

Yule & Its Etymological Associations

Yule is attested early in the history of the Germanic peoples; from the 4th-century Gothic language it appears in the month name *fruma jiuleis*, and, in the 8th century, the English historian Bede wrote that the Anglo-Saxon calendar included the months *geola* or *giuli* corresponding to either modern December or December and January. Scholars have connected the original celebrations of Yule to the Wild Hunt, the Norse god Odin, and the pagan Anglo-Saxon Modranicht, meaning “Night of the Mothers” or “Mothers’ Night.” It was an event held at what is now Christmas Eve by the Anglo-Saxon pagans.

While the Old Norse month name *ýlir* is similarly attested, the Old Norse corpus also contains numerous references to an event by the Old Norse form of the name, *jól*. In chapter 55 of the Prose Edda book *Skáldskaparmál*, different names for the gods are given; one is “Yule-beings.” A work by the skald (scholar) Eyvindr skáldaspillir that uses the term is then quoted: “again we have produced Yule-being’s feast [mead of poetry], our rulers’ eulogy, like a bridge of masonry.” In addition, one of the numerous names of Odin is *Jólnir*, referring to the event.

Later on, departing from its pagan roots, Yule underwent Christianized reformulation, resulting in the term Christmastide. Some present-day Christmas customs and

traditions such as the Yule log, Yule goat, Yule boar, Yule singing, and others may have connections to older pagan Yule traditions. Terms with an etymological equivalent to Yule are still used in Nordic countries and Estonia to describe Christmas and other festivals occurring during the winter holiday season. Today, Yule is celebrated in various forms of Neopaganism.

Yule is the modern version of the Old English words *ġēol* or *ġēohol* and *ġēola* or *ġēoli*, with the former indicating the 12-day festival of “Yule” (later: “Christmastide”) and the latter indicating the month of “Yule,” whereby *ǣra ġēola* referred to the period before the Yule festival (December) and *æftera ġēola* referred to the period after Yule (January). Both words are thought to be derived from Common Germanic *jehwla*, and are cognate with Gothic *jiuleis*; Old Norse, Icelandic, Faroese and Norwegian Nynorsk *jól*, *jol*, *ýlir*; Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian Bokmål *jul*. The etymological pedigree of the word remains uncertain, though numerous speculative attempts have been made to find Indo-European cognates outside the Germanic group. The noun Yuletide is first attested from around 1475.

The word is conjectured in an explicitly pre-Christian context, primarily in Old Norse. Among many others, the long-bearded god Odin bears the name Jólnir (“the Yule one”). In *Ágrip*, written in the 12th century, Christmas, *jól* is interpreted as coming from one of Odin’s names, Jólni(r).

In poetic language, a plural form (Old Norse *jóln*) may also refer to the gods collectively. In Old Norse poetry, the word is found as a term for 'feast', e.g. *hugin's jól* ("a raven's feast").