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All Hallows' Eve

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All Hallows' Eve falls on **31st October** each year, and is the day before **All Hallows' Day**, also known as **All Saints' Day** in the Christian calendar. The Church traditionally held a vigil on All Hallows' Eve when worshippers would prepare themselves with prayers and fasting prior to the feast day itself.

The name derives from the Old English 'hallowed' meaning holy or sanctified and is now usually contracted to the more familiar word Hallowe'en.

A brief history of the festival

In the early 7th century Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon in Rome, formerly a temple to all the gods, as a church dedicated to Saint Mary and the Martyrs, and ordered that that date, 13th May, should be celebrated every year.

It became All Saints' Day, a day to honour all the saints, and later, at the behest of Pope Urban IV (d. 1264), a day specially to honour those saints who didn't have a festival day of their own.

In the 8th century, on 1st November, Pope Gregory III dedicated a chapel to all the saints in **St. Peter's Basilica** in Rome. Gregory IV then made the festival universal throughout the Church, and 1st November has subsequently become All Saints' Day for the western Church.

The **Orthodox Church** celebrates All Saints' Day on the first Sunday after Passover - a date closer to the original 13th May.

Hallowe'en and Samhain

It is widely believed that many Hallowe'en traditions have evolved from an ancient Celtic festival called **Samhain** which was Christianised by the early Church. Pronounced *sow-in*, Samhain is a Gaelic word meaning 'end of the summer'. This festival is believed to have been a celebration of the end of the harvest, and a time of preparation for the coming winter.

It is widely accepted that the early church missionaries chose to hold a festival at this time of year in order to absorb existing native Pagan practices into Christianity, thereby smoothing the conversion process.

A letter Pope Gregory I sent to Bishop Mellitus in the 6th century, in which he suggested that existing places of non-Christian worship be adopted and consecrated to serve a Christian purpose, is often provided as supporting evidence of this method of acculturation. (See related links.)

Encyclopaedia Britannica states that this date may have been chosen "in an effort to supplant the Pagan holiday with a Christian observance".

The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions also claims that Hallowe'en "absorbed and adopted the Celtic new year festival, the eve and day of Samhain".

However, there are supporters of the view that Hallowe'en, as the eve of All Saints' Day, originated entirely independently of Samhain and some question the existence of a specific pan-Celtic religious festival which took place on 31st October/1st November.

In his book *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*, Nicholas Rogers states:

Festivals commemorating the saints as opposed to the original Christian martyrs appear to have been observed by 800. In England and Germany, this celebration took place on 1st November. In Ireland, it was commemorated on 20th April, a chronology that contradicts the widely held view that the November date was chosen to Christianize the festival of Samhain.

Nicholas Rogers, Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night

Steve Roud, author of *A Pocket Guide To Superstitions Of The British Isles*, says:

Certainly the festival of Samhain, meaning Summer's End, was by far the most important of the four quarter days in the medieval Irish calendar, and there was a sense that this was the time of year when the physical and supernatural worlds were closest and magical things could happen, but however strong the evidence in Ireland, in Wales it was 1st May and New Year which took precedence, in Scotland there is hardly any mention of it until much later, and in Anglo-Saxon England even less.

Steve Roud, A Pocket Guide To Superstitions Of The British Isles

In *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, Ronald Hutton says:

Heavy Irish immigration into the Scottish Highlands and Isles in the early Middle Ages carried the name Samhain there, in local variations, but to the Welsh the day was 'Calan Gaeaf', 'the first day of winter', and the night before was termed 'Nos Galan Gaea', winter's eve'. Perhaps significantly, the earliest Welsh literature attributes no arcane significance to these dates (in sharp contrast to May Eve) and describes no gatherings then (in sharp contrast to New Year). It must be concluded, therefore, that the medieval records furnish no evidence that 1st November was a major pan-Celtic festival, and none of religious ceremonies, even where it was observed. An Anglo-Saxon counterpart is difficult either to prove or to dismiss completely.

Ronal Hutton, Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain

Either way, what we can be sure of is that the modern celebration of Hallowe'en is a complicated mix of evolved (and evolving) traditions and influences.

Find out more

- **All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day**
- **Samhain**