

CHRISTMAS DAYS

OF

WINTER-MAGIC

by

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Introduction

The ancient chroniclers speak of a time when mankind was closely linked to the life-cycles of tilling, sowing, harvesting, and the appeasing of earth gods. In that age, not only Christmas, but many other winter days were seen as singular, and filled with earth-magic.

Thus, to nurture the cycle of life during the sun's winter repose, these magical days were devoted to rituals of field and fertility that would ensure a fruitful harvest, productive herds, and healthy families in the forthcoming seasons. These ancient festivals and rituals were the foundation upon which the 'ancient ones' built their society, norms, and beliefs.

Martinmas

In the northern latitudes, the start of winter was marked by Martinmas (St Martin's Day, November 11th). And on the eve of this day, great bonfires were lit to drive back the dark, and animals that could not be fed through the winter were butchered, and salted down. The blood of the animals was collected, and sprinkled on their owner's threshold - symbolic of the 'old winter sacrifice'.

St Martin is the patron of wine and vintners, and his day was a time of feasting, and a time when the first of the new wine would be drunk. Children, on Martinmas eve, would place jars of water on their doorsteps with a plea that the water be changed into wine. On the morning of Martinmas the water would indeed be wine, and beside it would lay a special biscuit, shaped like a horseshoe, showing that the saint had passed by during the night and had blessed that household.

Solstice

The day of the winter Solstice (December 21st), was an important time in the cycle of winter magic. From time immemorial, people had danced and feasted on the Solstice to generate powerful magic. The engendered magic was then used as a protection against the dark forces that were trying to prevent the spring's rebirth. The memory of this early ceremony lives on in the form of traditional village sword dances which are celebrated on the day of the solstice.

Clothed in costumes bedecked with finery and ribbon, dancing men would circle sun-wise (from left to right), in the path of the sun, using their brandished swords to create patterns in the air. The dancing would become increasingly animated until it reached its climax with the creation of the six pointed star pattern (the hexagram). This symbol represented the sun that was to be magically regenerated, and which in turn would breathe new life in to the spring. At the end of the dance, the exhausted performers would relax by feasting and drinking new wine.

Christmas

In ancient times, Christmas Eve (December 24th) was not just a time for human feasting - this was a time when the spirits of the departed would come back to visit their old homes and loved ones. After the feasting of the living was concluded, food would be laid out for the dead, and the mortals would retire. This was the sign for the dead to come into the warmth, and once more enjoy their old Christmas revels.

The old tales speak of tranquillity descending upon the world as midnight ushered in the day of Christmas (December 25th). One chronicler relates: "Even in the darkness, all the birds awoke and sang, and such was the magic of the time that sparrows carolled as sweetly as nightingales."

It was also written that: "In the tranquillity of the dawn, folk walking abroad, in the wintry wilderness of the world, would see the beasts of the field and wood lying in accord together. The predator and the prey joined in harmony, creating, for one day, a kingdom of accord - a kingdom of magical peace."

New Year

For the New Year to prosper, the old year and the spirits released by the solstice season had to be buried or driven away. In some villages the old year was represented by a straw dummy called Death which would be shouldered through the streets. Following Death's parade, he would be taken outside the village and would be buried, or burned, or drowned. This sacrifice ensured the "death" of the old year's spirits, and the safe and prosperous "birth" of the New Year. These rites would be enthusiastically carried out on New Year's Eve (December 31st).

Other people had higher spirited exorcisms. Brightly costumed, and disguised with masks against malevolent forces, citizens would parade through their town, striking the dwellings with sticks, beating drums, clanging bells, and cracking whips. The noise of "town rattling", as it was called, would drive out the spirits of the dying year, and would allow the New Year to be born in safety.

Twelfth Night

The eve of the Twelfth Day of Christmas (Twelfth Night, January 6th) was a time for safeguarding the health of growing things that had fallen under winter's spell of sleep. On that eve, people would visit their apple orchards to take "wassail" (good health) to their apple trees.

To the populace, the apple tree was an object of deep reverence, and it was believed to house its own elfin spirit. With joyous shouts and songs the men would call upon the tree to awaken from its winter slumber.

One of the revellers would be masked as a bull, symbolising fertility, and all present would make offerings to the tree's spirit to ensure its forthcoming fruitfulness. The carousers would place bread or salt in the tree's branches; and often, a special cake that had been soaked in cider from the wassail bowl would be placed in the tree. During this rite the branches of the tree would be solemnly dipped in cider, or sprinkled with a cider libation.

One chronicler wrote: "Following their wassailing, many people claimed to have seen the trees awake, and sprout buds."

Today

What about today? Have we become so advanced that we no longer need to feel our spiritual earth-roots, and kiss the spring to life?

Another chronicler speaks: "These ancient rituals and memories were fitted by the common folk into the patterns of their daily lives, and were cherished without fear. And also today, in the child born in Bethlehem, we have the promise of spring in the heart of midwinter, the divine gift of a bright cleansing flame to drive away the dark and give new birth."

Merry Christmas.

End

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