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- Ryan, Beth & Nicola :)

Samhain



"Snap-Apple Night" by Daniel Maclise

Samhain is the Celtic festival of the dead. It is observed yearly on the evening of October 31 and lasts until November 1. It marks the end of the harvest season and it is where Halloween originated from.

Definition

- Samhain is a Gaelic word that means “summer’s end.”
- Samhain is pronounced as “sah-ween”.
- Samhain is one of the four Gaelic harvest festivals. The three others are Imbolc, Bealtaine, and Lughnasadh.
- It marks the end of summer and the start of winter.
- Pagans, Wiccans, Druids, and witches take part in this ancient celebration.
- Samhain was primarily observed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Northern France, and the Isle of Man.
- It also has other names, depending on the region.
- Druids and Wiccans call it Calan Gaeaf or Nos Galan Gaeof.
- The Welsh call it Nos Cyn Calan Gual.
- Pagans also regarded Samhain as a spiritual new year thus it was also called “The Witches’ New Year”.



Samhain

- The Celtic calendar marks Samhain as the end of the year.
- The Gaulish Coligny calendar called it Trinouxtion Samonii, meaning "Three Nights of the End of Summer."

Historical Background

- Celtic people have observed this Gaelic celebration long before it evolved into Halloween.
- Over 2,000 years ago, Pagans celebrated Samhain as a harvest festival.
- There are not many written accounts on how Samhain was celebrated, but it is believed that the Celtic people harvested crops and slaughtered animals in preparation for an elaborate feast.
- They also believed that this point in time made the divide between the supernatural and the physical worlds to be thinner, allowing spirits to walk among the living.
- Priests were believed to light bonfires and hold rituals to ward off spirits.
- People offered food to ancestral spirits.
- In Celtic Ireland, two islands named Tlachtga and Tara were associated with Samhain.
- On the eve of Samhain, the Great Fire Festival was held in Tlachtga.
- It is untrue that Samhain is demonic in origin. This is a misbelief caused by Charles Vallancey, a British amateur historian and military surveyor.
- In 1762, Vallancey visited Ireland and wrote extensively about the country's history and culture.
- He argued that Samhain did not actually translate as "summer's end", but rather as the Celtic god Balsab which means "lord of death".
- Also, this is a misconception because Celts did not believe in the concept of heaven and hell. Demons did not exist for them.



Samhain

Celebrating Samhain Then and Now

- It's common to prepare a feast for the living and the dead, light bonfires, dance, heal, honoring the dead, and guide spirits home by opening a western facing door and placing a candle on that spot.
- Samhain is still celebrated today by neo-pagans.



Photo by William Murphy
Source: flickr.com

Halloween Parade in Dublin, Ireland

- To commemorate the ancient festival, neo-pagans recreate rituals to honor ancestors and spirits.
 - Other ways to celebrate Samhain today is to set up altars for the dead, decorating them with Samhain symbols, organize feasts, visit graves of loved ones, and explore divinatory methods like tarot cards.
- Wiccans celebrate Samhain as one of the Sabbats of their annual cycle of festivals called Wheel of the Year.

From Samhain To Halloween

- Samhain and Halloween are not the same holiday, but Halloween is rooted in Samhain.
- Samhain became Halloween after the Christians affected major transformations to the Celts' religious practices.
- In 601 A.D., Pope Gregory the First issued an order to turn pagan holidays into Christian ones rather than wipe them out.
- Famine in the 1840's forced the Irish to migrate to the United States. One of the traditions they brought with them was Samhain.
- Samhain evolved into Halloween which is now one of the main holidays in the US.
- Instead of performing religious rituals, wearing costumes is done to keep harmful spirits at bay.
- In ancient times, animal fur and skin were used as costumes.



Samhain

- Since the 1500s, going door to door in disguise (called guising) was practiced during Samhain.
- Trick-or-treating started in the 1940's. It is the act of dressing up, and sometimes performing, in exchange for candy or food.
- Trick-or-treating used to be called "souling" because prayers were exchanged for gifts.
- There have been other traditions incorporated into Samhain such as apple bobbing and pumpkin carving.
- The Church did not agree with Halloween because it took away from celebrating the day as All Saints' Day.
- For a long time they lobbied against Halloween but to no avail.

Popular Culture

- Many films and TV shows associate Samhain with demonic origins.
- Samhain is referenced in films such as Halloween 2 (1981) and Halloween 3: Season of the Witch (1982) wherein the festival was associated with blood and gore.
- In 2010, Samhain was featured in a cartoon show named Ugly Americans where the characters are zombies, demons, etc.
- A gothic rock/horror punk band called Samhain was founded by Glenn Danzig in 1983.



Time To Celebrate



What is Samhain? Complete the definitions of Samhain below by filling in the boxes with the correct letters to complete the words.

Samhain is a Gaelic word that means...

S U M M E R ' S E N D

Samhain marks the end of

H A R V E S T S E A S O N

Samhain was observed in...

I R E L A N D

Samhain was called Nos Cyn Calan Gaul by the...

W E L S H



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