

Yule Origins, Lore, Legends, and Customs

Reader 1: Yule falls approximately on the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year. After Yule the period of daylight begins to wax, until it reaches the longest day around June 21st, the Summer Solstice. For folks in Northern climes, the Winter Solstice was a most welcome day to anticipate at the dark end of the year, and although months of darkness lay ahead, folk could rest assured Sunna's (goddess of the Sun) might was on the increase and darkness was waning. Yule is actually a span of thirteen days, usually counted from the night before the solstice (19th or 20th of December, as it varies from year to year) to the thirteenth night (usually January 6th called "Twelfth Night" later by Christians). The Winter Solstice itself is the most important of the days, when the dead and other beings of the dark fare freely, winter arrives, and humans are closest to the spirit worlds.

Reader 2: Jölföðr (Yule-father) and Jólnir (Yule) are names of the Germanic and Norse god Odin. Some think Odin was the original "Alf" or gift-giving "Elf." Before Santa Claus was popularized in the Victorian era as a fat jolly Elf, he was seen as tall and lean, wearing a dark cloak, not a red and white tunic. Earlier legends describe "Santa" as riding a white horse, not driving a sleigh pulled by reindeer. This reminds us of Odin's steed Sleipner. The elder "Yule Elf" was a bit stern also, and could be quite a terrifying figure, especially to rude or ill-willed folk. Odin was also seen as riding the stormy winter skies. In the Christian era folklore advised people to stay inside at night to avoid the furious Host, who was much feared. There are many accounts, especially from Germany, of wayfaring folks being picked up and transported from one place to the other by the throng of the dead, only to be left there lifeless. It is quite possible that fearful reputation of the Wild Host was especially encouraged by Christians, who claimed the Wild Huntsman was their devil. From a Heathen perspective it is likely that originally the Wild Host was made up of human worshippers of the God Wodan. He is the God of ecstasy, but also of death, so the dead probably always made up part of the Wild Host, which rode with great clamor upon skeletal horses and accompanied by ghostly hounds.

Reader 3: In contrast to the frightening nature of the Wild Huntsman as seen by Christians, there is a great deal of evidence that Heathens believed fertility and blessings were brought by the Wild Host. The greatest gift believed wrought by the Furious Host was that as he rode above the fields and ensured fertility and fruitful harvests. An interesting related custom survived in Germany of leaving the last sheaf of grain cut in the field for the Huntsman's horse, eight-legged Sleipner, Odin's magical steed. This fertility aspect of the Wild Hunt could be connected in some way with the return of the dead to their earthly homes at Yule, for it was thought they brought blessings with them and bestowed them upon their kin. Indeed the kindred Dead were considered to still be an integral part of the family by Heathens, and were treated as such. The ghostly Wild Hunt is another manifestation of the pervasive Heathen beliefs of the eternal connection of the living with the dead, and the fertility bestowing powers of the Ancestors.

Reader 4: In Scandinavia it is the God Thor who is thought to be the origin of the Yule Elf. There are many legends that tell of Thor's benevolent protectiveness of human kind, and of his jolly, fun-loving nature (at least when He is not in a troll-slaying mood). This seems more in line with modern conceptions of jolly Saint Nick than grim Oden, the Wild Huntsman. The Yule goats (think of reindeers!) carry the Yule Elf as he visits the folk, bestows gifts, and gets his traditional offering of porridge. Modern Yule decorations of straw formed into goats, straw-goat ornamented wreaths, and a (mock) Yule goat head carried about on a stick are all memories of Thor's goats. When the Yule log burns on the hearth, some scholars say, it is an offering on Thor's altar. So perhaps another connection to chimneys and the legend of Santa coming down the chimney!?

Reader 5: In Germany, Scandinavia, and England, the Wild Huntsman came at Yuletide, leading hosts of the dead. Winter Solstice was seen as the time when the veils between the worlds became thin, and the dead were easily manifest to the living. But it is not usually the human dead who were considered the most fearsome. At Yuletide spirits of all kinds roamed, not unlike similar beliefs held by Celtic Pagans of *Samhain* (Halloween). In Norse lands, trolls of many types roamed at this time, and elves—both malicious and benevolent—may drop by the homes of humans. Many Yule customs that survive to this day have their origins in practices either meant to protect the home from evil wandering spirits at Yule, or conversely, to welcome good spirits into the home and show them thanks for the blessings they bestow. House spirits (guardian and patron spirits of the home), and the respected dead of the family, were welcomed gladly to the Yule feast. Food would be left out on the table for them after all had gone to bed (cookies and milk for Santa Claus?). Clearly Yule has a dual nature: it is the time of death and darkness, when trolls, ghosts and elves are about, but it is also the time of the return of the Sun and celebration of the promise of life and light renewed.

Reader 6: The central celebration of Yule is the holy feast. It is thought very important to spare nothing in providing for the guests—both living and dead, human and spirits. All good spirits shared in the Yule feast; dogs and cats ate the same food as humans, and were brought into the house. Offerings of cream, beer, and bread were left out for the house spirits. If the feast were being held by a chieftain (or a wealthy community leader), many people would be invited and it would last many days, with presents being given to guests as they left. For less wealthy folk, there would be as good a feast as could be provided, and of course the Yule ale would be shared between family members and friends. *Sumble* (ritual toasts) would be drunk to the Ancestors at this time as well, for Yule was the season for the recognition of the continuance of human life. Savory foods such as mutton or leg of lamb, goose, pork, and beef, special Yule breads, porridge, apples, sweets and nuts are traditional. But most important is the Yule ale, brewed stronger than other ales, and considered holy. Oaths were sworn on the *bragarfull* (holy cup).

Reader 7: Drinking Wassail at Yule is an English custom. "Wassail" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *Wes Hal*, meaning "to your health." The beverage is made from ale, wine, and/or cider with fruits and spices added. Traditionally it was used in part as an offering to apple trees in thanks and for their continued fruitfulness. Bits of **toast** were floated in the wassail bowl, then placed in the branches of the tree, and libations poured over the roots. This is the origin of our term "to toast" someone!

Reader 8: As well as fruit trees, evergreens have long been part of Winter Solstice celebrations. The evergreen tree, which keeps its leaves throughout the year, is an obvious symbol of the endurance of life through the cold and dark winter months. Beer, bread, and table scraps were offered to trees in Scandinavia. In South Germany, the custom arose of a branch or small tree brought inside and decorated with offerings to the spirit of the tree. This Yule tree was considered to represent good luck for the family, as well as being honored as a powerful spirit in its own right, capable of bestowing fertility in the coming year.

The great cosmic tree was understood as an evergreen yew in some traditions, and an ash in others. Both trees have bright red berries; possibly one origin of decorating the modern Yule tree with berries. The cosmic tree bears all nine worlds of the Norse cosmos in its branches and among its roots, so perhaps tree ornaments in part represent the nine worlds. Trees are sacred to Germanic and Celtic peoples, and there are many ancient traditions of offerings tied onto tree branches as gifts to them, and this practice is the most probable origin for the custom of decorating Yule trees with gifts.

Reader 9: Another Yule tradition that survives from pagan times is the burning of a Yule Log. This was a specially chosen tree that was to burn for at least twelve hours, but possibly it originally burned for all twelve days of Yule. In some legends the log was offered to Thor. Oak would be the most appropriate choice, but any hardwood considered holy from the locality is suitable. English lore holds that Yule logs should not be bought, but gotten from one's own property, or a neighbor's. The tradition is that the presence of the remnants or ashes of the Yule log in the house would protect it all yearlong from lightning and bring good luck. The new Yule log should be started with some splinters of the previous year's. Holly and other winter greenery is often used to decorate the Yule log. Today, some people substitute a large candle (or series of candles) for it, and burn them all through the thirteen nights of the holy time. This is done to honor and aid Sunna (goddess of the Sun) through the darkest time of the year, to ward off ill spirits of darkness, and to symbolize the lengthening of daylight after Solstice.