

The Historacle

December 2011

The Official Newsletter of the Talent Historical Society



105 Market Street, Talent, Oregon 97540 541-512-8838 talenthistory@gmail.com

Special Holiday Edition Winter Solstice & New Year

History and Cultural Significance

The winter solstice may have been a special moment of the annual cycle of the year even during neolithic times. Astronomical events, which during ancient times controlled the mating of animals, sowing of crops and metering of winter food reserves between harvests, show how various cultural mythologies and traditions circling around the winter solstice have arisen. This is attested by physical remains in the layouts of late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeological sites such as Stonehenge in Britain and New Grange in Ireland. The primary axes of both these monuments seem to have been carefully aligned on a sight-line pointing to the winter solstice sunrise (New Grange) and the winter solstice sunset (Stonehenge).

The winter solstice may have been immensely important because communities were not certain of living through the winter, and had to be prepared during the previous nine months. Starvation was common in winter between January and April, also known as the famine months. In temperate climates, the midwinter festival was the last feast celebration before deep winter began. Most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter, so it was almost the only time of the year when a supply of fresh meat was available. The majority of wine and beer made during the fall of the year was finally fermented and ready for drinking at this time. The concentration of the observances were not always on the day commencing at midnight or dawn, but were held at the beginning of the pre-Romanized day, which falls on the previous eve.

Explanations for Parallel Traditions

Symbolically, since the event is seen as the reversal of the Sun's ebbing presence in the sky, concepts of the birth or rebirth of the sun gods have been common and, in cultures using the winter solstice calendars, the year was celebrated with regard to life-death-rebirth deities or new beginnings such as Hogmanay's *redding*, a New Year cleaning tradition. In Greek mythology, the gods and goddesses met on the winter and summer solstices, and Hades was permitted on Mount Olympus. Also reversal is

another usual theme as seen in Saturnalia's slave and master reversals.

Many outside traditions were often adopted by neighboring or by invading cultures. Some historians will often assert that many traditions, even those we Americans use today, are directly derived from previous ones rooting all the way back to those begun in the cradle of civilization or beyond.

Therapeutic Celebrations Help

Even in our modern cultures these winter gatherings are still valued for emotional comfort. Those who participate have something to look forward to at the darkest time of the year. This is especially the case for populations in the near polar regions of the hemisphere. The depressive psychological effects of winter on individuals and societies are experienced as coldness, tiredness, malaise, and inactivity. Psychologists call this a “seasonal affective disorder.”

Also, insufficient sunlight on the short winter days increases the secretion of melatonin in the body, throwing off the circadian rhythm with longer sleep. Exercise, light therapy, increased natural light exposure (which can be attained from plants and well ventilated flames, burning wood, or beeswax can reinvigorate the body from its seasonal lull and relieve winter blues. This is enhanced by decreasing the melatonin secretions, increasing serotonin, and temporarily creating a more even sleeping pattern.

Midwinter festivals and celebrations occurring on the longest night of the year, often calling for evergreens, bright illumination, large ongoing fires, feasting, communion with close ones, and evening physical exertion by dancing and singing are cultural winter therapies that have evolved as traditions since the beginnings of civilization.

World Wide Celebrations

In Japan the “Amaterasu celebration” were held to celebrate the re-emergence of the sun goddess from her seclusion in a cave. Tricked by the other gods with a loud celebration, she peeks out and finds the image of herself in a mirror and is convinced by the other gods to return, bringing sunlight back into the universe. There is a reason that Japan is called the “Land of the Rising Sun” and has a sun on its flag. This celebration was held around the time of the winter solstice.

In Scandinavia the indigenous people worshiped Beiwe, the sun-goddess of fertility and sanity. On the winter solstice, her worshipers sacrificed white female animals, and ate the meat. They also covered their door posts with butter so the goddess could eat and begin her journey once more.

Saturnalia, Kronia, Lenaia or Brumalia are all solstice celebrations of either the Greeks or the Romans. Brumalia, a Roman solstice celebration patterned after the Greek Lenaia, honored Bacchus, and was generally held for a month ending on December 25. The festival included drinking and merriment. The name of the celebration means “the shortest day.” The festivities almost always occurred on the

night of the 24th.

Saturnalia, itself, celebrated by the Greeks as Kronia, the feast of Cronus, was a feast at which the Romans commemorated the dedication of the temple of Saturn, which originally took place on the 17th of December, but expanded to a whole week up to 23 December. Besides the official celebration held at the temple itself, there was a series of holidays and customs celebrated privately. The celebrations included a school holiday, the making and giving of small presents, and a special market. Gambling was allowed for all, even slaves, during this period. The toga was not worn, but rather colorful informal "dinner clothes," and a "freeman's hat" was worn by everyone. Slaves were exempt from punishment, and treated their masters with disrespect. The slaves celebrated a banquet before, with, or served by their masters. Saturnalia became one of the most popular Roman holidays, which led to tomfoolery, marked chiefly by having the masters and slaves ostensibly switch places, temporarily reversing the social order.

In Pakistan during the Kalash people winter solstice celebration, women and girls are purified by taking ritual baths. Men are purified with water and must not sit on chairs until evening when goat's blood is sprinkled on their faces. Following this purification, a great festival begins, with singing, dancing, bonfires, and feasting.

The Western Slavs, had a holiday similar to Halloween on the longest night of the year. On this night, Hors, symbolizing the old sun becomes smaller and dies on December 22. The sun is considered to have been defeated by the dark and evil powers of the Black God. In honor of Hors, the Slavs danced a ritual chain-dance which was called the horo. In Bulgaria today it is still called the horo. Similar traditions existed in Russia and the Ukraine. On December 23 Hors is resurrected and becomes the new son, Koleda. On this day, Western Slavs burned fires at cemeteries to keep their departed loved ones warm, organized feasts in honor of the dead so they would not suffer from hunger, and lit wooden logs a local crossroad.

The early Germans considered the Norse goddess (Hertha or Berths) to be the goddess of light, domesticity and the home. They baked yeast cakes shaped like shoes, which were called Hertha's slippers, and were filled with gifts. During the winter solstice houses were decked with fir and evergreens to welcome her coming. When the family and serfs were gathered to dine, a great altar of flat stones was erected and a fire of fir boughs was laid on them. It was thought that Hertha descended in the smoke, and guided those who were wise in saga lore to foretell the fortunes of those at the feast. Somewhat similar traditions continued in the Alps and in Celtic nations, like the Scots Wren day until recently.

The Zuni and Hopi American Indian tribes celebrate Soyalangwul at the winter solstice. The main purpose is to bring the sun back from its long winter slumber. It also marks the beginning of another cycle of the Wheel of the Year.

The Norse lit Yule logs to honor Thor, the god of thunder. Feasting would continue until the log burned out----three or as many as twelve days.

Hannukaha, also known as the Festival of Light, is an eight day Jewish holiday

and is observed for eight nights starting on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, according to the Jewish calendar, which may occur anytime from late November to late December. Many families exchange gifts each night and special foods are eaten, including jam-filled doughnuts, and certain kinds of cheese. Special religious traditions are followed including recitation of many Psalms, the lighting of lamps, and it is common to give children presents at this time. Children play with the dreidel, a four-sided spinning top during this time. The celebration includes the exchange of nut, raisins, candies or coins as each child is given an identical number of items as they start the game. Money is often given to the children, and this is where the idea of the chocolate money candy was derived.

Kwanzaa is a week long celebration held in the United States honoring universal African heritage and culture, marked by participants lighting a candle holder. It is observed from December 26 to January 1, and features 7 days of celebration. The festivities include candle-lighting, libations, and culminate in a feast and gift giving. It was created by Ron Karenga and was first celebrated beginning in 1966.

The Iranians celebrate Yalda. It is the most important non-new year celebrations in modern day Iran and has long been celebrated by all ethnic and religious groups in that country. It is derived from a pre-Zoroastrian festival Shab-e Chelleh, and is always celebrated on the first day of winter in the Persian calendar, which always falls on the winter solstice. According to Persian mythology, Mithra was born at the end of this night after a long-expected defeat of darkness by light. Today it is an important social occasion when family and friends get together for fun and merriment. They eat different kinds of dried fruits, nuts, seeds and fresh winter fruits, thought to be similar to ancient ceremonies to ensure the protection of the winter crops. Traditionally, celebrants would stay awake all night until sunrise, eating, drinking, and listening to stories and poems. Interestingly enough, the word “Yalda” means birth (i.e. The birth of the sun!).

The Roman “Sol Invictus Festival” meaning “the undefeated sun god” was a festival where several solar deities could be celebrated collectively and occurred simultaneously in the 3rd century A. D. when the Roman emperor Elagabalus (who was put on the throne by the legions who worshiped Mithra) came to power. It was celebrated on December 25 and reached popularity under emperor Aurelian who promoted it as an empire-wide holiday.

Christmas, or Natis Domini in Latin, means Christ's Mass and is one of the most popular Christian celebrations, as well as one of the most globally recognized midwinter celebrations. Christmas is the celebration of the birth of the Christian Deity, **God Incarnate or Messiah**, Jesus Christ. The birth is observed on December 25, which was the Roman winter solstice upon the establishment of the Julian Calendar. Christian churches recognized folk elements of the festival in various cultures within the past several hundred years, allowing much of the folklore and traditions of local pagan

festivals to be appropriated. So today, the old festivals such as Jul, Koreada and Karacsony, are still celebrated in many parts of Europe, but the Christian Nativity is now representational as the meaning behind the holiday. This is why “Yule” and “Christmas” are considered interchangeable in Anglo-Christendom. Universal activities include feasting, midnight mass or other services, and singing Christmas carols about the *Nativity*. Good deeds and gift giving in the tradition of Saint Nicholas but not admitting to being the actual gift giver is also observed in some countries. Many observe the holiday for twelve days leading up to the *Epiphany*. The Epiphany is considered to be the day the magi, wise men from the East, came to see the infant Jesus. It is the 6th day of January.

So at this time of the year, the Talent Historical Society wishes all of you the best for this Holiday Season and during 2012.

A brief footnote, for the first part of January the artwork of Jewel Lockard (animal sketches and models of long gone buildings in the area) will be on display in the museum. Some 55 sketches of animals and places can be seen.

Do your last minute Christmas shopping at the Talent Historical Society. We have the Talent Book, Cook Books, T-Shirts, Centennial Belt Buckles, and other items. A membership in the Society is also a great Christmas gift. Individual (\$20) and family (\$30) memberships are available. And of course, donations given to the Society before the end of December are tax deductible.

The Museum is open Wednesday thru Saturday 1:00pm to 5:00pm