always tempting to borrow bits from the romans or germans to fill in the blanks ; something that can be seen even in academia, in MacCulloch's terrible *The Religion of Ancient Celts* in 1911, for example.<sup>11</sup> Oh and of course, there needs to be the sacrifice of a firstborn child. Because Celts, you know.

Supernatural (2005-forever)

*Supernatural* is a television show that came on the air in 2005 and will last *forever*.<sup>12</sup> It follows the adventures of Sam and Dean, two brothers who hunt supernatural creatures. From a history of religions point of view there's a lot that could be said on the show since practically every episode we

<sup>8</sup>Debra Hill, Fangoria interview, quoted at <http://halloweenmovies.com/filmarchive/h1bts.htm>  
<http://archive.is/RsUG> )

<sup>9</sup> [http://halloweenmovie.wikia.com/wiki/Halloween\\_\(novelization\)](http://halloweenmovie.wikia.com/wiki/Halloween_(novelization))

<sup>10</sup> Dans le trailer de 1981 : <https://youtu.be/RCiuZ9MvdJs?t=1m5s> (1'05)

<sup>11</sup> *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (1911) [archive.org]

<sup>12</sup> Perpétuellement renouvelée.

see them study religion and folklore, comparing various cultures that speak of similar creatures to get more information about their targets.

*Supernatural* is set in the US, with its melting pot of culture that allows for a lot of folklore to be featured on the show and the exciting possibilities that come with it. In practice, every monster is played by a guy in a suit, everything is solved by good old fisticuffs between guys in suits, or torture sometimes, and from season 4 onwards, everything is a demon versus angel thing, christianity is the one true religion except for the parts about Jesus -- which nobody wants to address because that would mean the Winchesters are not the center of history.

And in their 2008 Halloween episode they explain that the feast of Samhain is named after a demon :

“Dean, Samhain is the damn origin of Halloween. The Celts believe that October 31st was the one night of the year when the veil was the thinnest between the living and the dead, and it was Samhain’s night. I mean, masks were put on to hide from him, sweets left on doorsteps to appease him, faces carved into pumpkins to worship him. He was exorcised centuries ago.” *Supernatural* (30 oct 2008) “It’s The Great Pumpkin Sam Winchester” (4x7)

The boundary between the world of the living and the dead would be thinner that day and -- why not ? - the Celts were already celebrating Halloween, they wore masks to escape the demon Samhain. They carved pumpkins to-- Wait, pumpkins? As in, a vegetable that is native to the americas and that the ancient celts could not possibly have used? A similar mistake can be seen in *The Real Ghostbusters* cartoon where a celtic spirit named Samhain is awoken and he has a pumpkin head.

"I am Samhain. I am Halloween." ("When Halloween Was Forever ", 1 nov 1986)<sup>13</sup>

And again we are told that Samhain - pronounced as in *Supernatural* - is not a feast but the lord of the dead.

This is completely wrong. There is literally no trace of a deity named Samhain. It's always been the name of a feast, of a holiday.

Where does this come from? Well, we owe this invention to a folklorist named Vallency in the eighteenth century. He did not know to which god this festival was dedicated - we can only speculate but probably not to any particular god<sup>14</sup> - and well he said there was a god named Samhain, to whom he gives a biblical demon name "BalSab" which would mean lord of the dead. (Morton 2013: 9) He made this up from nothing and it was repeated by Lady Wilde in her book *Mystic Charms and Superstitions* and after that by many people until today, still based on nothing.<sup>15</sup> (Rogers 19 n.20)

Well, we can actually find one appearance by a character named Samhain. In a legend collected in the 19th century, he is the brother of Cian and Goibhnu. The latter gives him a magical cow who can provide an infinite supply of milk, but she is cunningly stolen by a guy named Balor of the Evil Eye. For some, like Peter Berresford Ellis, it's enough proof that Samhain was a god, even though nothing else can be said about him..

<sup>13</sup> [Ghostbusters Wikia sv Samhain](#)

<sup>14</sup> Selon Hutton ça pourrait être le Dagda et la Morrigan qui devraient se retrouver dans la bataille de Mag Tured Cf. aussi Jan de Vries, *La religion des Celtes*, 237-8. Samhain ne signifierait pas fin de l'été mais "rassemblement" (cite Vendryes, *La Religion des Celtes*, 1948) ce qui se rapporterait à l'union de Dagda et de la Morrigan, dans la bataille de Mag Tured. Pareil pour Persigout 357 qui va jusqu'à dire qu'un "rituel hiérogame" était rejoué en Irlande en se basant sur que dalle. Markale (40-41) suppose que la fête est dédiée à Lug. Pour Thibaud ce n'est "pas la fête d'une divinité particulière mais la fête du monde et des âmes peuplant le monde (visible ou non) (341).

<sup>15</sup> Rowan Moonstone, a Wiccan, comments: "I've spent several years trying to trace the "Great God Samhain" and I have YET to find seminal sources for the same. The first reference seems to be from Col. Vallency in the 1700s and then Lady Wilde in her book 'Mystic Charms and Superstitions' advances the 'Samhain, lord of the dead' theory. Vallency, of course was before the work done on Celtic religion in either literature or archaeology." ("The Origins of Halloween")

The problems with this assertion is obvious: it comes from several compiled legends, collected in the 19th century, so quite late, and it doesn't add any other piece of information. And it seems like to weak a proof for him to start his article on Samhain in his Dictionary of Celtic Mythology by saying he was "one of the gods". So there are still some researchers who consider that Samhain was a god, but it's quite a minority, even a fringe position.<sup>16</sup>

### Review of encyclopaedias and dictionaries on the subject

In the end, we cannot really blame the creators of *Supernatural* or *Halloween* because the problem goes way back.

Usually when we don't know much about a topic, we start with dictionaries or encyclopedias on the field in question, because they're often written by specialists and they give you references to go further. It's never perfect but it's a starting point. And, if I try to summarize a dozen of those dictionaries published in the last 25 years they portray Samhain pretty much like these horror movies.

- Samhain being a deity (Ellis 1992) we saw that was erroneous. (refuted by Morton 2011)
- That it was the Celtic New Year ([Maier1997:242](#), Monaghan 2008: 407, criticized by [Koch 2005:1556](#))
- that it was the Day of the Dead (Morton 2011: 171)
- That it was the occasion for ghostly manifestations and an increased supernatural activity (Ellis 1992; [Koch 2005: 1557](#); Monaghan 2008: 406)
- a special moment to get in touch with the deceased, ([Maier1997: 242](#); Matson 2010:100)
- That there was human sacrifices (Matson 2010: 100)
- And bonfires (Ellis 1992; Monaghan 2008: 407)
- practices of divination (Monaghan *ibid*)
- and other festivities (Koch, Monaghan, Morton, etc. )

Book	Ellis (1992)	Thibaud (1995)	Maier (1997)	MacKillop (2004)	Koch (2005)	Monaghan (2008)	Persigout (2009)	Matson (2010)	Morton (2011)
Samhain = deity	= god	refuses				Review (some)			refutes
Day of the Dead				maintains	Mention				supports
Celtic New Year		supports		supports	critical	Mentions	supports	supports	
Supernatural Apparit.	supports	supports		supports	supports	supports			supports
Contact w/Spirit World	supports	supports	supports	supports			supports	supports	supports
Human sacrifices				supports		Pig Sacrifice		supports	supports
Bonfire	supports			supports	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports
Divination				supports	supports	supports			supports
Other festivities	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports	supports

Some are more skeptical or refute one mistake or the other, but it's still weird that they share the same portrayal of Samhain as horror movies, cartoons or tv shows unable to pronounce the name right. So in this video, we're going to try to figure things out and see what we can find out about Samhain and the origins of All Saint's Day and Halloween...

<sup>16</sup> ELLIS Peter B., *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* 1992, 240p. sv Samhain

## Human sacrifice among the Celts

the Wicker Man (1973)

One of the themes that comes up a lot is human sacrifice. In *The Wicker Man*, the 1973 film (which had a 2006 remake with Nicolas Cage) we see a policeman investigating a disappearance in a small British island whose inhabitants seem to perpetuate celtic pagan practices, before he is himself killed by fire in a Wicker Man. The film mixed a lot of folk elements that usually factor in the portrayal of Celtic paganism: a certain idea of sensuality, the naked dancing amid standing stones, masks of animals including of deers, etc.

Sources Greco-Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval

But this idea of ancient Celts making large wicker men full of men and beasts that they burn in offering to their gods, we owe it to **Julius Caesar**, who mentions it in his [Gallic Wars \(VI.16\)](#) c. 50 BC). **Diodorus of Sicily** ([Bibliotheca V.32](#) c. 60-30 BC)<sup>17</sup> and **Strabo** ([Geography.IV.4.5](#)) also speak of human sacrifice. It is believed that many of those Greek and Roman historians draw from the writings of Posidonius (c. 135 - 51 BC) and are questionable, but even the oldest historical reference to Celtic religion in Athenaeus mentions human sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

It has an obvious function. It's a discourse that enables Romans, Pagan as well as Christians, to portray themselves as more civilized than the cultures they conquered. In the same vein, Strabo says that the Irish sleep with their mothers and sisters and devour the corpse of their fathers - even if he admits that it comes from unreliable testimonies.<sup>19</sup>

Human sacrifice is a complex topic. It is quite possible that the Celts did sacrifice people, but archeologists found no trace of the gigantic pyres of humans and animals described by Caesar. And in general, it's an accusation that tends to be linked to alterity, to otherness, to the Other.

No Roman claims that his people make human sacrifices -- although they did bury Vestals alive -- when they talk about human sacrifices it is either about foreigners (Celtic or Carthaginian) therefore a geographical otherness; or to state that their ancestors made human sacrifices, but that it was a long time ago and that they abolished them: a temporal otherness, in a way, that makes them look good.

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<sup>17</sup> "Après avoir gardé les malfaiteurs pendant cinq ans, ils les empalent en l'honneur des dieux, et les brûler ensuite sur d'énormes bûchers avec beaucoup d'autres offrandes. Ils immolent aussi en honneur des dieux les prisonniers de guerre ; il en est qui, avec les hommes, égorgent ou brûlent, ou font périr par quelque autre supplice les animaux qu'ils ont pris dans la guerre. Quoique leurs femmes soient belles, ils ont très-peu de commerce avec elles, mais ils se livrent à la passion absurde pour le sexe masculin, et couchés à terre sur des peaux de bêtes sauvages, ils ont d'habitude à chaque côté un compagnon de lit. Mais ce qu'il y a de plus étrange, c'est que, au mépris de la pudeur naturelle, ils prostituent avec abandon la fleur de la jeunesse! Loin de trouver rien de honteux dans ce commerce, ils se croient déshonorés si l'on refuse les faveurs qu'ils offrent." (V.32)

<sup>18</sup> Sopater, frg. 6, cité par Athénée Cf. Borsje 31 : "D'après eux [les Celtes] c'est une coutume, quand ils gagnent une bataille, de sacrifier leurs prisonniers aux dieux ; ainsi, imitant les Celtes, j'ai juré aux pouvoirs célestes que je brûlerai sur un autel trois de ces faux dialecticiens." Athénée, *Les Deipnosophistes*, IV, 160c

<sup>19</sup> "Nous n'avons, du reste, rien de certain à en dire, si ce n'est que ses habitants sont encore plus sauvages que ceux de la Bretagne, car ils sont anthropophages en même temps qu'herbivores et croient bien faire en mangeant les corps de leurs pères et en ayant publiquement commerce avec toute espèce de femmes, voire avec leurs mères et leurs sœurs. A dire vrai, ce que nous avançons là repose sur des témoignages peu sûrs" ([Géographie 4.5.4](#))

And even when we do find a body, like the *Lindow Man* found in Cheshire: a man tied up, strangled, and left to sink into a bog -- what tells us it was not simply some form of execution or murder?<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless some claim that Samhain would feature human sacrifices or at least sacrifices.

**Bede** (c. 725) says that the Anglo-Saxon month corresponding to November, *Blodmonath*, month of blood, takes its name from the bloody sacrifices that were performed at that time.<sup>21</sup> Because of that, Markale (p. 36s.) supposes that a very important pig sacrifice took place at Samhain.<sup>22</sup> The problem is, aside from the fact that Blodmonath is a Germanic name, that even if it might have derived from the cattle being slaughtered at that time of year, it was probably just to process their meat and save up on fodder during winter, so it's more about butchery than sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

A better example would be The **Dindschenchas** -- "the lore of the places"<sup>24</sup> --- a collection of Irish texts from the eleventh or twelfth century that sought to explain how places got their names. It mentions that in a place called Mag Slecht, which would mean the plain of prostration, there were human sacrifices on Samhain, offered to Cromm Cruaich (which would mean lord of the hill?), a golden idol surrounded by twelve stone idols. (Metric l. 45-48) The pagans bowed to him so that their noses touched their knees (prose version 33) and offered him their first-born as sacrifice, shedding their blood around the idols (the metric. 13 -16) in exchange for a good harvest of wheat and milk. (l. 17-9) at least until Saint Patrick allegedly put a term to these practices. (Borsje 33-40)

But as Jacqueline Borsje of the University of Amsterdam explained, this story is probably not historical. (pp. 33-40) First, we do not find this story of human sacrifice in the **Confession** that was supposedly written by St. Patrick himself in the fifth century (§41, Borsje 36) or in the **Collectanea**, traditions on the life of St. Patrick compiled by the bishop Tirechan at the end of the seventh century. (Borsje 37) The idol Cromm Cruaich does appear in some ulterior lives of Saint Patrick but still no human sacrifice until the Dindschenchas. (Borsje 39-40) Second, those idolatrous sacrifice look a lot like some passages of the Old Testament<sup>25</sup>, which describe human sacrifices to Moloch or Baal, and the vocabulary used even resembles the Vulgate translation.

So we can conclude that in trying to reconstruct their pagan past, the Irish have filled the blanks using the stories of the Old Testament that warned the people of Israel with whom the Irish identified. And what did the heathen do back then you ask? Well, human sacrifices of course ! And that's probably how we ended up with this story of human sacrifices stopped by St. Patrick, although the process seems to be a bit more complex -- if you're interested, I would recommend Borsje's article on the topic.

So were there sacrifices on Samhain? Perhaps, the evidence is not really conclusive. And for human sacrifices? Even less so.

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<sup>20</sup> Pour une vision romantique voir Ross & Dobins, *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince*, 1989. Ellis (*Druids*, 1994:152-3) doute que ce soit un sacrifice humain.

<sup>21</sup> "Blodmonath is "month of immolations" for then the cattle which were to be slaughtered were consecrated to their gods. Good Jesu thanks be to thee who hast turned us away from these vanities and given us [grace] to offer to thee the sacrifice of praise." (*De Temporum Ratione*, XV, "De Mensibus Anglorum" trad. Faith Wallis 54) [[GBooks](#)]

<sup>22</sup> Peut-être lié à certaines apparitions folkloriques de démons-truies. Hutton (368) les dit récentes.

<sup>23</sup> S'appuyant sur cette tendance immémoriale à tuer le bétail avant l'hiver, néanmoins il n'apporte pas d'éléments qui en feraient autre chose que de la boucherie.

<sup>24</sup> Du moins étymologiquement, en irlandais moderne cela signifie la topographie.

<sup>25</sup> Eg dans le Deutéronome, le livre de Daniel, les Psaumes ou le Livre des Rois



### Samhain:historical traces

In some Celtic languages, the month of November was named Samhain (Sermon)<sup>26</sup> or a related name, and we can find some clue about it in medieval Irish literature.

The **Tochmarc Emire** lists Samhain among the four quarter-days of the year: Samhain, Imbolc, Beltaine and Lughdasahn. (Hutton 403) Beltaine was still well known into the Middle Ages, but not much is told about the others - as you can see in our Imbolc episode - which would suggest that they had long disappeared.

The **Serglige con culaind** (12th century.) tells us that three days before and after samhain there were festivities, games and competitions, which would then last one week. (See Koch 1607-8)

The **Sanas Cormaic** (tenth c.), a kind of lexicon, says of Samhain that it is the end of summer, which would fit with its likely etymology. The fact that the **Coligny Calendar**, a Celtic calendar from the second century found in Roman Gaul<sup>27</sup> had a month named Samonios and, it seems a samonios feast suggests that the feast was old. However, this is a lunar calendar, so it would mean that it did not always fall on the first of November. Caesar also said that unlike the Romans, who counted the days from midnight to midnight, the Celts counted from dusk to dusk. So assuming Samhain became fixed in a solar calendar, it would begin on the eve of November 1, that is, to us, October the 31st.

Now as to what Samhain was beyond that ...

John The new year Celtic

Many people, in particular the folklorist **John Rhys** theorized that Samhain was the Celtic New Year.<sup>28</sup> Rhys had noticed that on the culturally celtic Isle of Man, some people -- well, at least some elderly guy he found there -- treated November 1 as the new year : in the old days some bills were paid at this date and some would even call it *Hogmanay*, a word still used in Scots to mean new year's eve. It's not an unreasonable supposition, and as Rhys noted, there are a few New Year rituals on this day in the Isle of Man, even if he himself remarked that it was possible that they had only recently been transferred from the 31st of December or the first of January

But we also have good reason to believe that Beltaine was the beginning of the year. One theory, relying on the Coligny Calendar, is that the year was divided in two: Samhain marking the beginning of the cold half while Beltaine marked the beginning of the warm half.

A counterargument to Rhys is that it's very common for people to use different calendars for different purposes. And you probably do: we certainly use the Gregorian calendar starting on the first of January, but the school year, at least in Switzerland generally lasts from August-September to June-July Depending on the country, the fiscal year does not necessarily begin in January, and so on. The fact that some leases and contracts end on Samhain on the Isle of Man can be a sign of such a calendar existing, but it does not necessarily give it a crucial significance.

Also, we're not really sure that there was only one celtic calendar, be it in a country in a given era or more so throughout the entire Celtic world: it seems that there always were several coexisting calendars, legal, agricultural, etc.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sermon

<sup>27</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coligny\\_calendar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coligny_calendar)

<sup>28</sup> Sir John Rhys *Celtic Folklore : Welsh and Manx. Oxford, 1901, I.315-22.* [archive.org]

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Koch 2005:IV.1556 "In contemporary popular understanding, this date marks the beginning of the Celtic year, but, in fact, it is not at all clear when the year began or ended, or whether there was ever a consistent system throughout a single country, much less throughout all the Celtic countries. However, Samain, known as 'the calends of winter' in the Brythonic tradition (Welsh Calan Gaeaf, Breton KalanGoañv), was certainly an important date. It was the beginning of winter, and there is compelling evidence that it was the beginning of the new year. On the other hand, there is equally compelling evidence that Beltaine, which is six months from Samain, was considered as the beginning of the year. There are also other possibilities, for instance, that, as in the Coligny calendar, the year

In this context there, was Samhain the Celtic New Year? Maybe, but as it stands, it does not mean much.

### Invention of a Celtic festival

Keating and fire Tlachtgha

Among other sources John Rhys relied on a seventeenth century account by Geoffrey **Keating**, , who explains in his history of Ireland that on Samhain, everyone had to extinguish the fires they had in their house, on penalty of fine. The druids would gather on a hill named Tlachtgha, where they would light a bonfire and make sacrifices to their gods.<sup>30</sup> Everyone would then come to the hill and bring back fire to rekindle theirs.<sup>31</sup>

Beyond the fact that the ritual hardly seems practical if the whole country is to come and get fire back from the same hill, and that it implies a degree of religious centralization in Ireland that goes against everything we know about the era, Keating doesn't even provide a source for it! (Hutton 361)

James George Frazer: a pagan festival of the dead

Relying on this account, even though it cannot really be taken at face value, **James George Frazer**, made it one of his Fire Festivals. He reconstructed an entire calendar of Fire Festivals at the solstices, equinoxes and halfway between them. Despite the lack of evidence, many researchers after him, as well as neo-pagans, would adopt this "celtic" calendar.<sup>32</sup> (Sermon 408)

For him bonfires mostly had purifying virtues, but sometimes they could represent the sun, or help the sun in its course.<sup>33</sup> In this respect traditions of Hallowe'en fires can mostly be found in three places:

- in center and north Wales
- In the districts around the Highland Line in Scotland. (Hutton 366-7, 369)
- and on the Isle of Man, where in 1845 it was said that in olden times people built fires during a festival named Sauin to scare away witches.<sup>34</sup>

The problem is, one, that as the index of Frazer reminds us, people make bonfires *all the time* so it might not be that significant.

Two, these fires are virtually absent from regions of the British Isles usually deemed "Celtic" being The rest of the Scottish Highlands, the Hebrides (with the exception of Skye at the later date of

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was divided into two halves, or that the two dates represent the beginning of the year in two different types of calendars, eg agricultural, civil, or religious."

<sup>30</sup> "Now, when Tuathal had put these four parts together and made them into one territory called Meath, he built therein four chief fortresses, that is, a fortress in each of the portions. Accordingly he built Tlachtgha in the portion of Munster which goes with Meath; and it was there the Fire of Tlachtgha was instituted, at which it was their custom to assemble and bring together the druids of Ireland on the eve of Samhain to offer sacrifice to all the gods. It was at that fire they used to burn their victims; and it was of obligation under penalty of fine to quench the fires of Ireland on that night, and the men of Ireland were forbidden to kindle fires except from that fire; and for each fire that was kindled from it in Ireland the king of Munster received a tax of a screaball, or three-pence, since the land on which Tlachtgha is belongs to the part of Munster given to Meath." ([vol. 2 xxxix](#))

<sup>31</sup> De Vries 1963:237-8 ; Ellis 1992:240 ; MacKillop 2004 ("At Tlachtgha the lighting of the winter fires was a key part of the Samain ceremony."); Persigout 2009:357 etc..

<sup>32</sup> Pour un exemple néo-druidique New Age (qui ne mentionne même pas Samhain mais des solstices et équinoxes) : BOUCHET Paul et René, *Les Druides : science et philosophie*, Laffont, Paris, 1976, 282p.

<sup>33</sup> Une interprétation qu'on trouve chez MacCulloch 261.

<sup>34</sup> Hutton 368-9 n. 37 citant Joseph Train, [An Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man, 1845 ii.123](#). [GBooks]

1923<sup>35</sup>), Cumbria, Cornwall, and even Ireland. (Hutton 368-9) In this last case they *can* be found in Dublin and the Protestant parts of Ulster probably due to the many Scottish immigrants there (Hutton 368 n. 38-9) but Frazer himself was somewhat puzzled that this practice would be absent from everywhere else in the major Irish folklore collections of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

From this, it seems that there was no great Celtic fire festival at Samhain.

In addition to that, Frazer supposed that Samhain was a pagan festival of the dead that the Catholic Church had replaced with All Saints Day. His reasoning was simple: the two feasts were close, it would be the Celtic New Year, there are examples of cultures who honor their dead during the new year, and the Catholic Church would have taken over this holiday from the Celts, since that is what they do all the time.<sup>37</sup> And a lot of people agree with him.<sup>38</sup>

All Saints Day (1 nov) and the Day of the dead (2 nov)

But as Ronald Hutton reminds us, the reality is much more complex. First, the divisions of the English year appear to be rather Anglo-Saxon, so Germanic rather than Celtic. (Sermon 2000:418-9)

Second, All Saints Day, as its name clearly indicates, is not a feast of the dead, but a celebration of saints. And around the Mediterranean in the second half of the fourth century we see a multiplication of this kind of celebrations, commemorating the Christian martyrs killed by pagan emperors.

**Saint Ephrem the Syrian**, who died in 373, mentions one such celebration on May the 13th in his *Carmina Nisibena*. In the fifth century, Syrian churches had one during Holy week, and the Greeks preferred the Sunday after Pentecost<sup>39</sup>, thus we have varying dates. Rome favored May the 13th, which was made official by Pope **Boniface IV** in 609 when he consecrated the Pantheon to All Saints. (Hutton 364)

But around the year 800 we see that germanic churches, so in England and Germany, preferred the date of November the 1st, it appears for example in the later copies of Bede's martyrology. The holiday was then allegedly generalized under Louis the Pious in 835 at the instigation of Gregory IV.

Was this set up to replace Samhain? In support of this theory, we can point out that there were influential Irish monks and missionaries in this region, such as Saint Columban, who founded many monasteries; and so they would have spread an irish custom. Except that we have evidence that All Saints Day cannot come either from or even to Ireland! We know from two calendars, the **Felire of Oengus** and **Martyrology of Tallaght** that in Ireland, around the ninth century Saints were commemorated on April 20. (Hutton n. 364 15 quoting [Butler:iv.234-5](#) ; [Dowden 23](#))<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Hutton 367 n. 32 William Hone *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, 1832:ii.1259-60 ; Maria J. MacCulloch "Folk-lore of the Isle of Skye", *Folk-Lore* 34, 1923:86-7.

<sup>36</sup> "In Ireland the Hallowe'en fires would seem to have died out" Frazer, [Balder I.241](#)

<sup>37</sup> Hutton 364. On le retrouve en plusieurs passages de Frazer, [Adonis 1906:253-256](#) ; [Adonis. Attis. Osiris 1907:301-9](#) ;, [Balder 1913:I.224-6 Ibid.](#) ; [1919 \(ibid.\)](#) ; jusque dans la troisième édition abrégée : "the Feast of All Souls at the beginning of November, which under a thin Christian cloak conceals an ancient pagan festival of the dead" ([ed. 1922 §62 "The Hallowe'en Fires"](#) [Bartleby]) Frazer doutait par ailleurs des arguments de Rhys Cf. [Balder 1914I.224-6](#)

<sup>38</sup> ; Sjoestedt 76 : "L'Eglise, attentive à s'annexer les traditions antérieures malaisées à déraciner a fait de cette fête de tous les esprits, la fête de tous les saints, notre Toussaint." ; Markale va jusqu'à dire que le rituel pascal d'éteindre les chandelles et les rallumer a été transféré "du 1er novembre à Pâques par les chrétiens" (!) *Les druides* ; [Morton 19](#) [GBooks]

<sup>39</sup> Jean Chrysostome, homélie 754 ?

<sup>40</sup> [Butler's Life of the Saints, 1956:iv.234-5](#) ; [Dowden, The Church Year and Kalendar, Oxford 1910:23.](#) (à propos de l'absence de la Toussaint le 1er novembre dans le sacramentaire grégorien) Cf. [Martyrology of Tallaght](#) & [Felire Oengussa](#) [Wikipedia, en]

So it's not necessarily clear why November 1st was chosen instead of a date in April or May: Samhain may have played a role to some extent, but that date clearly came out of the Germanic world, not the Celtic world.

We can speculate that one problem with those dates in April or May is that they can get too close to the moveable feasts around Easter.

Easter, at least in the west, falls between March 22 and April 25, so the Ascension follows between April 30 and June 3 and Pentecost between May 10 and June 13. It could mess up the liturgy a bit if a feast of the dead were to fall in between them. Thus, outside of the Annunciation at the very beginning of the cycle on March 25 there's no major fixed feast in this part of the Catholic liturgical year.

As for the 'day of the dead' as such, known as All Souls' Day or officially the commemoration of all the faithful departed, it only appears later. It's supposedly **Odilo, Abbot of Cluny around the 10th-11th century**, who created a day commemorating the dead in all the institutions attached to Cluny, but the exact date it was celebrated at the time remains unclear. In any case, it ended up being set on the day after All Saints' Day, so November 2nd.<sup>41</sup>

We can try to guess why.

First, All Saints' Day bears a fairly obvious relationship with death since many saints died in martyrs, which is what is commemorated on this day.

Moreover, during the Middle Ages with the development of the hell/purgatory/heaven dogma, saints became intercessors, intermediaries, which could be called upon to help the souls of the deceased. (Hutton 364-5)

Of course, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day are not necessarily distinct in most people's mind. In France, more often than not, the dead are honored on the first of November, which is a public holiday.

So now that we're talking about the dead, let's go back to this idea that Samhain is a fateful date, during which the boundaries between the spirit world and the world of the living are thinner, and during which supernatural phenomena occur.

### Literary Traces

And indeed in Irish sagas a lot of weird things happen on Samhain, which was associated with manifestations from the Sidhe, the spirit world or otherworld, inhabited by supernatural beings.

In the **Serlige con Culain**: the hero Culain attacks two otherworldly birds, linked by a red gold chain and singing a mysterious song who turn out to be fairies in animal form: he falls asleep and dreams that they are whipping him, causing him to lose the ability to speak for a year and forcing him to stay in bed until the next Samhain, when one of these fairy women from the otherworld sends someone to tell him they can heal him in exchange for his help. (Koch 1606-7)

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<sup>41</sup> Hutton 365 ; [Jardet 1898:277-312](#) il semble qu'il y avait une journée de commémoration à Cluny en Février et que Odilon la fixa plutôt au lendemain de la Toussaint le 2 novembre. Cependant la date du décret clunésien qui lui est attribué est débattue et pourrait représenter un ancrage dans le passé d'une coutume plus récente. Cf. Iogna-Prat Dominique, « [Les morts dans la comptabilité céleste des clunisiens aux xie et xiiie siècles](#) », *Études clunisiennes*, Paris, Editions Picard , «Les médiévistes français», 2002, 240 p.

This was also the date when the Fomorians, the former monstrous masters of Ireland, demanded a tribute of milk, honey, and a third of the newborns. (MacKillop 2004 sv Samhain<sup>42</sup>) It could be linked to Samhain as a date on which you payed your rent or your contract ended, and so on.

One explanation for the numerous occurrences of Samhain in Irish medieval tales would be that it's a recognizable date, during which there were regular festivities. The same way, in the Arthurian legends, stories often begin on Pentecost/Whitsunday, Christmas or Easter: since all the characters can be reunited for a banquet at Arthur's court, which makes for a natural starting point.

But it's also on this day that the Fomorians were vanquished by the Tuatha de Danaan, during the battle of Mag Tuired. Many kings from the Ulster cycle die on Samhain, and in the adventure of Nera, it's on Samhain's night that someone dares him to tie something to a hanged man's ankle, at which point he comes back to life and asks for water. Nera's adventure continues with him having a vision of his town on fire, filled with dead people, and a woman warning him that it's going to happen next samhain unless his people and him destroy the Sidhe Army hidden in the hill of Cruachan. (Morton 16) We also have the tale of some sort of three-headed vulture coming out of its cave on this night to wreak havoc with hordes of devilish creatures, etc. (Rogers 20 n.4)

This idea of Samhain as a literary device to gather all characters cannot explain all these ghostly or monstrous apparitions, so scholars like Jeffrey Gantz<sup>43</sup>, Proinsias MacCana<sup>44</sup> and, in France, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt<sup>45</sup> or Françoise Le Roux<sup>46</sup> consider that Samhain is indeed an ominous date when manifestations from the otherworld, the Sidhe<sup>47</sup>, increased in intensity and frequency. (Hutton 361-2 ; [Morton 2012:15-16](#)).

### Shoney and other divinations

And this ominous dimension seems to be reflected in folklore. To quote only a few examples :

- In some places food offerings were left on that date; they could be implied to be for the dead or for fending off witches.<sup>48</sup>
- On the Isle of Lewis in the seventeenth century, local priests reported to have abolished a pagan ritual. Namely, sailors would go on the edge of the waves, kneeling in the sea and imploring a spirit named "shoney" (johnny) for a good catch next year by pouring a bowl of ale

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<sup>42</sup> "Authors of early texts are careful to point out when important action takes place at Samain. At this time the predatory Fomorians would exact their tribute of grain, milk, and live children. Each year on this date Aillén mac Midgna came to burn Tara until Fionn mac Cumhaill dispatched him. From Cruachain in Co. Roscommon came the triple-headed monster Aillén Tréchenn who wreaked havoc on all of Ireland, especially Emain Macha and Tara, until he was eliminated by Amairgin (1). Cúchulainn encountered otherworldly damsels at Samain time, and this was also the time Cáer and Angus Óg flew off in swan form."

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Myths and Sagas*, 1981, 188-9.

<sup>44</sup> Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, 1970, 127s.

<sup>45</sup> SJOESTEDT Marie-Louise, *Dieux et Héros des Celtes*, PUF, 1940. a un passage dévoué à Samhain avec la plupart des lieux communs (pp. 65-76) : "Nuit de Nouvel An des celtes, nuit pour ainsi dire hors du temps" (71), Sacrifices (72-3), sacrifices humains à Cenn Cruaich (73), mythes et batailles surnaturelles (73-4). "L'Eglise, attentive à s'annexer les traditions antérieures malaisées à déraciner a fait de cette fête de tous les esprits, la fête de tous les saints, notre Toussaint." (76)

<sup>46</sup> LE ROUX Françoise, *Les Druides*, PUF 1961, 115-7 décrit ainsi Samhain (115-7) : sept jours, fête, banquets, quant aux sacrifices humains offerts à Cromm Cruaich elle les mentionne mais dit que ce ne seraient pas "de jeunes enfants comme on l'a très souvent supposé, mais plutôt les petits des animaux domestiques." (106) Y ont aussi lieu toutes les "batailles mythologiques" elle cite ainsi Sjoestedt (71) : "tout le surnaturel se précipite prêt à envahir le monde humain".

<sup>47</sup> Pronounced [i].

<sup>48</sup> On laisse parfois de la nourriture en offrande, mais avec des significations différentes. Dans le Caerwonshire ça semble être pour les morts et dans le Cambridgeshire c'est pour apaiser les sorcières. (Hutton 379-80)

in the water. They then went to sit in silence in a chapel, and later went to make merry in the fields.<sup>49</sup>

- In Argyle in the twentieth century, people in disguise would visit houses while playing the role of ghosts, inhabitants pretending not to see them.<sup>50</sup>
- In the nineteenth century at Longridge Fell in the Lancashire Pennines, it was customary to ascend on a hill from eleven o'clock to midnight, with a lit candle in hand, and if it were to go off, it would mean a witch had done it, which would mean bad luck for you, but if it were to stay lit you were safe. (Hutton 365-6 n. 21)<sup>51</sup>
- Divinatory practices which would vary greatly from place to place. In north wales, people would throw a pebble in the Halloween bonfire and if the next day your pebble could not be found, it would be a sign that you would die during the next year.<sup>52</sup>

Divination can also be found on the eve of May Day, on the 24th of June or on New Year's Eve. (Hutton 380) Depending on your point of view it could reinforce the theory that Samhain was the Celtic New Year, or weaken it, given that those practices appear on the eve of any significant date. And that they look a lot like roman customs of the New Year as we saw in our episode on the Kalends of January.<sup>53</sup>

### The Beltaine-Samhain connection

For all this and more, again, I refer you to Hutton's book.

There is no proof that it started the year, or that it was about the dead but from all these elements, from folklore or irish literature, Hutton concludes that there was an important pagan festival on the first of november.

But what really convinces him is the link between Samhain and Beltaine. Beltaine deserves its own episode, (Hutton chap. 25 218-225) but they share some customs: both are seen as ominous times, on opposite ends of the year. The thing is, a lot of Samhain and Beltaine-related beliefs can also be found beyond the British Isles, on the eve of May Day, or *Walpurgisnacht*, as it's called in german.

That's a problem : *Walpurgisnacht* was a big deal in a lot of the germanic world<sup>54</sup> and even beyond, where it was said that on this night witches were out and about ; so it can't just be a celtic festival.

And geography might not be as important as economy. Hutton theorizes that the period around Samhain and Beltaine, marking the beginning of the seasons, was only important in pastoral economies, where it would be the period of transhumance, the herds being brought out in their grazing fields at the beginning of may, and taken to their winter quarters at the beginning of november. Given the vulnerability that might come at those transitional times, a lot of the customs we've seen make sense, and it seems logical that places that had a completely different economy altogether did not care much for those feasts. (Hutton 225, 370)

If we accept this hypothesis, which fits with a lot of the facts, Samhain loses its aura as an important celtic religious festival and starts to look like an important moment for pastoral economies, but shared largely beyond celtic peoples.

<sup>49</sup> Hutton 369-370 n. 41 M. Martin, [A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland. 1703:28-9](#)

<sup>50</sup> [Folk-lore vol. 58.1 1947. p. 247 "All Hallows Eve"](#)

<sup>51</sup> Renvoie à Thompson *Medii aevi Kalendarium* 1841:I.365

<sup>52</sup> Hutton 366 n.25 ; Frazer [Balder I.239-246](#) citant Brand 1883:i.389

<sup>53</sup> Cf. [CPS 8 : Les Calendes de Janvier](#)

<sup>54</sup> namely Denmark, Sweden, Norway Saxony, Silesia Moravia Bohemia and Austria. Hutton 225 n. 42 citing Frazer *Balder* I.156-160 & *Magic art and evolution of kings* 1911:54. It can also be found in Finland and some Baltic countries.

The modern Halloween tradition

We've talked about traditional folklore and practices, but when we talk about *modern* Halloween traditions you're certainly thinking of two of its most emblematic elements : trick-or-treating, going from door to door in disguise to ask for candy, unleashing various tricks on the neighbour that would not comply, and the Jack'o'lanterns, faces carved in pumpkins to be used as lanterns. You might be surprised to learn that there is a very strong case for those practices to be entirely linked with christian concepts of death and the hereafter.

### **The Reformation, and private rituals**

Let's go back to All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

The concept of purgatory mostly developed throughout the Middle Ages as an intermediate stage between Heaven and Hell, though the idea that you could help the deceased through prayer<sup>55</sup> could already be found in christian antiquity, to relieve them of their pain or ease their way into heaven.<sup>56</sup>

But during the Reformation, protestants started to push back against such conceptions, because they often implied to call upon saints as intercessors, which protestants despised, but also because if you can decide what becomes of one's soul after one's death, it means that people are not judged for their actions but just for how many friends they have praying for them.

Thus, in the British Isles, the reformation brings about the end of official church celebrations for the commemoration and rest of the dead, which was fought against by some. (Hutton 371-2) This might explain why, in reaction to this disappearance, we note the emergence of a lot of private rituals.

### **Origins of Trick or Treating Soul Cakes**

An example of those rituals would be the "Teen'lay": straw was burnt at the end of a fork while people prayed around it in honor of the dead. ([Hutton 372-3](#)) Another one that would be of even bigger interest to our actual purpose : Soul Cakes.

Poor people would come knocking from door to door and ask for Soul Cakes, which were given in honor of the dead of the household, which might already had some soul-saving virtue, being an act of charity in their name, but in exchange for the cookie, the beggars would also say a prayer for the souls of the deceased. It was really popular with children, who would often be satisfied with cookies, fruits or money, but older young men would warmly accept a little beer. It's a great business model : give us something and we'll pray for your dead ! To get the message across more efficiently they had some songs like this one, that Sting covered in 2009 :

A soul cake, a soul cake,  
Please, good missus, a soul cake,  
One for Peter, two for Paul,  
And three for Him that made us all.

<sup>55</sup> [Jacques de Voragine, La Légende Dorée, CLX 2 novembre](#)

<sup>56</sup> Dans la *Passion de Sainte Perpétue*, elle a une vision de son frère décédé, assoiffé, meurtri et sale, qui ne parvient pas à surmonter le rebord d'une sorte de piscine parce que trop petit (il est mort d'un cancer à 7 ans) mais elle prie pour lui et quand elle le revoit, le rebord a baissé, ses vêtements sont en meilleur état, de même que ses plaies et il peut s'abreuver. Cf. *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivi des Actes*, ed. J. Amat, Sources Chrétiennes n° 417, cerf, Paris, 1996. [Traduction A. LEVIN-DUPOLOY en ligne](#). [PDF] Reproduit et discuté in Parrot 131s. L'Encyclique [Spe Salvie \(§48\)](#) de Benoit XVI fait même remonter la pratique au judaïsme ancien citant [2 Maccabées 12. 38-45](#) (1<sup>er</sup> s. av. J.-C.) Cf. [Jardet 1898:277-312](#).

An early form of such a custom could be found in a tract from 1511 entitled *The Festyvall* which states that bread was offered “for all christian souls”<sup>57</sup>. The tradition of souling can be found all throughout the nineteenth century, hindered a bit from 1870 onwards because of the generalised schooling of children, which left them with less time to go begging for baked goods. The thing is, Sting was doing a christmas themed album, so he says :

*And come no more a-soulling 'till christmas time next year*

To make it a christmas song, while it originally it said til this time next year. But in any case, a lot of people *would* come bother you until Christmas.

All Saints' Day marked the beginning of a big winter begging cycle where people would beg for people's hospitality, generally singing door to door. (Hutton 54-69 chap. 6) On the 23 of november, it was done by blacksmiths in honor of Saint Clement, their patron saint ; on the 29th of november you had the feast of Saint Catherine, for wheelwrights, carters, spinners, rope makers and so on. And along these you had other forms of celebration: on the 30th of november, Saint Andrew's day, men and women would exchange clothes. And closer to christmas, a kind of itinerant begging on Saint Thomas Day, the 21st of december, was called Thomasing, (Hutton 55-6) and was so prominent that the day was often called “Begging Day”. (Hutton 59)

The Twelve Days of Christmas featured carolling, which still exists today in some capacity in anglo-saxons countries, where you go sing carols from door to door in ugly sweaters in exchange for a little money, though today it's usually for charity ; and wassailing, where it's especially young women asking that their wassail bowl be filled with roasted apples, hot wine etc. (Hutton 61sq.)

We could certainly emit the hypothesis that souling, as it was called, is of celtic origin, but it didn't really take hold in northern England, in Scotland or in Wales. And there are only very few records before 1700. It can actually be best explained as the emergence of new forms of urban begging, because during that time of the year different economic activities came to a halt, agricultural jobs, fishing at sea, but people still needed to make a buck. (Hutton 60)

So, at first, souling marketed itself with the christian ideal of charity, in connection to the christian ideology around purgatory, at a point where traditional rituals of prayer and intercession in favor of the dead were disappearing. Although the meaning was soon lost to leave only the candy... (Hutton 371-8)

But that's often what happens when your marketing is efficient.

#### Déguisements & Mischief

Another way to make a few bucks during the winter was Mumming, or Mummers Plays<sup>58</sup> a sort of folk theatre that people played in disguise, sometimes in exchange for money, going from door to door, and in the same way it could be seen at numerous times during winter.

Of course, we could assume that it's the origin of Halloween disguises, that we find at the beginning of the twentieth century among some of those that went from house to house to collect candy. In Orkney, young men would wear women's clothing ; on Skye, they would blacken their face and wear old clothes. And it was an opportunity to cause some mischief. In this latter case, to quote Hutton :

[they] were traditionally allowed to ‘exercise the greatest licence’, sitting where they pleased in a kitchen, singing, conversing, and ignoring the inhabitants of the house which they had entered and who were expected to set scones, cakes and fruit before them. (Hutton 381<sup>59</sup>)

<sup>57</sup> “We read in old time all good people would on all Halloween Day bake bread and deal it for all christian souls” Hutton 374 n. 16 [Dowden 23](#) ; Frazer *Adonis* 301-9

<sup>58</sup> Hutton chap. 7 “Mummer's play and sword dance” 70-80.

<sup>59</sup> Referencing his book *Merry England*, 253, 255. Relying on a 1923 account from [Maria J. MacCulloch](#) “Folk-lore of the Isle of Skye”, [Folk-Lore 34, 1923:86-7](#). [archive.org]



That's one example of the kind of mischief that was an important part of the night, but it was by no means confined to Halloween.

Now, all this could have a celtic component. We talked about it in our episode on the Kalends of January (which is only in french for now please submit english subtitles thanks), mentioning that numerous church fathers complained that around the New Year, there were some masquerades, people disguising themselves as animals, especially deers.<sup>60</sup> Some people made a connection to Cernunnos, the gaulish god, given the geographical repartition of those testimonies, who are mainly found in Gaul, Britain and Spain.

It's a parallel that could be added to what Rhys noticed on the Isle of Man<sup>61</sup>, to put it differently, with the introduction of the Julian calendar, Samhain customs would have shifted on the new New Year, the first of january.

But I don't know if it's really conclusive, especially given there's no deer disguise found on samhain. Furthermore, disguising oneself for festive occasions was relatively common all throughout the year, just like itinerant begging, or divinatory practices. In the end, we see that these things are not really uniquely associated with Samhain.

### Jack'o'Lantern and Pumpkins

All this brings us to jack'o'lanterns, which are clearly associated with that time of year. In Ireland, they were traditionnaly carved from turnips, but the custom can also be found in Sutherland, in the north of Scotland, and in Somerset, where they were called "punkie", and halloween called punkie or spunky night. The name "jack'o'lantern" was linked to the story of a spirit trying to lure away wanderers with a lantern, which was probably linked to will-o'-the-wisps. Punkie was actually a word used for the will-o'-the-wisps. People usually give mundane explanations to these lanterns : they were simply a way to get light during the night, or maybe to fend away evil spirits. But given that will-o'-the-wisps are often depicted as the souls of unbaptised babies, we might theorize that it was originally meant in honor of the deceased. (Hutton 382-3). Now it might be a bit contrived.

When the tradition came to the united states, mostly thanks to irish immigrants, they started using pumpkins instead of turnips, probably because, well, they're quite bigger and easier to carve. The first written record in the US dates back to 1834, but there might already be a trace in 1820 in Washington Irving's famous short story: [The Legend of Sleepy Hollow](#), where a pumpkin was found next to the body of Ichabod Crane. In later incarnations of the story, of course, it would be a jack'o'lantern instead of a mere pumpkin.

### USA and Halloween

One factor in the diffusion of these traditions was the Great Famine in Ireland, between 1845 and 1852, which caused massive emigration of irish people to the rest of the British Isle, and -- especially -- to the United States, where Halloween would become hugely popular and where all those elements would combine in the twentieth century to form the holiday we know.

And from the United States it would be exported again to continental Europe.

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<sup>60</sup> "Pierre Chrysologus (homely [155](#) *De Pythonibus* ; *De Kalendis Januarii* [PL 52.609](#)) mentions people defiling as roman gods, screaming obscenities. People disguise themselves as domestic animal in northern italy in **Pierre Chrysologue et Maxime of Turin**. The **pseudo-Augustin** speaks of bull and dog masks. But most are wild animals, especially the deer. First mentioned by **Pacian of Barcelone** (310-391) (*Paranesis I* [PL 13.1081](#)). **Césaire of Arles** even tells (homely 192.2) that they wore the skin of the animal on their heads. **Ambroise of Milan** denounces it around 387 (Ps. 42.1) elsewhere in italy, **Maxime of Turin** (hom. 16), **Sedatus of Nimes** in Gaul, **Isidore of Sevilla** (*De Eccl. Off.* [1.40](#) [GBooks]) in spain. At the end of VIIIth century, the bishop of Canterbury, **Theodorus**, condemns those wearing the deer skin" ([CPS 8 : Les Calendes de Janvier](#)) [french]

<sup>61</sup> as pointed by MacCulloch 257

You could see Halloween in the anglo-saxon media that was consumed in Europe, but it was not really well known back then, to the point where if you search for mentions of Halloween in european newspapers before the nineties, most of them are about the John Carpenter movie (which thus needed a different title when it was translated into french, "la Nuit des Masques", night of the masks) or speak of halloween in an anglo-saxon context.

And between 1994 and 1996, the holiday started to manifest itself: if you look at Switzerland and France it might have been helped by some marketing operations, like France Telecom giving away pumpkins in 95, or some brand of cigarette giving away cigarettes on the night of Halloween in some Swiss nightclubs. So its propagation might be helped by business-minded people looking for an opportunity to sell stuff during a part of the year that was traditionally off peak (except for Florists, maybe), which is also part of a broader american cultural influence, in a way

But it's broadly seen as an american thing and hasn't caught on in a lot of places.

Conclusion : mercy for the funeral

Let's talk about The Halloween Tree again.

Are we saying that this is intolerable anachronistic propaganda? Well, a little but not entirely. Its greatest sin is perhaps to have won the Emmy in 1994 for "Outstanding Writing in an Animated Program". What? Okay, it's not bad writing, it's Ray Bradbury, but... it didn't really make the best use of the medium especially if you consider that it won against Animaniacs, Batman the Animated Series and Rugrats!

So yes, Ray Bradbury seriously believes some of this history lesson and obviously people take him seriously. But it's still fiction and we're not really mad that novelists, screenwriters or youtubers have a skewed vision of Halloween or celtic religion. But it's a bit more worrying when it comes to people who write books on the subject.

In the novel and the movie Bradbury is not writing a history Halloween. He is rather doing what Dickens did for Christmas in A Christmas Carol, a ghostly journey to clarify the meaning of a holiday attacked as too cheerful or not Christian enough.

And in essence his book is intended as a response to Christian attacks against Halloween, that's why we are shown the Romans destroying Celtic culture, then Christians destroying all paganism; or that Moundshrew cannot enter a church : to make Halloween separate from christianity.

The various pagan traditions invoked serve this discourse and when speaking of Ancient Egypt or Dia de Muertos he does not describe the origins of Halloween, he compares how two cultures deal with death, and tries to draw a lesson : staging death, in a way, allows us to confront it and make it lose its grim sid, which for Bradbury would be the function of Halloween. (Bradbury 136-8)

And of course some Christians are annoyed Halloween eclipses All Saints' Day. But even though early Christians were quite vocal in their fight against paganism, there was a certain tolerance towards practices regarding Death. One could cite, for example the roman tradition of eating with the dead, and involve them in the meal by pouring food into holes in their graves, which was called the *refrigerium*<sup>62</sup> and lasted quite a long time into Christian antiquity.

But most importantly there is a passage that I find quite significant in the life of Saint Martin of Tours. He sees a procession in the distance, people carrying something wrapped in white sheets battered by the winds. Suspecting that it's a pagan ritual he intimates them to stop with his saint superpowers, and they actually find themselves unable to advance. So they drop what they're carrying and Martin realizes that this is not an idol, but a corpse. It was a pagan funeral. And when he realizes that ... He lets them go.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> SMITH Jonathan Z., La Magie de la Comparaison, 2014, 88-9, citant la grande étude de André Parrot, *le Refrigerium dans l'antiquité*, 1937, 131s. pour Rome, l'Afrique du Nord et la Gaule.

<sup>63</sup> "Quelque temps après, Martin, dans un de ses voyages, rencontra le convoi funèbre d'un païen qu'on portait en terre, avec des cérémonies superstitieuses. Voyant de loin cette foule qui s'avancait,

Generally speaking, the church were not monsters, they understood that when it came to honor the dead everybody would not necessarily be entirely Catholic, but it didn't mean that this sentiment was fundamentally unchristian.

In conclusion, I would say that it is often impossible to distinguish Christian folklore from surviving pagan traditions, and that distinction doesn't always make sense anyway. But no matter how much it bothers Christians or neo-pagans, all we can guess about Samhain from folklore is intertwined with the Christian feast of the dead, and has been for over a thousand years.

So maybe we could stop twisting the history of this holiday in order to attack Christians and maybe instead of saying that it is a satanic pagan festival, Christians might try to incorporate it into their celebration of All Saints' and All Souls' Days, drawing inspiration from the practices of charity and prayer for the dead that gave birth to these customs in the first place. Who knows? Maybe everyone could benefit from it...

Thank you for watching this video! If you want to go further, there is a link to the script in the description, which includes our bibliography with links to online sources when they are available. If something is unclear, or if you think we've made a mistake, don't hesitate to leave a comment below. If you want to follow us on twitter, the links to our profiles are in the description as well. So far, all our other videos are in French, but they often include English subtitles so don't hesitate to share and subscribe - if this one proves successful, we might even do more videos in English!

Until then, well happy halloween!

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#### Irlandaises

- Dindschenchas
- Sanas Cormaic (Xe s.)

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et ne sachant ce que c'était, il s'arrêta un instant ; car, se trouvant à peu près à cinq cents pas de distance, il lui était difficile de rien distinguer. Cependant, comme il voyait une troupe de paysans, et que le vent faisait voltiger les linges blancs qui recouvraient, le corps, il crut qu'on accomplissait quelque rite profane et superstitieux : car les paysans, dans leur aveuglement insensé, ont l'habitude de porter autour de leurs champs les images des démons recouvertes d'étoffes blanches. Élevant donc la main, il fait le signe de la croix, commande à la foule de s'arrêter et de déposer le fardeau. À l'instant même ils demeurent immobiles comme des pierres ; puis, faisant un violent effort pour continuer leur marche, ils se mettent à tourner ridiculement sur eux-mêmes, jusqu'à ce que épuisés par le poids qu'ils portent, ils déposent le corps. Étonnés, ils se regardent les uns les autres en silence, et se demandent à eux-mêmes quelle peut être la cause de l'accident qui leur arrive. Mais le bienheureux, ayant reconnu que cette foule n'était point réunie pour un sacrifice, mais pour des funérailles, éleva de nouveau la main, et leur permit de s'éloigner et d'emporter le corps du défunt. C'est ainsi que Martin, suivant sa volonté, ou les força de s'arrêter, ou leur permit de reprendre leur marche." Sulpice Sévère, [Vie de Saint-Martin XII](#) [Remacle, trad. Viot 1861, num. F.-D. Fournier]

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**Samhain.** [I] One of the gods, a brother of Cian and Goibhniu. He was looking after a magical cow, Glas Gaibhnenn, which belonged to his brother Cian. Balor of the Evil Eye, disguised as a little red-haired boy, tricked him into parting with it. **Samhain's** role as a god is not clearly defined, although one of the four major Celtic festivals was named after him. The *Feis na Samhna*, or the **Samhain** Festival, was held on the evening of October 31 into the following day, November 1. It marked the end of one pastoral year and the beginning of the next. It was an intensely spiritual time, for it was the one period when the Otherworld became visible to mankind and when spiritual forces were let loose on the human world. Christianity took this pagan festival over as a harvest festival. The feast became St. Martin's Mass (Martinmas). The festival also became All Saints' Day or All Hallows, and the evening prior was Hallowe'en, still celebrated as the night when spirits and ghosts set out to wreak vengeance on the living and when evil marched unbridled across the world. In all the Celtic countries, fires were extinguished and could only be rekindled from a ceremonial fire lit by the druids. Significant events happened on **Samhain** or its equivalent. It was the time when the Fomorii oppressed the people of Nemed and when the Dé Danaan defeated the Fomorii at the second battle of Magh Tuireadh.

THIBAUD R.-J. *Dictionnaire de Mythologie et de Symbolique Celte*, 1995, sv Samain pp. 340-1.

Assemblée de la fin de l'été. Samonios gaulois. Grande fête annuelle placée sous le signe du gui, célébrée le 1er novembre, qui débutait l'année druidique. Moment particulier où le temps et l'espace, le monde visible des vivants et le monde invisible des disparus communiquaient. Temps hors du temps, où les disparus revenaient visiter leurs lieux d'existence pendant cette nuit de Samain qui n'était pas la fête d'une divinité particulière mais la fête du monde et des âmes peuplant le monde (visible ou non).

MAIER Bernhard, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, [1997:242 sv Samain](#) [GBooks]

The day marking the beginning of winter in the Irish calendar (1st Nov.) it was celebrated as the beginning of the New Year, with the evening of the 31st October being included in the festivities. The night between the 31st October and 1st November (Hallowe'en) plays a major role in legends and customs, as it was believed that in these hours human beings could make contact with the world of spirits. Lit. : K. Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, Du. 1972.

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Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx names for the seasonal feast of pre-Christian origin fixed at 1 November on the Gregorian calendar. The most important of the four great calendar feasts of Celtic tradition, including, by their old Irish names, Beltaine (1 May), Imbolc (1 February), and Lughnasad (Modlr. Lúnasa/Lughnasa, 1 August); its counterparts are in Wales Hollantide, in Cornwall Allantide, and in Brittany Kala-Goañv. The antiquity of Samain is attested to by the Coligny Calendar (1st cent. bc) which cites the feast of Samonios. The same source explains that to the ancient Gauls the period of dark precedes the light, supporting the commonly held belief that Samain is the equivalent of New Year's Day. Julius Caesar (1st cent. bc) reported that the Gaulish Dis Pater, god of death and winter's cold, was especially worshipped at this time of year. Other classical commentators observed that Teutates might be worshipped at

this time by having sacrificial victims drowned in vats, whereas sacrifices to Taranis were burned in wooden vessels. Samain's equivalents on the Christian calendar are All Saints' Day (introduced by Pope Boniface IV in the 7th cent. to supplant the pagan festival of the dead) and Halloween.

By abundant testimony, Samain was the principal calendar feast of early Ireland. Each of the five provinces sent assemblies to Tara for a feis held every third year. At Tlachtga the lighting of the winter fires was a key part of the Samain ceremony. In part Samain ceremonies commemorated the Dagda's ritual intercourse with three divinities, the Mórrígan, Boand, and Indech's unnamed daughter. Just how much of this remembrance included fertility rites, or what their nature might be, is not known; but in Irish and Scottish Gaelic oral tradition, Samain time was thought most favourable for a woman to become pregnant. At Mag Slécht in Co. Cavan, human sacrifices might be offered to Crom Crúaich, called the 'chief idol of Ireland' by early Christian scribes. Although the full nature of Crom Crúaich is not known, popular writers on early Ireland have taken to calling him Samain, implying that he gave his name to the seasonal feast; although at least one American encyclopaedia repeats this conjecture, it is unsupported by early Irish texts.

Authors of early texts are careful to point out when important action takes place at Samain. At this time the predatory Fomorians would exact their tribute of grain, milk, and live children. Each year on this date Aillén mac Midgna came to burn Tara until Fionn mac Cumhaill dispatched him. From Cruachain in Co. Roscommon came the triple-headed monster Aillén Tréchenn who wreaked havoc on all of Ireland, especially Emain Macha and Tara, until he was eliminated by Amairgin (1). Cúchulainn encountered otherworldly damsels at Samain time, and this was also the time Cáer and Angus Óg flew off in swan form.

The different celebrations of Samain over the centuries explain some of the traditions still popularly attached to Halloween. Standing between the two halves of the Celtic year, Samain seemed suspended in time, when the borders between the natural and the supernatural dissolve and the spirits from the Otherworld might move freely into the realm of mortals. Concurrently, humans might perceive more of the realm of the dead at this time, and looked for portents of the future in games. People might choose from small cakes called barmbracks [Ir. bairín breac, speckled loaf, ie with currants or raisins] containing a ring or a nut to determine who would be married and who would live singly. Bonfires were built in parts of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. It was also a time to relax after the most demanding farm work was done. In counties Waterford and Cork, country lads visited farmers' houses on the night before Samain, oíche shamhna [Samain eve], collecting pence and provisions for the celebrations. In Cork the procession of young men blowing horns and making other noises was led by someone calling himself the White Mare, wearing white robes and the configuration of a horse's head. On the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, though the inhabitants were Protestant, people gathered ale and other provisions for a mock ceremony, calling Shoney of the sea to enrich their grounds in the coming year. Turnips were hollowed out with candles put inside.

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The most important of four great feasts of Celtic tradition. Held around November 1, it marked the beginning of winter and of the Celtic year. See Coligny Calendar. The dates and types of celebrations varied slightly by region, but each might have included ceremonial fires and human sacrifices to gods such as Taranis and Teutates. In some regions, young children would go door to door the night before Samhain, collecting provisions for the celebrations. Sometimes celebrants would display hollowed-out turnips lit from inside with a candle. Revelers believed that Samhain marked the time of year when the barrier between the spiritual realm and the mortal world was thinnest. Residents of the Otherworld could move about freely and the living could visit Otherworldly places. The celebration has obvious similarities to the modern Halloween. Other names for the festival include Allantide (Cornish), Hollantide (Welsh), Kala-Goanv (Breton), and Sauin (Manx).

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