

YULE or YULETIDE

Winter Solstice is a major transition time period. In northern countries at this time, they celebrate “Yule.”

Yule or Yuletide (“Yule time” or “Yule season”) is a winter festival historically observed by the Germanic peoples. The earliest references to it are in the form of month names, where the Yule-tide period lasts somewhere around two months, falling along the end of the modern calendar year between what is now mid-November and early January.

In Scandinavia they don't call it “Christmas” (Christ-Mass), but instead they still retain the old pagan name for the Yuletide celebrations which they call “Jul” (pronounced Yule). Yule was a pagan festival that followed the midwinter solstice (usually around 21st December) and celebrated the return of the sun as the days slowly started to get longer again. The festivities, which involved lots of drinking and consuming of slaughtered animals, lasted up to 12 days, hence the 12 days of Christmas. In Scandinavia it is still traditional to leave food out, and thus we have the tradition of leaving food (usually cookies) out for Father Christmas, who in Sweden is called the “Jul Tomte” (the Yule Elf).

Another tradition in Scandinavia is that of the Christmas

goat, whose origins are lost in the mists of time. The Jul Bok (Yule goat) is nowadays usually made from straw, which indicates that it was probably once an offering from the last harvest (like the British corn dollies), but other traditions have a man dressing up as goat at Yuletide, which could be distant memory of a pagan fertility ritual, or even be connected to the two goats who pulled Thor's chariot in Norse mythology.

Yule is the turning of the year when, as the days slowly start to get longer, the Nordic peoples celebrated the end of the year and the return of the sun, the completion of another yearly cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

The Modern English word Yule comes down to us via the Middle English *yol* from the Anglo-Saxon *geol*, though nowadays it is more commonly known as Christmastide or the 12 Days of Christmas. However, in Scandinavia they still call it “Jul” (pronounced yule) or “Jol.”

So how did the Nordic Yule become Christmas? “The Saga of Hákon the Good” credits King Haakon I of Norway, who ruled from 934 to 961 with the Christianization of Norway. As a Christian, he passed a law that the Christian Christmas Day and the Pagan Yuletide celebrations were to be henceforth celebrated at the same time. While this only impacted the Norwegian territories, it illustrates how these festivals were intentionally combined into one celebration.

Other sources tell of the burning of a Yule log, the ashen remains of which were used to ward off evil spirits and other misfortunes, before being ignited again the following year to start the subsequent Yule fire. Also, there was the eating of a Yule boar in honor of Freyr, a god associated with the harvest and fertility, who in Christian times became associated with St Stephen and his feast day of 26th December.

The Winter Solstice was a particularly inauspicious, the night when Odin was said to ride through the skies with the “Wild Hunt,” collecting the souls of the dead. Thus, everyone stayed indoors feasting, afraid to go outside lest they be caught out alone and abducted by the Wild Hunt. One of the many names of Odin recorded in the Icelandic sources is Jolnir, which means “The Yule One.” Though this name probably refers to his role as leader of the Wild Hunt at Yule, rather than to a jolly giver of gifts. Odin, in his aspect as the God of Death and Transition, is almost always honored at this time. The Wild Hunt rages over the whole world seeking out and sweeping up the dead, ushering out the dead old year itself. It's also common to honor Freyr and an envisioned new year of growth and promise. Also, Thor is honored for driving back the Frost Giants. It was customary that no work was to be done during Yuletide. From Germanic sources we see stories of the Goddess Berchta visiting houses and punishing those who had been spinning during Yule.

Yuletide was perhaps the greatest of all pagan holidays. It was a time of celebration and close family contact that lasted 12 days and nights; each of which can be viewed as a month of the preceding year in miniature. Many of the customs associated with Christmas may have begun from pagan Yule rites and customs. Many gods and goddesses are honored during Yuletide, and it was believed that the gods, as well as the spirits of the earth and the ancestors, joined them for the celebrations at this time of year.

Modern Neopagans opt to celebrate this time as the “Twelve Days of Yule,” with the last day culminating on 12th Night. Many practices are traditional to the month of Yule, and the most well-known is, of course, the Twelve Days of Yule, which have several versions and variations. Thus, there are Neopagan groups who celebrate the Twelve Nights of Yule since it is the darkest time of the year.