

Vernal Equinox & Spring Festivals Around the World

Many ancient peoples celebrated the equinoxes. They felt reborn, escaping from close, snow-bound confinement into the new warmth. Their gods and goddesses of fertility were active once again in the land, causing new growth everywhere. Among the ancient civilizations that celebrated the Vernal Equinox are these in the following survey:

ANCIENT BRITAIN: Both the equinoxes and solstices were the highly sophisticated preoccupation of the mysterious Megalithic peoples who pre-dated Celt, Roman and Saxon in Europe's Atlantic region by thousands of years. Some experts believe that the celebration of the Vernal Equinox was imported from Mediterranean lands, although there can be no doubt that the first inhabitants of the British Isles observed it, as evidence from megalithic sites shows. But it was certainly more popular to the south of Europe, where people celebrated the holiday as New Year's Day, and claimed it as the first day of the first sign of the Zodiac, Aries.

ANCIENT IRELAND: The Spring and Fall equinoxes were celebrated in ancient times. A cluster of megalithic cairns are scattered through the hills at Loughcrew, about 55 miles northwest of Dublin in Ireland. Longhcrew Cairn T is a passage tomb which is designed so that the light from the rising sun on the spring and summer equinoxes penetrates a long corridor and illuminates a backstone, which is decorated with astronomical symbols. The cairns at Loughcrew form the largest complex of passage graves in Ireland, and twice a year the chamber is illuminated by the rays of the rising sun. According to Celtic folklorist and storyteller Mara Freeman, March is the second month of Spring on the Celtic calendar. The goddess Brigit's flame, which was recognized on the cross-quarter festival of Imbolc on February 1st, is growing in strength, and on March 21st the flame of daylight is at last equal to the darkness. In most parts of Ireland and the British Isles, the lengthening days and warmer weather meant that it was time to plow the fields after winter and sow the seeds. These agricultural rituals and customs go back to ancient times in Ireland. To some Irishmen, prone to imaginal nostalgia, it seems as if the land itself—the spirit of place—holds memories of a time before time; a mythical time of beginnings.

ANCIENT GERMANS: Ostara, the Germanic fertility and dawn goddess was associated with human and crop fertility. On the Vernal Equinox, she mated with the solar god and conceived a child that would be born 9 months later on Dec. 21st: Yule, the Winter Solstice.

ANCIENT GREEKS: The vegetation-god Dionysus was a major deity among the ancient Greeks, being a god of the spring rites, of the flowering plants and fruitful vines—the god of intoxication and ecstasy. The god-man Dionysus is the only god who had a mortal parent, Semele, whose name means “moon.” His father was Zeus. He was known as the “twice-born” god. Dionysus was said to have descended to the underworld in search of his true mother, Semele. He brought her back and ascended with her to Mount Olympus, where Zeus made her immortal as a Moon-Goddess. The festival for Dionysus was in the spring when the leaves begin to reappear on the vine. It became one of the most important events of the year. Its focus became the theater. Most of the great Greek plays were initially written to be performed at the feast of Dionysus. Then there was the maiden-goddess Persephone (Kore), a daughter of the earth-mother, Demeter, who descended into Hades and returned near the time of the Vernal Equinox.

ANCIENT ROMANS: In about 200 BCE, mystery cults began to appear in Rome just as they had earlier in Greece. Most notable was the Cybele cult. Associated with the Cybele cult was that of her lover, Attis (the older dying-and-reborn gods Tammuz, Osiris, or Dionysus under a new name). The festival began as a day of blood on Black Friday and culminated after three days in a day of rejoicing over the resurrection. Attis was born of a human woman, a virgin named Nana. He grew up to become a sacrificial victim and Savior, slain to bring salvation to mankind. His body was eaten by his worshipers in the form of bread. He was crucified on a pine tree, whence his holy blood poured down to redeem the earth.” The celebration was held on March 25th, 9 months before his birth on Dec. 25th. In Rome, the rituals took place where St. Peter's now stands in Vatican City.

ANCIENT SAXONS: Eostre was the Anglo-Saxon version of the Germanic (Teutonic) goddess Ostara. She gave her name to the Christian Easter and to the female hormone estrogen. Her feast day was held on the full moon following the Vernal Equinox—almost the identical calculation as for the Christian Easter in the west.

JUDAISM: In its origin, the Passover dinner itself was a spring fertility festival, and the unleavened bread came from the agricultural past of the people and the paschal lamb from its more distant pastoral years.” The Bible passages of Leviticus 23:5-8 and Numbers 28:16-18 state that Passover is to be celebrated in the springtime, on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nissan. The Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord is held on the 15th. It evolved into a celebration of the story of God’s liberation of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

ANCIENT MAYANS: The indigenous Mayan people in Central American have celebrated a spring equinox festival for ten centuries. As the sun sets on the day of the Vernal Equinox on the great ceremonial pyramid, El Castillo, Mexico, its western face is illuminated in the late afternoon sunlight. The lengthening shadows appear to run from the top of the pyramid’s northern staircase to the bottom, giving the illusion of a diamond-backed snake in descent. This has been called “The Return of the Sun Serpent since ancient times, which is obviously a symbol of rebirth.