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WINTER SOLSTICE TRADITIONS

Here in the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice (December 21) marks the first day of winter and is the shortest day of the year, with the least amount of sunlight between sunrise and sunset. From ancient times, many cultures have observed the solstice with ceremonies, festivals, and other traditional events.

Ancient agricultural communities had an intimate connection to the change of seasons and the cycles of the harvest, and many of these cultures celebrated the turning of the year with offerings and festivities honoring their gods and goddesses. Additionally, many ancient structures were built to align with the solstices and equinoxes—including Stonehenge (England), Newgrange (Ireland), Maeshowe (Orkney Islands north of Scotland), and the Great Zimbabwe (also known as the "African Stonehenge," in Zimbabwe).

Also built as solar observatories were many medieval churches throughout Europe, which feature a meridian line across the church floor—a beam of sunlight coming through a small hole in the roof of the church traces the meridian line, with zodiac and other symbols marking the year's progression.

The winter solstice was of great importance to ancient Native Americans, millennia before European explorers arrived, and winter solstice celebrations lasted for several days. The Iranian festival of Yalda—in which vigils were held through the night to keep the fires burning bright to help the light in its battle against darkness—has its origins in Babylonian New Year's celebrations.

Divination is a common practice at the time of the winter solstice, when the fabric between worlds was thought to be drawn away. In Russia, a Christmas-time divination practice involves a candle between a pair of mirrors. Early Germans built a stone altar to their goddess of domesticity, Bertha, and kept fir boughs burning on the altar so that the goddess might descend through the smoke to inspire the fortune-tellers at her feast.

For modern pagans, the winter solstice holiday of Yule marks the birth of the new sun god, and celebrations often include a ritual vigil from dusk to dawn to ensure the rising of the new sun.

As Christianity spread across the Western world, the observance of Christmas was tied to the traditional Yule and solstice celebrations, and many current Christmas traditions have pre-Christian roots. A sixth-century letter from Pope Gregory I suggested the practice of allowing heathens to retain the outward expressions of their pagan religions as a means of more easily converting them to Christianity.

Decorating our homes with evergreen boughs and trees stems from an old magical practice to ensure the return of vegetation at the end of the winter season. Holly is thought to be imbued with protective powers to guard against malicious forces at this dark time of year.

Mistletoe is also considered a powerful protection against evil and is frequently left hanging year-round, with fresh mistletoe hung each winter. It is also well-known for its powers of fertility—women hoping to conceive are advised to carry a sprig of mistletoe—and as a love charm. Unmarried girls would pinch sprigs of the plant from church decorations to be hidden under their pillows, so that they might dream at night of future husbands. Kissing under the mistletoe is a familiar tradition, though a man seeking to kiss a young lady under such a sprig should pluck a berry from the plant and present it to her for each kiss.

sources:

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