***The Shortest Day***

*And so the Shortest Day came and the year died*

*And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world*

*Came people singing, dancing,*

*To drive the dark away.*

*They lighted candles in the winter trees;*

*They hung their homes with evergreen;*

*They burned beseeching fires all night long*

*To keep the year alive.*

*And when the new year’s sunshine blazed awake*

*They shouted, reveling.*

*Through all the frosty ages you can hear them*

*Echoing behind us — listen!*

*All the long echoes, sing the same delight,*

*This Shortest Day,*

*As promise wakens in the sleeping land:*

*They carol, feast, give thanks,*

*And dearly love their friends,*

*And hope for peace.*

*And now so do we, here, now,*

*This year and every year.*

*- Susan Cooper*

**Circle One: Yule**

I am a woman from the North. I live in a place that rivals the coldest on Earth. Winter isn’t just a season, but its own epoch, easily stretching out over half the year. There is no escaping the darkness here. The Underworld is familiar terrain. The shadow, ever present in waking life as well as in dreams.

I awakened in that darkness this morning, before the sunrise, as I usually do. The first light of the day has now broken, though the sky is still overcast and gray. I see more snow has fallen while we slept, and the winds outside sound wild and feral.

It will be a good day to stay in, to light a dayfire, and give thanks for this home and its warmth. I worry about those caught in the cold - animals and humans alike. Though the animals, ever more connected to the instinctual rhythms of the natural world, tend to fare better than we in these harsh elements.

It is almost Yuletide, and I understand well why this sabbat was so important to our ancestors. It is the time of year when we celebrate the rebirth of light, as the Sun sets off on its path, returning to us a bit more day by day. I imagine it would be less ceremonious for those who live further South, ensconced in sunlight and heat year round. For my people, for all of us who live in the Northlands, we hold the Sun’s return as our deepest collective prayer in these times when It is furthest from us.

So these traditions remain: surrounding ourselves with lights, whether they be the twinkling artificial variety, or the warm glow of candles and embers; we bring in a tree (or at the very least a log) to remind us there is still life gestating beneath the frozen Earth; we cook hearty meals and fatten ourselves a bit, adding layers of flesh and fabric to shield us from the cold; and most amazingly, we gather together, celebrating life even as we spent recent months bearing witness to the world slowly dying all around us.

We recognize the rebirth of the Sun (also celebrated as the birth of God’s Son) in ourselves. We ready ourselves for another year, and begin to dream into being our new plans, intentions, goals, and resolutions. But there is certainly no rush. We slow ourselves and are patient, just like the seeds lying still in the world below. We have the whole winter ahead to lose ourselves in visions of what we will eventually burst forth to be.

Today, I will kindle a fire. I will bake bread and cook a savory stew. I will tend to my work, but will likely also find time for a midday nap. I’ll set out some nuts and seeds for my animal relatives. I’ll move slowly, and dream deeply. ‘Tis the season for it all. So be it. Blessed be.

**An Introduction…**

In the tradition of the Wheel of the Year, Yule marks the beginning of the Sun’s annual journey, when its light is reborn from the depths of darkness on the longest night, the Winter Solstice.

In pagan mythology, this journey is evidenced in the seasons of the year, known as Solar Festivals, as they mark a seasonal change caused by the Sun. The cross-quarter days (or midpoints in each season) are usually celebrated as significant agricultural festivals. Together, these eight *sabbats* (holy days) make up the Wheel of the Year.

The origin of the word Yule has several suggested origins from the Old English word, geõla, the Old Norse word jõl, a pagan festival celebrated at the winter solstice, or the Anglo-Saxon word for the festival of the Winter Solstice, 'Iul' meaning 'wheel'. In old almanacs Yule was represented by the symbol of a wheel, conveying the idea of the year turning like a wheel, The Great Wheel of the Zodiac, The Wheel of Life. The spokes of the wheel marked the old festivals of the year, falling on the precise astronomical placements of the solstices and equinoxes.

In pagan traditions, the narrative of the Wheel of the Year traditionally centers on the sacred marriage of the God and the Goddess (the sacred duality we find in all of nature). In this cycle, the God (Sun) is perpetually born of the Goddess (Earth) at Yule. He grows in power while She is in Her maiden phase at Ostara. He courts and impregnates Her at Beltane, then reaches His peak at Litha, as the Goddess enters Her mother aspect. His power begins to wane at Lammas, until He finally passes into the Underworld at Samhain, taking with Him the fertility of the Goddess, who is now in Her crone age. He is then born anew at the following Yule.

In cultures around the world and throughout all of time, the seasonal celebrations at this time of year are largely centered around Light. This is particularly true for Northern peoples, and it’s easy to understand why. Before the Industrial Age, back when societies were agricultural, the long months of Winter’s darkness were particularly difficult. Although farmers had far less to do than in the warmer months (when they’d be planting, growing and reaping crops), it was a daunting task to ensure there would be enough reserves of food and fuel to survive the cold Winter.

Throughout the ages, the peoples of the Northern hemisphere would make special offerings and ceremonies at Winter Solstice to call in the Light, and to pray for the return of the Sun. Even in the major religions of the world today, the same Light is celebrated - such as the light of the candles at Chanukkah, and the light of Jesus Christ, whose birth is celebrated right around Yuletide.

Yule represents an ending, and a rebirth. It is an introspective time of dreaming, and envisioning. It emphasizes connection and community, and the collective hope that we will make it through, together.

**A Herstory of Yule**

Yule was originally an indigenous W[inter festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_winter_festivals) celebrated by the [Germanic peoples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar_year) between what is now mid-November and early January.

Yule is attested early in the history of the Germanic peoples; in a [Gothic language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_language) calendar of the 5-6th century it appears in the month name *fruma jiuleis*, and, in the 8th century, the English historian [Bede](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bede) wrote that the [Anglo-Saxon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon) calendar included the months *geola* or *giuli* corresponding to either modern December or December and January.

While the Old Norse month name *ýlir* is similarly attested, the [Old Norse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Norse) corpus also contains numerous references to an event by the Old Norse form of the name, *jól*. In chapter 55 of the [*Prose Edda*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prose_Edda) book [*Skáldskaparmál*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sk%C3%A1ldskaparm%C3%A1l), different names for the [gods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%81ss) are given; one is "Yule-beings.” A work by the [skald](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skald) [Eyvindr skáldaspillir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyvindr_sk%C3%A1ldaspillir) that uses the term is then quoted: "Again we have produced Yule-being's feast (mead of poetry), our rulers' eulogy, like a bridge of masonry". In addition, one of the numerous [names of Odin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_names_of_Odin) is *Jólnir*, referring to the event.

The [*Saga of Hákon the Good*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saga_of_H%C3%A1kon_the_Good) credits [King Haakon I of Norway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haakon_the_Good) (who ruled from 934 to 961) with the [Christianization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianization) of [Norway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norway), as well as rescheduling Yule to coincide with Christian celebrations held at the time. The saga says that when Haakon arrived in Norway he was a confirmed Christian, but since the land was still altogether heathen and the people retained their pagan practices, Haakon hid his Christianity to receive the help of the "great chieftains". In time, Haakon had a law passed establishing that Yule celebrations were to take place at the same time as the Christians celebrated Christmas, "and at that time everyone was to have ale for the celebration with a measure of grain, or else pay fines,” and “had to keep the holiday while the ale lasted."

Yule had previously been celebrated for three nights from [midwinter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midwinter) night, according to the saga. Haakon planned that when he had solidly established himself and held power over the whole country, he would then "have the gospel preached". According to the saga, the result was that his popularity caused many to allow themselves to be baptized, and some people stopped making sacrifices. Haakon spent most of this time in [Trondheim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trondheim). When Haakon believed that he wielded enough power, he requested a bishop and other priests from England, and they came to Norway. On their arrival, "Haakon made it known that he would have the gospel preached in the whole country." The saga continues, describing the different reactions of various regional [things](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thing_(assembly)).

A description of pagan Yule practices is provided:

“It was an ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the [heathen temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heathen_temple) and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast, all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also, all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also; and all the blood from them was called *hlaut* (sacrificial blood), and *hlautbolli*, the vessel holding the blood; and *hlautteinar*, the sacrificial twigs ([aspergills](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aspergillum)‌). These were fashioned like sprinklers, and with them were to be smeared all over with blood the pedestals of the idols and also the walls of the temple within and without; and likewise the men present were to be sprinkled with blood. But the meat of the animals was to be boiled and served as food at the banquet. Fires were to be lighted in the middle of the temple floor, and kettles hung over the fires. The sacrificial beaker was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast (and was chieftain) was to bless the beaker as well as all the sacrificial meat.”

The narrative continues that toasts were to be drunk. The first toast was to be drunk to Odin "for victory and power to the king", the second to the gods [*Njörðr*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nj%C3%B6r%C3%B0r) and [*Freyr*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freyr) "for good harvests and for peace", and third, a beaker was to be drunk to the king himself. In addition, toasts were drunk to the memory of departed kinsfolk. These were called *minni*.

Scholars have connected the month event and Yule period to the [Wild Hunt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_Hunt) (a ghostly procession in the winter sky), the god Odin (who is attested in Germanic areas as leading the Wild Hunt and bears the name *Jólnir*), and increased supernatural activity, such as the Wild Hunt and the increased activities of [*draugr*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draugr)—undead beings who walk the earth.

[*Mōdraniht*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C5%8Ddraniht), an event focused on collective female beings attested by Bede as having occurred among the [pagan Anglo-Saxons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_paganism) on what is now Christmas Eve, has been seen as further evidence of a fertility event during the Yule period.

The events of Yule are generally held to have centered on midwinter (although specific dating is a matter of debate), with feasting, drinking, and sacrifice ([*blót*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bl%C3%B3t)). Scholar [Rudolf Simek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Simek) says the pagan Yule feast "had a pronounced religious character" and that "it is uncertain whether the Germanic Yule feast still had a function in the cult of the dead and in the veneration of the ancestors, a function which the mid-winter sacrifice certainly held for the West European [Stone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Age) and [Bronze Ages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Age)."

The traditions of the [Yule log](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yule_log), [Yule goat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yule_Goat), Yule boar ([*Sonargöltr*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonarg%C3%B6ltr), still reflected in the [Christmas ham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_ham)), [Yule singing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wassailing), and others possibly have connections to pre-Christian Yule customs, which Simek says "indicates the significance of the feast in pre-Christian times.[[1]](#footnote-0) Like most colonized cultures, the roots of these indigenous traditions remain, however rededicated and renamed to align with the Christian mission.

**Celebrations of Light**

Human beings seek out light. It provides comfort, warmth, the ability to see, and the energy to grow food.

As part of our very nature, humans have created rituals and celebrations of the light since time immemorial, particularly in the Autumn and Winter, when the light is most scarce. The light is both literal and figurative, representing both the external light in the world around us (the light from the Sun and Moon, in particular), as well as the inner light each of us carries, representing our very soul, and the essence of our unique energy.

The spiritual concepts of light and darkness are found in ancient teachings around the world. In a general sense, the light represents spiritual illumination, higher levels of consciousness, truth, guidance, goodness, hope, wisdom and knowledge; while the dark has historically equated to unconsciousness, shadow, ignorance, evil, and those habits or behaviors which stem from a malintended source.

In modern times, these definitions have become increasingly problematic. In one sense, many view the concept of “lightbringers” (those who feel soul-called to bring more light into this world) as a form of “spiritual bypassing,” wherein the intense focus on the light negates and overlooks the inherent shadow within each of us. The shadow often represents those deep internal places where we hide trauma, grief, rage, fear, and other more challenging emotions and experiences. There is a greater call, and a consciousness movement, to understand the importance of confronting and integrating the shadow through deep personal and spiritual work. Many believe it is only by working with the shadow that we can truly bring forth more light.

Also, as we continue to live in times and cultures where there are great racial disparities, many are concerned that “light” often equates to “white” (caucasions), and “dark” refers to people of color. In this sense, there is a hierarchy which mirrors the inequities in our current realities: the light is better than, and triumphs over, the dark. There have been efforts to create new language for these ancient wisdoms, so as not to perpetuate such toxic ideologies further.

However, like most of the truly ancient wisdoms and teachings shared, there is inherent truth to the light/dark polarity. In fact, it is yet another example of the sacred duality which exists in all beings, and in all of the natural world. One cannot exist without the other. No matter how we try to re-contextualize it, or find new language to describe it, it exists exactly as it is, and as our most distant human ancestors, themselves, perceived it: there is the light of day, and the dark of night. And when we enter into the latter half of the year (Autumn and Winter), the darkness triumphs over the light.

Because humans are so dependent upon light for their ultimate safety and survival, it is easy to understand why these traditions, rituals, and celebrations of light were originally created and sustained throughout the ages… as well as why so many of them occur during the same time of year. Especially in the long months of darkness, petitions and offerings for the rebirth and return of the light were central to the season itself. Though they each have their own indigenous roots, these traditions continue to be celebrated in many ways today.

**Diwali**

Diwali is the Festival of Lights celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists during the lunisolar month Kartika, which typically occurs in October or November in the Gregorian calendar. Diwali celebrates Rama’s eventual defeat of the evil spirit Ravana, and his triumphant return to his home. The festival lasts for five days, during which people light small clay lamps and rangoli (decorations made from colored powder or fine sand), enjoy fireworks and gather with their loved ones. Celebrants dress in their finest clothes, attend temple services, and exchange gifts and sweets at family feasts.

Although Diwali was once celebrated to honor the final crops brought in for the season, it has come to represent the triumph of good over evil. Diwali is a festival of the light which dispels the darkness of ignorance, and illuminates the way of the journey of life. The lamps symbolize the internal light of each person, even in times of darkness. It is also considered to be a good time to start new ventures, as the festival coincides with the Hindu New Year.

**Hanukkah**

This Jewish holiday (also known as Chanukah) is another Festival of Lights, celebrated for eight days in early Winter (December). Although it is considered to be a minor Jewish holiday, it is nonetheless one of the most beloved.

Hanukkah celebrates a miracle that happened more than 2,000 years ago at a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It commemorates the victory in the second century B.C.E. of Judah Maccabee and his followers over the occupying Syrian army and the rededication and repurification of the Temple in Jerusalem with a [miraculous jar of oil](https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/hanukkah/history-hanukkah-story). Jews had been forced from their temple by war, and when they returned after achieving victory, they had only enough oil to keep the temple’s lamp burning for one night. But somehow the lamp burned for eight days on that little bit of oil.

Today, Jews celebrate this “miracle of light” by lighting the candles on a Menorah for eight days, eating foods fried in oil, reciting special prayers, and giving gifts.

**Winter Solstice / Yule**

In the northern hemisphere, [the Winter Solstice](https://www.farmersalmanac.com/winter-solstice-first-day-winter) is the shortest day/longest night of the year, and marks the first official day of winter. Despite the chill, the Winter Solstice also marks a rebirth of light in the world, as after the solstice the days begin to lengthen again.

The Winter Solstice has been important to many different cultures since ancient times. Possibly the oldest festival celebrated by humankind — and still celebrated today — is Alban Arthan (Welsh for “Light of Winter”). The Druids celebrated the solstice as the death of the Old Sun and the birth of the Sun of the New Year. It's believed that stone circle formations like [Stonehenge](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/) in Britain were built to mark the Summer and Winter Solstices.

**Christmas**

Christmas is both a religious and secular holiday, celebrated around the world. 1700 years ago (in the 4th century CE), Christians decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25, although his actual birth date is not known. What we do know is that as this religion moved across the globe over the ages, it was a custom to “christianize” the holidays and traditions of indigenous peoples. Christmas is no exception.

While the Winter Solstice is an ancient tradition celebrating the birth of the Sun, Christmas is a younger tradition, celebrating the birth of the Son of God. Many elements of Solstice light worship carried into Christmas: the Star of Bethlehem; the Light of Christ; and even the decorative lights which festoon houses and communities during the Christmas season.

**Kwanzaa**

The newest winter holiday was created in 1966 as a [uniquely African-American celebration](https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/kwanzaa-history). The spirit of Kwanzaa is about connecting with African roots and heritage; the name comes from the Swahili phrase for “first fruits.”

Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one of the seven principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

Families celebrate Kwanzaa by wearing the colors of the pan-African movement (red, black and green), drumming and music, artistic performance, feasting and lighting seven candles to represent the seven shared principles.

**Saturnalia**

Saturnalia was an [ancient Roman festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_festival) and [holiday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holiday) in honor of the [god](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_deities) [Saturn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturn_(mythology)), held on December 17th (of the [Julian calendar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_calendar)) and later expanded with festivities through to December 23rd. The holiday was celebrated with a sacrifice at the [Temple of Saturn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Saturn), in the [Roman Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Forum), and a public banquet, followed by private gift-giving, continual partying, and a [carnival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival) atmosphere that overturned [Roman social norms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Roman_culture): [gambling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dice#History) was permitted, and masters provided table service for their [slaves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome) as it was seen as a time of liberty for both slaves and freedmen alike.

A common custom was the election of a "King of the Saturnalia,” who would give orders to people, which were to be followed and preside over the merrymaking. The gifts exchanged were usually [gag gifts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Practical_joke_device) or small figurines made of wax or pottery known as [*sigillaria*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigillaria_(ancient_Rome)). Wax taper candles called *cerei* were also common gifts during Saturnalia, to signify light returning after the solstice.The poet [Catullus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catullus) called it "the best of days".

Although probably the most well-known Roman holiday, Saturnalia as a whole is not described from beginning to end in any single ancient source. Modern understanding of the festival is pieced together from several accounts dealing with various aspects.

The Saturnalia was the dramatic setting of the multivolume work of that name by [Macrobius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macrobius), a Latin writer from [late antiquity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Late_antiquity) who is the major source for information about the holiday. Macrobius describes the reign of Justinus' "king Saturn" as "a time of great happiness, both on account of the universal plenty that prevailed and because as yet there was no division into bond and free – as one may gather from the complete license enjoyed by slaves at the Saturnalia."

In [Lucian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucian)'s *Saturnalia* it is [Chronos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronos) himself who proclaims a "festive season, when 'tis lawful to be drunken, and slaves have license to revile their lords".

In one of the interpretations in Macrobius's work, Saturnalia is a festival of light leading to the [winter solstice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_solstice), with the abundant presence of candles symbolizing the quest for knowledge and truth. The renewal of light and the coming of the [new year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_year) was celebrated in the later [Roman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire) at the [*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_Invictus), the "Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun", on December 25th.

The popularity of Saturnalia continued into the [3rd](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3rd_century) and [4th centuries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4th_century) AD, and as the [Roman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire) came under Christian rule, many of its customs were recast into or at least influenced the seasonal celebrations surrounding [Christmas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas) and the [New Year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Year%27s_Day).[[2]](#footnote-1)

**Odin and The Wild Hunt**

*“When the winter winds blow and the Yule fires are lit, it is best to stay indoors, safely shut away from the dark paths and the wild heaths. Those who wander out by themselves during the Yule-nights may hear a sudden rustling through the tops of the trees – a rustling that might be the wind, though the rest of the wood is still. But then the barking of dogs fills the air, and the host of wild souls sweeps down, fire flashing from the eyes of the black hounds and the hooves of the black horses…” –Kveldulf Gundarsson*

Yule is the annual mid-winter festival of the pre-Christian Germanic peoples, and that name has continued to be associated with Christmas and the various celebrations that take place at the end of December every year. Of course, midwinter celebrations are far more widespread than in just those countries where Odin/Woden and Thor/Donar were popular. We’ve been trying to make the darkest days of the year slightly less terrible for a very long time, as far as we’ve roamed. “Yule” is the more specific set of traditions, such as the burning of the log, wassailing, and so on, that are particular to Germanic peoples.

The Wild Hunt is one name for a myth that’s a bit more uniquely European, and perhaps a bit more Germanic-flavored as well. A host of the dead rides through the skies, particularly during the twelve nights of Yuletide, led by one or more of the gods, making the sounds of strong winds and storms, and taking the souls of the dead or incautious wanderers (humans and livestock) with them as they pass. Sacrifices were left to the gods of the Hunt, to ensure that no one was taken from their homes in the night.

One of the most obvious links between these two traditions is Odin. One of Odin’s many bynames is *Jólnir*, “Master of Yule,” and the many feasts and [traditions of Yule](https://throwbackthorsday.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/what-role-for-thor-in-yules-of-yore/) were typically dedicated to him. It’s worth noting also that Yule is understood to be a fertility feast. A celebration at midwinter might seem like a bad idea, with no clear idea of just how harsh the full winter will be, it would perhaps be prudent to continue rationing carefully until spring is imminent. This makes the Yuletide feast a genuine sacrifice, an offering to Odin and the gods in the hopes that their crops and livestock will be replenished in the next year.

The Wild Hunt is a kind of haunted hunting party, where ghosts come sailing through the air, making spooky noises, perhaps chasing a particular target or perhaps coming for the dead. That’s the link to Odin, who is, in addition to his many other roles, the god of the dead. Odin hanged himself to learn the knowledge of the runes, accepts human sacrifice as a form of worship, and even in his role as god of war, accepts the deaths of fallen warriors not only for practical purposes at Ragnarok, but as devoted tribute.

When the wild hunt comes to collect the fallen, whether that means the living, the recently deceased, or land spirits who’ve out-stayed their welcome, Odin is governing his natural territory. As the Wild Hunt is sometimes also called “the furious army” in other parts of Europe, Odin’s name’s definition as “furious one” also comes into play, with hints at shamanic magic and the eight-legged horse Sleipnir taking Odin on trips physical and metaphysical throughout the nine realms.

If Odin has a particular connection to Yule, and a particular connection to the Wild Hunt, what, then, can be said of the fact that these two events are occurring at the same time?

In pre-Christian times, the dead were understood to be closer to the living in winter time. With longer nights and shorter days, the spirits of friends, family, and ancestors had a greater opportunity to actively participate in life. While these spirits were venerated, even worshiped, and were understood to fight off grave robbers and protect the living, it was not necessarily the case that the spirits were all benevolent, or that their appropriate place was in Midgard.

But the Wild Hunt and Yule were a ritual cycle that helped the living move on from their attachments to the lost, and prepare for the new life that would come with the longer days and the spring which couldn’t be too much further away. As Odin’s howling host came and collected the dead, one could take solace in the fact that those whose time had come to pass now had the opportunity to do so.

The myth had a practical side to it as well, a ritual. Gifts were left for Odin and Sleipnir, for the other riders and their steeds, usually a sacrifice of food, hay, and oats. One description says that these gifts were put in a small boat and taken to the woods, about a bowshot’s distance from the back of the home. This seems particularly appropriate given the practice of [ship burial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_burial) among Germanic peoples, and a nearly explicit connection between the Wild Hunt myth and the recently deceased, perhaps a small payment, perhaps merely a gift for Odin to thank him for caring for the souls of that family’s ancestors.

And so the god of the slain and the father of Yule accepts sacrifices both for the dead and for fertility, in the hope that the ongoing cycle of life, death, and rebirth will continue as it always has. Those who are leaving gifts to Odin under their trees, though, are doing so to remember specific loved ones, the recently deceased, the beloved. Yule brings with it the broader cultural celebration, the shared hope that the gods will bring us all the blessings in the new year that they gave us in the last. But it is also a time to honor and remember those we love who are part of our lives in a different way now, and to embrace how new years, and new life, will help us honor them still.[[3]](#footnote-2)

**Goddesses of the Winter Solstice**

While it may be mostly Pagans who celebrate the [Yule holiday](https://www.learnreligions.com/all-about-yule-2562972) today, nearly all cultures and faiths have held some sort of Winter Solstice celebration or festival. Because of the theme of endless birth, life, death, and rebirth, the time of the solstice is often associated with deity and other legendary figures. Here are some goddesses and traditions to note:

## **Alcyone (Greek)**

Alcyone is the Kingfisher goddess. She nests every winter for two weeks, and while she does, the wild seas become calm and peaceful. Alcyone was one of the seven sisters of the Pleiades.

## **Amaterasu (Japanese)**

In feudal Japan, worshipers celebrated the return of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, who slept in a cold, remote cave. When the other gods woke her with a loud celebration, she looked out of the cave and saw an image of herself in a mirror. The other gods convinced her to emerge from her seclusion and return sunlight to the universe.

According to [Mark Cartwright at Ancient History Encyclopedia](http://www.ancient.eu/Amaterasu/):

"She blocked herself in a cave following an argument with Susanoo when he surprised the goddess with a monstrous flayed horse when she was quietly weaving in her palace with her younger sister Waka-hiru-me. As a consequence of Amaterasu’s disappearance the world was cast in total darkness and evil spirits ran riot over the earth. The gods tried all manner of ways to persuade the peeved goddess to leave the cave. On the advice of Omohi-Kane, cocks were set outside the cave in the hope their crows would make the goddess think that dawn had come."

## **Bona Dea (Roman)**

This fertility goddess was worshiped in a secret temple on the Aventine hill in Rome, and only women were permitted to attend her rites. Her annual festival was held early in December. High-ranking women would gather at the house of Rome's most prominent magistrates, the *Pontifex Maximus*. While there, the magistrate's wife led secret rituals at which men were forbidden. It was even prohibited to discuss men or anything masculine at the ritual.

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## [**Cailleach Bheur (Celtic)**](https://www.learnreligions.com/cailleach-the-ruler-of-winter-2561705)

In Scotland, she is also called Beira, the Queen of Winter. She is the hag aspect of the [Triple Goddess](https://www.learnreligions.com/maiden-mother-and-crone-2562881), and rules the dark days between [Samhain](https://www.learnreligions.com/paganism-wicca-sabbats-and-holidays-4684802) and [Beltaine](https://www.learnreligions.com/paganism-wicca-sabbats-and-holidays-4684802). She appears in the late fall, as the earth is dying, and is known as a bringer of storms. She is typically portrayed as a one-eyed old woman with bad teeth and matted hair.

## **Demeter (Greek)**

Through her daughter, Persephone, Demeter is linked strongly to the changing of the seasons and is often connected to the image of the [Dark Mother](https://www.learnreligions.com/mabon-ritual-to-honor-the-dark-mother-2562295) in winter. When Persephone was abducted by Hades, Demeter's grief caused the earth to die for six months, until her daughter's return.

## [**Frau Holle (Norse)**](https://www.learnreligions.com/legend-of-frau-holle-2563015)

Frau Holle appears in many different forms in Scandinavian mythology and legend. She is associated with both the evergreen plants of the Yule season, and with snowfall, which is said to be Frau Holle shaking out her feathery mattresses.

## **Frigga (Norse)**

Frigga honored her son, Baldur, by asking all of nature not to harm him, but in her haste overlooked the mistletoe plant. Loki fooled Baldur's blind twin, Hodr, into killing him with a spear made of mistletoe but [Odin](https://www.learnreligions.com/who-is-the-norse-god-odin-2561972) later restored him to life. As thanks, Frigga declared that mistletoe must be regarded as a plant of love, rather than death.

## [**La Befana (Italian)**](https://www.learnreligions.com/witches-in-mythology-and-legend-4126677)

This character from Italian folklore is similar to St. Nicholas, in that she flies around delivering candy to well-behaved children in early January. She is depicted as an old woman on a broomstick, wearing a black shawl.

## **Spider Woman (Hopi)**

Soyal is the Hopi festival of the winter solstice. It honors the Spider Woman and the Hawk Maiden, and celebrates the sun's victory over winter's darkness.

**Traditions of Yule**

Yule and Winter Solstice traditions are many and generous, and are shared not only with Christianity (with the birthday of the Christ Child), but with many pre-Christian Pagan traditions, as well as more recent ones.

**The Evergreens**

Evergreens represent everlasting life and were traditionally hung around doorways and windows. Each has a symbolism of its own:

**Mistletoe**

Mistletoe is a parasitic plant that grows on various trees, particularly the apple tree. It is held in great veneration when found growing on oak trees. The Winter Solstice was the time when the Chief Druid would cut the sacred mistletoe from the oak. The mistletoe is cut using a golden sickle on the sixth day of the Moon, in such a way so that it never touches the ground. Its magical properties are believed to be connected to the fact that it lives between the worlds, between sky/heaven and the Earth. Its white berries are said to represent the fertile white semen of the life-giving male.

**Holly**

Another evergreen of protection, holly's spiky bristles are believed to repel unwanted spirits. Newborn babies used to be sprinkled with “holly water,” water in which holly had been soaked - especially potent if left under a full moon overnight. Holly is sacred to Holle, the Germanic underworld goddess, and symbolizes everlasting life, goodwill and potent life energy. Its red berries represent feminine blood. Together, mistletoe and holly represent the Sacred Marriage at this time of year with the re-birth of the Sun/Son.

**Ivy**

An evergreen symbol of immortality and resurrection, growing in a spiral to remind us of reincarnation and rebirth. Sacred to Osiris, where His death and resurrection was a central theme in Egyptian religion. Sacred also to Dionysus, god of vegetation, blossoming, and the Return of Spring.

**Yew**

The Yew tree is one of regeneration and rebirth like no other - it sends up new trees from its roots and grows to a very great age. It is deeply connected with the spirit realms and the ancestors. Often used as the central “world tree” in ritual spaces, and was often planted in graveyards.

**Crafting With Holiday Plants**

So many traditional Yule crafts feature many of the trees and plants listed above. No doubt, they collectively represent life and light in the time when the world appears lifeless and dark.

**The Yule Tree**

In ancient Rome, pine trees were an essential part of Goddess groves. On the eve of the Midwinter Solstice, Roman priests would cut down a pine tree, decorate it and carry it ceremonially to the temple celebrations. People decked their homes with boughs of evergreen trees and bushes in pots. Pines and firs were cherished as a symbol of rebirth and life in the depth of winter. Pagan families would bring a live tree into the home so the wood spirits would have a place to keep warm in the cold winter months - food and treats were hung on the branches for the spirits to eat.

**The Kissing Bough**

At Yuletide, it has often been customary to make a decoration using two hoops, one thrust through the other, and bound with evergreens, holly and ivy, and rosy-cheeked apples, specially reserved for the occasion. Inside, dolls are hung, male and female, with other brightly coloured baubles. At the bottom of the decoration, a bunch of mistletoe is carefully tied, and the whole tableau is suspended in the middle of the room, at the center of attention. Every berry on the mistletoe bears the promise of a kiss, and for every kiss given or taken a berry is removed. When all the berries are gone, (so the tradition goes), the kissing has to stop!

**The Wreath**

It was traditional to make wreaths from evergreen - representing the Wheel of Life as ever green. These were hung on doors or laid horizontally and decorated with candles. This tradition later became the Christian Advent Wreath.

**The Yule Log**

Playing an important role in the celebrations of Yule and Christmas, the Yule Log is an old tradition rooted in Norwegian culture. On the night of the Winter Solstice, it was common to hoist a giant log oak log onto the hearth to celebrate the return of the Sun each year. The Norse believed that the Sun was a giant wheel of Fire which rolled away from the Earth, and then began rolling back again at Yule.

As [Christianity](https://www.learnreligions.com/christianity-4684897) spread through Europe, the tradition became part of Christmas Eve festivities. The father (or head) of the house would sprinkle the log with libations of mead, oil, or salt. Once the log was burned in the hearth, the ashes were scattered about the house to protect the family from hostile spirits.

It was deemed essential that the log, once lit, should burn until it was deliberately extinguished, before it fully burned out. It was never allowed to burn away completely, as some would be needed for the following year. It was an ill omen if the fire burnt itself out.

Traditionally, the log was adorned with candles, pine cones, dried berries, cuttings of evergreens, mistletoe, feathers, cinnamon sticks and festive ribbons. Many people also write wishes for the new year on pieces of paper, tucked into the ribbons. The candles can be lit and the log used for decorative purposes until Solstice night, when it is burned.

**Yule Candles**

This was an ornamental candle of great size, once widely used at Yule throughout Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia. It was often colored red, green or blue, and decorated with sprigs of holly or some other evergreens.

The candle was lit on Christmas Eve - its light shedding on the holiday meal and left to burn throughout the night - or, on Christmas morning, to burn throughout the day. It was rekindled on each successive night of the twelve day festival, and finally extinguished on the twelfth night.

While the candle burned, it was believed to shed a blessing on the household. It was considered a sign of ill omen or misfortune if the candle were blown out. It was also considered unlucky to move it, or blow out the flame with the breath. When the time came to extinguish it, it was done by pressing the wick with a pair of tongs. In some homes, only the head of the household could perform this task, it being considered unlucky for anyone else to touch it while it was lit.

**Traditional Yule Recipes**

Finally, as Yule and other holiday celebrations at this time of year are generally focused on gatherings with loved ones, cooking and feasting together is a cherished tradition of its own. Here are just a couple traditional Yule recipes you might include in your own celebrations:

**Yule Wassail**

Wassail was originally a word that meant to greet or salute someone. Groups would go [out “wassailing” on cold evenings](https://www.learnreligions.com/go-a-wassailing-for-yule-2562973), and would be offered a mug of warm cider or ale when they approached a home. Over the years, the tradition evolved to include mixing eggs with alcohol and asperging the crops to ensure fertility.

**Ingredients**

* 1 gallon apple cider
* 2 cup cranberry juice
* 1/2 cup honey
* 1/2 cup sugar
* 2 oranges
* Whole cloves
* 1 apple, peeled and diced
* Allspice
* Ginger
* Nutmeg
* 3 cinnamon sticks (or 3 tbsp. ground cinnamon)
* 1/2 to 1 cup brandy (optional)

**Directions**

1. Set your crockpot to its lower setting, and pour in apple cider, cranberry juice, honey, and sugar, mixing carefully. As it heats up, stir so that the honey and sugar dissolve.
2. Stud the oranges with the cloves, and place in the pot (they'll float).
3. Add the diced apple and allspice, ginger, and nutmeg to taste, usually, a couple of tablespoons each is plenty.
4. Snap the cinnamon sticks in half and add those as well.
5. Cover your pot and allow to simmer up to four hours on low heat.
6. About a half-hour prior to serving, add the brandy if you choose to use it.

**Savory Sun King Soup**

You can make an entire crockpot full of this soup or scale the measurements down to make a smaller batch if needed. It is gluten-free, and you can substitute olive oil for the butter if you prefer to avoid dairy.

**Ingredients**

* 3 tbsp. butter (use real butter, not margarine)
* 1 small onion, diced
* 1 shallot, diced
* 4 garlic cloves, pressed and chopped
* 3 quarts tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and pureed (if tomatoes are out of season, use four large cans of tomato paste)
* 1 box vegetable broth
* 1 cup orange juice, no pulp
* A few sprigs of rosemary
* Salt and pepper

**Directions**

1. Sautee the onion, garlic, and shallots in the butter over low heat. Cook them until they begin to caramelize and then remove from heat.
2. Pour the tomatoes into a 5-quart crock pot. Add the vegetable broth and orange juice. Stir until well mixed.
3. Fold in the onions, garlic, and shallots. Season with salt and pepper to taste, then allow to simmer on low for about eight hours.
4. To get the best flavor, add the rosemary about two hours before you want to eat. If you put the rosemary in too early, it tends to lose some of its earthiness while cooking. Add salt and pepper, to taste.

[[4]](#footnote-3)

Other popular Yuletide treats include things like plum pudding, peppermint fudge, chocolate yule logs, hot buttered rum, egg nog, and all kinds of cakes and cookies. Apples, oranges and nuts figure prominently, as do cured meats, squashes and root vegetables, and homemade breads.

Brightly colored foods, linens, and candles set at the feast table are other ways of celebrating the rebirth of the Sun, and the ushering in of new seasons of light.

**Sharing the Wisdom: Preparing Your Ritual**

Use this space to consider how you would honor this sabbat in a ritual way, whether for yourself or for others. This is meant to be a loose guide to inspire you, and to build confidence in your own intuition, vision, and abilities to incorporate more ritual in your life.

1. **What would your ritual space look like/what environment do you envision?**
2. **What items would you include on your altar? What do they represent to you?**
3. **What Elements would you include? How will you include them? And why?**
4. **What words do you feel should be spoken or sung? You might jot down your ideas, and create a loose outline to follow.**
5. **What is the best way for you, personally, to connect with this sabbat? How will you demonstrate that through ritual action?**

**Reflections and Integration**

Going back through your life in increments of 5 years, reflect upon this season/sabbat in the Wheel of the Year and what it has meant to you in those various stages of life. Use these questions as a guide:

* **What memories stand out to me the most about this season in each stage of life?**
* **How did this season/sabbat make me feel emotionally? Physically?**
* **How do my past experiences of the season/sabbat correlate to the present?**
* **In my highest vision, how would I best connect with this season/sabbat?**
* **From this year forward, what changes might I make to align myself more with the energies of this season/sabbat?**

1. From Wikipedia, and “The Curious Past and Lasting Importance of Yule” by Tai Gooden [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. From Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. From “Yule and the Wild Hunt, the Living and the Dead,” at throwbackthorsday.wordpress.com [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. From “Magical Recipes for Yule,” by Patti Wigington [↑](#footnote-ref-3)