

The Celtic Wheel of the Year

Observing the cycle of the seasons has been important to many people, both ancient and modern, and this is especially the case with the Celtic peoples. Ancient Celtic philosophy revolved around the concepts of light and dark, and so the year was divided into a dark half, beginning with Samhain on October 1, and a light half, beginning with Beltane on May 1. Each half was further divided, with each quarter marking a festival. Thus, after Samhain came Imbolc on February 1 to celebrate the end of winter and the beginning of the spring season. Then came Beltane on May 1 to welcome in the summer season. It was followed by Lughnasadh on August 1 to round off the light part of the year by welcoming in the autumn season and the beginning of the harvest at the end of summer. This gave the Celts a fourfold division of the calendar year. For the Celts, these four “cross-quarter” days were regarded with significance and host to major communal festivals. This cycle of the seasonal year has been traditionally known as the four-spoked “Celtic Wheel of the Year.”

Following the “Celtic Revival” of the 19th and 20th centuries, the new spirituality movement of “Reconstructionist” neopaganism (beginning in Great Britain) adopted the Celtic festival calendar in a modified form, adding the equinoxes and solstices, giving an eight-fold ritual year or eight-spoked (Neopagan) “Celtic Wheel of the Year.” This is particularly the case with the neopagan religion called “Wicca.” Differing sects of modern neopaganism also vary regarding the precise timing of each celebration, based on distinctions such as lunar phase and geographic hemisphere. In any case, the point is that the Eight-spoked “Celtic Wheel of the Year” is a modern construct largely influenced by mid-20th century British neopaganism and therefore not strictly based upon the calendar of Celtic ritual festivals.

These four “cross-quarter” Celtic festivals—Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh—marked powerful nodes of the year, often termed “liminal” by scholars (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “threshold”). They were deemed to be particularly potent, and so referred to as the “four gates of power.” The reason that the Celts began their cross-quarter festivals on the eve of the first day of the four months was because, just as they reckoned their new year from the darkening months, they likewise reckoned their days beginning at dusk, the opposite of our days beginning at dawn.

Lughnasadh on August 1st was the beginning of the autumn season in the medieval British Isles. Actually, this calendar date is one that is only customarily agreed upon. For the paleo-Celts, who measured time by astronomical means or by seasonal signs in nature, the timing of the festival didn't

necessarily depend on the calendar date. This is complicated by the fact that the festival date could vary because of the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. When the Gregorian calendar system was adopted in Britain in 1752 and Ireland in 1782, 11 days had to be dropped to make the calendar astronomically correct. This led to the festival being celebrated on either the 1st or the 12th of August, called respectively New Style and Old Style Lughnasadh. To further complicate matters many Celtic festivals became appropriated to Christian saints' days or the nearest Sunday (as in the case of Croagh Patrick mountain, an important site of pilgrimage in Mayo, Ireland). Moreover, in recent centuries in some locales the celebrations of Lughnasadh have shifted to August 2nd and some to the Sundays nearest the August 1st date. Therefore, the dating of Lughnasadh requires some further explanation. Lughnasadh is traditionally celebrated on the eve of August 1st, known as the "Fixed Date." However, in addition to the "Fixed Date," there is also the "Astrological Date" of Lughnasadh, called "Lughnasadh Old Style," which this year falls on August 7th, the actual midway point between the Summer Solstice and the Autumnal Equinox, at Sun 15° Leo. It should also be pointed out that Celtic cross-quarter festivals, like Lughnasadh, were not just one-day festivals. They probably lasted from two (a fortnight) to three weeks. We know that in the old Celtic world the celebration of Lughnasadh continued through August 15th or longer.

Originally (for the paleo-Celts), these turning points of the year were not precisely marked on a calendar, but reckoned from the careful observation of star, sun, moon, wind and weather, the movements of animals and birds. (It has also been recognized that the ancient Celts would reckon the timing of the Beltane festival not so much by a fixed calendar date but rather by observing the first blossoms of the sacred hawthorn tree.) Although we do not know for certain, it is also likely the Druid astronomers understood how to reckon time and from the great stone circle observatories built by the megalith engineers (such as Newgrange in Ireland and Stonehenge in England).