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LITHA

Midsummer is the period of time in the middle of the summer. The exact dates vary among different cultures, but is primarily held close to the [summer solstice](#). The celebration predates Christianity, and has existed under different names and traditions around the world.^{[7][8]}

The undivided [Christian Church](#) designated June 24 as the [feast day](#) of the [early Christian](#) martyr [St John the Baptist](#), and the observance of St John's Day begins the evening before, known as [Saint John's Eve](#). These

are commemorated by many [Christian denominations](#), such as the [Roman Catholic Church](#), [Lutheran Churches](#), and [Anglican Communion](#),^{[2][9]} as well as by [freemasonry](#).^[10] In [Sweden](#), the Midsummer is such an important festivity that there have been proposals to make the Midsummer's Eve the [National Day of Sweden](#), instead of June 6. In [Estonia](#), [Latvia](#) and [Lithuania](#), Midsummer's festival is a [public holiday](#). In Denmark and Norway, it

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may also be referred to as St. Hans Day.

HISTORY

Saint John's Day, the feast day of [Saint John the Baptist](#), was established by the undivided Christian Church in the 4th century AD, in honour of the birth of the Saint John the Baptist, which the [Gospel of Luke](#) records as being six months before [Jesus](#).^{[12][13]} As the [Western Christian Churches](#) mark the birth of Jesus on December 25, [Christmas](#), the Feast of Saint John (Saint John's Day) was established at midsummer, exactly six months before the former feast.^[13]

By the sixth century, this solar cycle was completed by balancing Christ's conception

and birth against the conception and birth of his cousin, John the Baptist. Such a relationship between Christ and his cousin was amply justified by the imagery of scripture. The Baptist was conceived six months before Christ (Luke 1:76); he was not himself the light, but was to give testimony concerning the light (John 1:8–9). Thus John's conception was celebrated on the eighth kalends of October (24 September: near the autumn equinox) and his birth on the eighth kalends of July (24 June: near the Summer solstice). If Christ's conception and birth took place on the 'growing days', it was fitting that John the Baptist's should take place on the 'lessening days' ('diebus

decrescenibus'), for the Baptist himself had proclaimed that 'he must increase; but I must decrease' (John 3:30). By the late sixth century, the Nativity of John the Baptist (24 June) had become an important feast, counterbalancing at midsummer the midwinter feast of Christmas.

— Professor Éamonn Ó

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Within [Christian theology](#), this carries significance as John the Baptist "was understood to be preparing the way for Jesus", with [John 3:30](#) stating "He must increase, but I must decrease"; this is [symbolized](#) in the fact that the "sun begins to diminish at the

summer solstice and eventually increases at the winter solstice.^{[14][15]} By the 6th century AD, several churches were dedicated in the honour of Saint John the Baptist and a [vigil, Saint John's Eve](#), was added to the feast day of Saint John the Baptist and Christian priests held three [Masses](#) in churches for the celebration.^[16]

In [Florence](#), medieval midsummer celebrations were "an occasion for dramatic representations of the Baptist's life and death" and "the feast day was marked by processions, banquets, and plays, culminating in a fireworks show that the entire city attended."^[3] The historian [Ronald Hutton](#) states that the "lighting of festive fires upon Saint John's Eve is first recorded as a popular custom by [Jean Belethus](#), a theologian at the University of Paris, in the early twelfth century".^[17] In England, the earliest reference to this custom occurs on in the 13th century AD,^[17] in the *Liber Memorandum* of the [parish church](#) at Barnwell in the [Nene Valley](#), which stated that parish youth would gather on the day to sing songs and play games.^[17] A Christian monk of [Lilleshall Abbey](#), in the same century, wrote:^[17]

In the worship of St John, men waken at even, and maken three manner of fires: one is clean bones and no wood, and is called a bonfire; another is of clean wood and no bones, and is called a wakefire, for men sitteth and wake by it; the third is made of bones and wood, and is called St John's Fire.^[17]

The 13th-century monk of [Winchcomb](#), Gloucestershire, who compiled a book of sermons for Christian feast days, recorded how [St. John's Eve](#) was celebrated in his time:

Let us speak of the revels which are accustomed to be made on St. John's Eve, of which there are three kinds. On St. John's Eve in certain regions the boys collect bones and certain other rubbish, and burn them, and therefrom a smoke is produced on the air. They also make brands and go about the fields with the brands. Thirdly, the wheel which they roll.^[18]

Saint John's Fires, explained the monk of Winchcombe, were to drive away [dragons](#), which were abroad on St. John's Eve, poisoning springs and wells. The wheel that was rolled downhill he gave its explanation: "The wheel is rolled to signify that the sun then rises to the highest point of its circle and at once turns back; thence it comes that the wheel is rolled."^[19]

On St John's Day 1333 [Petrarch](#) watched women at [Cologne](#) rinsing their hands and arms in the [Rhine](#) "so that the threatening calamities of the coming year might be washed away by bathing in the river."^[20] 15th-century diarist [Goro Dati](#), described the celebration of Saint John's Day at Midsummer in Italy as being one in which guilds prepared their workshops with fine displays, and one in which solemn church processions took place, with men dressed in the costumes of Christian saints and angels.^[21]

In the 16th century AD, the historian [John Stow](#), described the celebration of Midsummer:^[17]

the wealthier sort also before their doors near to the said bonfires would set out tables on the vigils furnished with sweet bread and good drink, and on the festival days with meats and drinks plentifully, whereunto they would invite their neighbours and passengers also to sit, and to be merry with them in great

familiarity, praising God for his benefits bestowed on them. These were called bonfires as well of good amity amongst neighbours that, being before at controversy, were there by the labour of others reconciled, and made of bitter enemies, loving friends, as also for the birtue that a great fire hat to purge the infection of the air. On the vigil of St John Baptist and St Peter and Paul the Apostles, every man's door being shadowed with green birch, long fennel, St John's Wort, Orpin, white lillies and such like, garnished upon with garlands of beautiful flowers, had also lamps of glass, with oil burinin in them all night, some hung branches of iron curiously wrought, containing hundreds of lamps lit at once, which made goodly show.^[17]

These fires are commonly called Saint John's Fires in various languages. Historian [Ronald Hutton](#) states that the "lighting of festive fires upon St. John's Eve is first recorded as a popular custom by [Jean Belethus](#), a theologian at the University of Paris, in the early twelfth century".^[17] In England, the earliest reference to this custom occurs on in the 13th century A.D.,^[17] in the *Liber Memorandum* of the [parish church](#) at Barnwell in the [Nene Valley](#), which stated that parish youth would gather on the day to sing songs and play games.^[17] and served to repel [witches](#) and [evil spirits](#).^[22] Saint John's Day is also a popular day for [infant baptisms](#) and in the 19th century, "baptisms of children who had died 'pagans' were acted out".^[5] In Sweden, young people visited [holy springs](#) as "a reminder of how John the Baptist baptised Christ in the River Jordan."^[6] In addition, historically, "it was a custom to carry lighted torches on Midsummer-eve, as

an emblem of St. John the Baptist, who was 'a burning and shining light,' and the preparer of the way of Christ."^[23]

Midsummer/Saint John's Day–related traditions, church services, and celebrations are particularly important in northern Europe – Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – but is also very strongly observed in Poland, Russia, Belarus, Germany,

Netherlands, Flanders, Ireland, parts of the United Kingdom ([Cornwall](#) especially), France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Ukraine, other parts of Europe, and elsewhere – such as Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, and also in the [Southern Hemisphere](#) (mostly in Brazil, Argentina and Australia).^[1] In [Estonia](#), [Latvia](#), [Lithuania](#) and [Quebec](#) (Canada), the traditional Midsummer day,

June 24, is a [public holiday](#). So it was formerly also in [Sweden](#) and [Finland](#), but in these countries it was, in the 1950s, moved to the Friday and Saturday between June 19 and June 26, respectively.^[24]

It is possible that the Christian Church may have adapted a pre-Christian festival celebrating the solstice into a Christian holiday