



## From Yule to Christmas – the Anglo-Saxon Religious Journey

### Lesson 2 – Yule: Anglo-Saxon Religion and Culture

#### Anglo-Saxon Religion



The Anglo-Saxons were Pagans, this means that they believed in and worshipped many different gods. Like all people in ancient times, they lived very close to nature; the weather and the seasons influenced them directly, e.g. farming, hunting, travel, etc. So, their gods were meant to explain how and why things happened in the natural world

and they were represented as people, very much like themselves, who could be spoken to (prayers), given gifts (sacrifices) and even bargained with and, sometimes, outsmarted by humans.

We still see some influence of these beliefs in things like the names for the days of the week. In the chart to the right, you can see that in English we use the names of the Germanic gods, while in French the names of the Roman gods are used. The Anglo-Saxon gods played a part in everyday life and in marking special times of the year with annual ceremonies, feasts and festivals. One of the most joyful of these was the seasonal festival of YULE.

The Germanic gods have left traces in modern English vocabulary

An example of this is some of the names of the days of the week

English	Saxon	Title of God	Roman	French
Monday	Mona	The Moon	Moon	Lundi
Tuesday	Tiu	God of War	Mars	Mardi
Wednesday	Woden	The Cunning God	Mercury	Mercredi
Thursday	Thor	Thunder God	Jove	Jeudi
Friday	Freyja	Goddess of Love	Venus	Vendredi
Saturday	---	God of Time	Saturn	Samedi
Sunday	Sunne	The Sun	Sun	Dimanche

## Yule

Held in the deepest part of Winter, the Winter Solstice, Yule was a festival and feast to cheer people up and raise their spirits in the darkest time of the year.

Further, some European Pagans believed that, in order for Spring and Summer to happen, they had to persuade the Sun to return again. While others treated the festival more as a celebration of the year beginning to

turn back to Spring as the nights became shorter and the days longer after December 21<sup>st</sup> ("Shortest Day", i.e. Winter Solstice). At around that time in Europe, most of the cattle were slaughtered so they wouldn't have to be fed in the winter when food was scarce, plus, the beer that had been brewing since Autumn was now ready to drink. All the ingredients for a feast were available.



There is a lot of confusion and disagreement among historians about which customs, practises and traditions actually come from Yule and have survived into the modern Christmas celebrations and which were introduced to this country in later times. Some of those that are attributed to Yule by some historians are:

- Yule logs
- Evergreen wreaths
- Mistletoe
- Drinking beer in celebration
- Giving presents
- Eating a large, family meal



## What do You Know and What do You Understand?

- 1) Use a dictionary to look up any words on this sheet you do not understand, write down the definitions in your own "Vocabulary Book". You have just increased your word-power!
- 2) In your own words, describe Anglo-Saxon religion and explain how they saw the Germanic gods. **DO NOT COPY FROM THIS SHEET.**
- 3) Describe the differences in naming the days of the week between Germanic languages, like English, and Latin languages, like French and explain their meanings.
- 4) "Modern historians have a very clear idea of what happened at Yule in ancient times and which traditions we still celebrate today" Say whether this statement is "True" or "False" and explain in your own words what the actual state of our understanding is about Yule traditions today.
- 5) Research on the internet or in your local library about Anglo-Saxon Yule and write an account of what the main feast-day might have been like for a boy or girl.

