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**Unit 8: The Multicultural Origins of Halloween**

**Celtic** festival of **Samhain** or Samhuinn /saʊn/ or /saʊm/ (Irish, the Celtic language of Ireland, but also Gaelic, but especially for Scottish variety)

* known in modern Irish as *La Samhana*

**Celts** the most powerful peoples in central & northern Europe from 8th c (ca. 750 BC) to 1st c BC (12 BC), with the peak of their Iron Age civilization between the 5th & 1st c BC, sharing common Celtic languages, cultural traditions & religious beliefs, often in conflict with the Romans. The Iron Age in Central & Western Europe is considered to have ended with the Roman conquests of the 1st c BC. Celts pushed back from Western Europe by Romans & Germanic tribes to Gaul & the British Isles.

- word *Celt* derived from *Keltoi*, name Greeks gave the “barbarian” tribes along the Danube & Rhone Rivers

- Romans borrowed the Greek name in Latin, but spelled it *Celtae*

- The word entered French in the form *celtes/celtique,* from which English derives *Celt/Celtic*

- /selt/, /’seltik/ in NAmE, but /kelt/, /’keltik/ in British Isles (Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England; but Glasgow football team /’seltik/)

story of Halloween goes back over 2,000 years ago to this ancient Celtic holy festival of **Samhain**

* many “Neo-pagans” celebrate it today as a spiritual beginning of a new year

e.g. Wiccans (Wicca: the religion of modern witchcraft, from old English *wicca -* witch/wizard); Druids (Celtic priests or members of present-day groups representing ancient Druidism); pantheistic Neo-pagans identifying divinity or spirituality in nature; “satanists”?

- today Halloween accused by fundamentalist Christians of being a violent, satanic, pagan holiday

celebration

**Celts**: most of what we know about the Celts & the polytheistic Celtic religion is from archaeological evidence, from legends and mythology, from Greco-Roman writers, including the hostile writings of the Roman invaders/occupiers of Britain about the “barbarians,” e.g. Julius Caesar & others, who were probably ill-informed, and early Christian literature.

- Celts passed on their culture orally, left no written record

- Romans invaded Britain during 1st c BC & Celts eventually pushed back to Ireland, Scotland &

Wales

- historians often disagree about aspects of Celtic culture

**Samhain** believed to have been a **3-day harvest festival** probably (according to most Celtic scholars) to mark the **Celtic new year**

- *harvest:* stagione/periodo della raccolta; *crop(s):* ilraccolto agricolo

believed to have been the most important of the “**fire festivals**”

- the Druids (Celtic priests) made **bonfires**, burned sacrifices (animal but also Human?), made charms, cast spells

- celebrating the year’s harvest & slaughtering of livestock before winter

celebrated as a festival marking the end of summer & the beginning of winter or dark half of the year

- polytheistic Celts worshiped nature: the sun god their favorite

- marked the end of “the season of the sun” & beginning of “the season of darkness & cold”

- the day before Samhain the last day of summer (the old year) & the day after Samhain the 1st day of winter (the new year)

- being “between” seasons or years, Samhain was (and is) considered a very magical time, lasting 3 days, when the veils may be lifted between past, present & future in prophecy & divination

- the barriers were lifted between the world of the living and dead, the veil between this world & the world of the ancestors was drawn aside on these nights, the gates between the worlds were open wide, allowing the spirit world to intermingle with the living, the dead walking among the living, departed families & friends could cross over in either direction, with all laws of time & space suspended during this time

- for those who were prepared, journeys could be made to “the other side”

- the Druid rites made contact with the spirits of the departed who were seen as sources of guidance & inspiration, rather than as sources of fear & dread

- the dead honored & feasted as the living spirits of loved ones & of guardians & wisdom holders of the community

- people invited their ancestors to join them in celebration

- the only ones with reason to fear would be people who had wronged someone dead &

therefore had reason to fear retribution

during Samhain time was abolished for 3 days of festival, and chaos would reign

* a time of no time & legend says that people did crazy things

- pranks, mischief

- according to some legends, children would go home to home asking for special food & people would parade in costumes made from skins & heads of animals; men dressed as women & women as men

according to legend, on the eve of the 1st night of Samhain, after the crops were all harvested & stored for the long winter, the cooking fires in the homes were extinguished in the Celtic villages

- the Druids, the Celtic priests, would meet on the hilltops in the sacred oak tree groves

- they would light new bonfires & offer sacrifices of crops & animals (& humans?) to the gods

- during the night the season of the sun would pass & the season of darkness would begin

- when the morning arrived, the Druids would enter the villages & give an ember (i.e. a

burning coal) from their sacred fires to each family who would then start new cooking fires

in their homes

- important collective, community symbolism

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The **Romans** invaded the island of Britain in 1st century BC, and finally withdrew in 410 AD

- although the **pagan Romans** outlawed the Celtic religion and persecuted the Druid priests,

& eventually pushed the Celts back into Wales, Scotland & across the sea into Ireland, the Celtic traditions of Samhain continued

the pagan Romans introduced the **harvest festival of Pomona**, the goddess of fruit and trees

- the use of nuts & fruits on Halloween possibly derived from this tradition

- symbol of Pomona is the apple

- might explain origin of tradition of “**bobbing for apples**” on Halloween

- *to bob* is to move (in this case the head) up & down

**Christianity**

- during Reign of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337 AD) it began to become dominant religion in Roman Empire

introduced other cultural contributions to coopt the holiday celebration

- a long policy of incorporating/appropriating non-Christian traditions into its holidays in order to bring people into the Catholic faith

- a tradition of co-opting the time periods and traditions of pagan religions in order to strengthen the Church (e.g. moving Christmas from the spring to 25 December to coincide with pagan winter solstice celebrations).

in the **8th century** the Western Church moved **All Saints' Day** (or **All Hallows**, or Hallomas, the archaic noun *hallow* meaning “saint” or “holy person”), a holiday for honoring early Christian martyrs, from 13 May to **1 November**.

* the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to celebrate All Saints’ Day in the spring

- thus associating it with the old Celtic Druid death rituals of Samhain

- to bring people of Celtic traditions into Christianity with combination of Catholic & pagan beliefs

Since the Celts, like many cultures, started every day at sunset of the night before, the tradition of Samhain on the night of 31 October became the evening of All Hallows, or rather “All Hallow E’en”, then “Hallowe’en” and finally the modern “**Halloween**:” **the eve of All Saints’ Day**.

* the evening before “All Hallows” 🡪 “All Hallow E’en” 🡪 “Hallow-e’en” 🡪 “Halloween”
* *hallow* – archaic English for holy/saint

The Roman Catholic Church was uncomfortable however with many of the Celtic pagan beliefs which continued about the supernatural & the return of the dead

* so, to attempt to coopt these beliefs, at the end of the **10th century** the Catholic Church created the new holiday of **All Souls' Day** on **2 November**, a day to commemorate all of the dead, not just the early Christian saints.

**All Souls' Day** on **2 November**

Celebrated in Medieval times with big bonfires, parades, & people dressing up as saints, angels & devils

Medieval tradition of “souling”: “soul cakes” dating back to 9th c in British Isles (song “Soul Cake” by Sting https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu8H5rA9HuA)

- continued in parts of England at least up until the 1930s

- on 2 November for All Souls’ Day & in general the Halloween season, children & in general the poor would walk from home to home, village to village, sometimes dressing up, begging for “soul cakes” (made out of round or square pieces of bread with spices & currants or raisins with the mark of the cross on top).

“Soul, souls, for a soul cake; Pray you good mistress for a soul cake”

or

“A soul! A soul! A soul cake! Please good missus a soul-cake!”  
- the more soul cakes a beggar received, the more prayers they promised to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donor.”

- At the time it was believed that the dead remained in limbo for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers, could speed up a soul’s passage to heaven

So with the coming of Christianity, the 3-day festival of Samhain was eventually matched by 3 other days at harvest time:

**Halloween 31 October**

**All Hallows (All Saints Day) 1 November**

**All Souls Day 2 November**

- But the spread of Christianity in the British Isles did not cause people to forget their earlier customs (especially in Ireland & Scotland)

- On 31 October, the eve of All Hallows, people continued to celebrate the festivals of Samhain & Pomona Day throughout Medieval times

- over the years the customs from all these holidays mixed

**Roman Catholic** & then **Protestant superstitions** were added to Halloween in **Medieval times**

- on Halloween, according to Medieval Christian superstition, the evil spirits of the dead can rise from their graves and cause harm to the living until dawn on 1 November.

- spirits/ghosts characterized as evil forces associated with the devil

- one legend said that on Halloween the disembodied spirits of all those who had died throughout the preceding year would come back in search of living bodies to possess

superstitions about **witches** and **black cats** came to be associated with Halloween in late Middle Ages

* “familiars” of witches, evil spirits/demons

- terrible mainly anti-woman persecution of “witches” from late 12th c until 17 c

- witches as only figures of pure evil invented by the Medieval Church

- women who were usually community herbalists, healers, midwives & fortune tellers

- no formal association of witches with Samhain/Halloween until late Middle Ages

- persecutions of witches taking place by late 12th c, increased after institution of Medieval Inquisition ca. 1232

- in 13th c an official church document called [“Vox in Rama”](https://historycollection.com/thou-shalt-not-suffer-a-cat-to-live-why-pope-gregory-ixs-vox-in-rama-implicated-cats-in-devil-worship/) was issued by Pope Gregory IX on 13 June 1233 in which black cats were declared “an incarnation of Satan”

- in addition to their early association with Satan, cats also became linked to witches in Medieval Europe.

- after Papal bull of 1484, ca. 1,000 people accused of witchcraft were hanged or burned in England (mostly under Elizabeth I & James I)

- the publication of “Malleus Maleficarum” (written by 2 well-respected German Dominicans in 1486) increased persecution of witches

- the book, usually translated as “The Hammer of Witches,” was essentially a guide on how to identify, hunt and interrogate witches.

- between the years 1500 & 1660, up to an estimated 80,000 suspected witches were put to death in Europe

- last execution in England in 1685

- also in New England Puritan colonies in North America (e.g. Salem, Massachusetts 1692)

- torture & forced confessions of “black sabbaths” & “night-flying”

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**Halloween in North America**

Irish and Scottish immigrants brought their Halloween traditions in the 19th century

- esp. rural Irish immigrants fleeing the “Great Hunger” or so-called “Potato Famine” of the 1840s provoked by English imperialist exploitation

- by then already starting to lose some of its supernatural associations

* - becoming merely a harvest festival
* - a night of games like “bobbing for apples,” divination games (esp. girls), eating popcorn, telling ghost stories around a bonfire, boys roaming outdoors engaging in pranks
* - already changing into the children’s holiday of 20th c

- immigrants brought story of Jack 0’Lantern and the tradition which began a few hundred years ago in Ireland and Scotland of carved-out turnip *(rapa)* with a face and a candle inside, to scare off evil spirits.

- in North America immigrants began using the larger and more easily-carved pumpkins.

- Irish folklore has different versions of the story of Jack O’Lantern

- according to one folk tale, a man named Jack, a notorious drunkard & trickster, tricked Satan into climbing a tree. Jack then carved an image of a cross on the tree’s trunk, trapping the devil up the tree. Jack made a deal with the Devil that, if he would never tempt him again, he would promise to let him down the tree. After Jack died, he was denied entrance to Heaven because of his evil ways, but the Devil also denied him entrance to Hell because Jack had tricked him. Instead the Devil gave him a single ember (i.e. a burning coal) in a hollowed-out turnip to light his way through the darkness for eternity. You can still see Jack O’Lantern (Jack of the Lantern) wandering in the dark at night on the Irish moors *(brughiere,* the methane gas?).

**Halloween in 20th c U.S.A.**

Halloween “pranks” started getting nastier & more violent with increased urbanization & poverty

- by the 1920s pranks had become the Halloween activity of choice for rowdy young men.

- in the 1930s the [Great Depression](http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression) worsened the problem, with Halloween mischief often degenerating into vandalism, physical assaults & violence, property destruction.

- by 1933, the holiday had become so destructive that some cities were considering banning it.

- as a response, in early to mid-20th century, civic and religious authorities, community organizations and neighborhood families started organizing “safe” Halloween events (Halloween parties, carnivals & costume parades on Halloween to keep children out of trouble) and people began giving out “treats”, offering nuts, fruit, cookies or candy to neighborhood children who came to their door

- a way to try to distract teenage boys & control their increasingly vandalistic pranks

- the term “**trick or treat**” first appeared in print around 1939 and “trick or treating” had

become common by the 1940s

- the custom had been firmly established in U.S. popular culture by 1951, when trick-or-treating was depicted in the *Peanuts* (“Linus”) comic strip.

- in 1952, Walt Disney produced a cartoon called “Trick or Treat” featuring Donald Duck *(“Paperino”),* his nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie *(“Qui,” “Quo” e “Qua”)* & Witch Hazel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSkXw1bk_NE>

- in the 1950s, candy manufacturers started to promote their products for

Halloween trick-or-treating

- in parts of the U.S.A. (esp. Midwest & Northeast) the pranks were moved to the night before Halloween, which became “Mischief Night”

- smashing pumpkins, soaping windows, toilet papering houses & trees, egging cars & houses, etc.

- today Halloween continues to be one of the most popular holidays celebrated in the U.S.A.

- the country’s second largest commercial holiday after [Christmas](https://www.history.com/topics/christmas)

- Today, an estimated $2.6 billion spent on candy for Halloween in the U.S.A.

([National Retail Federation](https://nrf.com/insights/holiday-and-seasonal-trends/halloween))

**Modern-day Halloween**

- includes multicultural influences of:

**Samhain**: harvest festival, magic, spirits & death

**Pomona**: harvest festival, apples, nuts

**All Saints Day** & **All Souls Day**: spirits/ghosts, skeletons, skulls

**Medieval Christian superstition**: evil spirits on Halloween, witches & black cats

**Irish** & **Scottish traditions** taken by immigrants to North America

**Hollywood** & **U.S. Mass Media**