

# FESTIVAL INFO

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## SAMHAIN

**Samhain** ([/ˈsɑːwɪn, ˈsɑʊɪn/](#), Irish: [\[ˈsʲəu̯ɪnʲ\]](#), Scottish Gaelic: [\[ˈs̪ˠa̪ːu̯.ɪnʲ\]](#); **Manx**: *Sauin* [\[ˈsoːɪnʲ\]](#)) is a [Gaelic](#) festival marking the end of the [harvest](#) season and beginning of winter or "[darker-half](#)" of the year. In the northern hemisphere, it is held on 1 November, but with celebrations beginning on the evening of 31 October,<sup>[1]</sup> as the [Celtic day](#) began and ended at sunset.<sup>[2]</sup> This is about halfway between the [autumn equinox](#) and [winter solstice](#). It is one of the four [quarter days](#) associated with Gaelic seasonal festivals, along with [Imbolc](#), [Beltane](#) and [Lugh nasa](#). Historically, it was widely observed throughout [Ireland](#), [Scotland](#), and the [Isle of Man](#) (where it is called 'Sauin'). A similar festival was held by the [Brittonic Celtic](#) people, called [Calan Gaeaf](#) in [Wales](#), [Kalan Gwav](#) in [Cornwall](#), and [Kalan Goaŋv](#) in [Brittany](#).

Samhain is believed to have [Celtic pagan](#) origins, and some [Neolithic passage tombs](#) in Ireland are aligned with the sunrise at the time of Samhain. It is first mentioned in the [earliest Irish literature](#), from the 9th century, and is associated with many important events in [Irish mythology](#). The early literature says Samhain was marked by great gatherings and feasts,

and was when the ancient burial mounds were open, which were seen as portals to the [Otherworld](#). Some of the literature also associates Samhain with bonfires and sacrifices.

The festival did not begin to be recorded in detail until the early modern era. It was when cattle were brought down from the [summer pastures](#) and when livestock were slaughtered. As at Beltaine, special [bonfires](#) were lit. These were deemed to have protective and cleansing powers, and there were rituals

involving them.<sup>[3]</sup> Like Beltaine, Samhain was a [liminal](#) or threshold festival, when the boundary between this world and the Otherworld thinned, meaning the [Aos Sí](#) (the 'spirits' or '[fairies](#)') could more easily come into our world. Most scholars see the Aos Sí as remnants of pagan gods. At Samhain, they were [appeased](#) with offerings of food and drink, to ensure the people and their livestock survived the winter. The souls of dead kin were also thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality, and a place was set at the table for them during a Samhain meal. [Mumming](#) and [guising](#) were part of the festival from at least the early modern era, whereby people went door-to-door in costume reciting verses in exchange for food. The costumes may have been a way of imitating, and disguising oneself from,

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the Aos Sí. [Divination](#) was also a big part of the festival and often involved nuts and apples. In the late 19th century, [John Rhys](#) and [James Frazer](#) suggested it was the "Celtic New Year", but this is disputed.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the 9th century, the [Church](#) had shifted the date of [All Saints' Day](#) to 1 November, while 2 November later became [All Souls' Day](#). Over time, it is believed that Samhain and All Saints'/All Souls' influenced each other, and eventually [syncretised](#) into the modern [Halloween](#).<sup>[5]</sup> Folklorists have used the name 'Samhain' to refer to Gaelic 'Halloween' customs up until the 19th century.<sup>[6]</sup>

Since the later 20th century, [Celtic neopagans](#) and [Wiccans](#) have observed Samhain, or

something based on it, as a religious holiday.

## ORIGINS

*Samain* or *Samuin* was the name of the festival (*feis*) marking the beginning of winter in [Gaelic Ireland](#). It is attested in the earliest [Old Irish literature](#), which dates from the 10th century onward. It was one of four Gaelic seasonal festivals: Samhain (~1 November), [Imbolc](#) (~1 February), [Bealtaine](#) (~1 May) and [Lughnasa](#) (~1 August). Samhain and Bealtaine, at opposite sides of the year, are thought to have been the most

important. [Sir James George Frazer](#) wrote in his 1890 book, [The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion](#), that 1 May and 1 November are of little importance to European crop-growers, but of great importance to herdsman practising seasonal [transhumance](#). It is at the beginning of summer that cattle are driven to the upland summer pastures and the beginning of winter that they are led back. Thus, Frazer suggests that halving the year at 1 May and 1 November dates from when the Celts were a

mainly [pastoral](#) people, dependent on their herds.<sup>[20]</sup>

Some [Neolithic](#) passage tombs in Ireland are aligned with the sunrise around the times of Samhain and Imbolc. These include the [Mound of the Hostages](#) (*Dumha na nGiall*) at the [Hill of Tara](#),<sup>[21]</sup> and [Cairn L](#) at [Slieve na Calliagh](#)

## IRISH MYTHOLOGY

Irish mythology was originally a spoken tradition, but much of it was eventually written down in the Middle Ages by Christian [monks](#).<sup>[23][24]</sup>

Irish mythology says that Samhain was one of the four seasonal festivals of the year, and the 10th-century tale [Tochmarc Emire](#) ('The Wooing of Emer') lists Samhain as the first of these four "[quarter days](#)".<sup>[25]</sup> The literature says a peace would be declared and there were great gatherings where they held meetings, feasted, drank alcohol,<sup>[26]</sup> and held contests.<sup>[25]</sup> These gatherings are a popular setting for early Irish tales.<sup>[25]</sup> The tale [Echtra Cormaic](#) ('Cormac's Adventure') says that the Feast of [Tara](#) was held every seventh Samhain, hosted by the [High King of Ireland](#), during which new laws and duties were ordained; anyone who broke the laws established during this time would be banished.<sup>[27][28]</sup>

According to Irish mythology, Samhain (like [Bealtaine](#)) was a time when the 'doorways' to the [Otherworld](#) opened, allowing supernatural beings and the souls of the dead to come into our world; while Bealtaine was a summer festival for the living, Samhain "was essentially a festival for the dead".<sup>[29]</sup> [The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn](#) says that the [sídhe](#) (fairy mounds or portals to the Otherworld) "were always open at Samhain".<sup>[30]</sup> Each year the fire-breather [Aillen](#) emerges from the Otherworld and burns down the palace of Tara during the Samhain festival after lulling everyone to sleep with his music. One Samhain, the young [Fionn mac Cumhaill](#) is able to stay awake and slays Aillen with a magical spear, for which he is made leader of the [fianna](#). In a similar tale, one Samhain the Otherworld being Cúldubh comes out of the burial mound on [Slievenamon](#) and snatches a roast pig. Fionn kills Cúldubh with a spear throw as he re-enters the mound. Fionn's thumb is caught between the door and the post as it shuts, and he puts it in his mouth to ease the pain. As his thumb had been inside the Otherworld, Fionn is bestowed with great wisdom. This may refer to gaining knowledge from the ancestors.<sup>[31]</sup> [Acallam na Senórach](#) ('Colloquy of the Elders') tells how three female [werewolves](#) emerge from the cave of [Cruachan](#) (an Otherworld portal) each Samhain and kill livestock. When [Cas Corach](#) plays his harp, they take on human form, and the [fianna](#) warrior [Cailte](#) then slays them with a spear.<sup>[32]</sup>

Some tales suggest that offerings or sacrifices were made at Samhain. In the [Lebor Gabála Éirenn](#) (or 'Book of Invasions'), each Samhain the people of [Nemed](#) had to give two-thirds of their children, their corn and their milk to the monstrous [Fomorians](#). The Fomorians seem to represent the harmful or destructive powers of nature; personifications of chaos, darkness, death, blight and drought.<sup>[33][34]</sup> This [tribute](#) paid by Nemed's

people may represent a "sacrifice offered at the beginning of winter, when the powers of darkness and blight are in the ascendant".<sup>[35]</sup> According to the later [Dindsenchas](#) and the [Annals of the Four Masters](#)—which were written by Christian monks—Samhain in ancient Ireland was associated with a god or idol called [Crom Cruach](#). The texts claim that a first-born child would be sacrificed at the stone idol of Crom Cruach in [Magh Slécht](#). They say that King [Tigernmas](#), and three-fourths of his people, died while worshipping Crom Cruach there one Samhain.<sup>[36]</sup>

The legendary kings [Diarmait mac Cerbaill](#) and [Muirchertach mac Ercae](#) each die a [threefold death](#) on Samhain, which involves wounding, burning and drowning, and of which they are forewarned. In the tale [Togail Bruidne Dá Derga](#) ('The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel'), king [Conaire Mór](#) also meets his death on Samhain after breaking his [geasa](#) (prohibitions or taboos). He is warned of his impending doom by three undead horsemen who are messengers of [Donn](#), god of the dead.<sup>[37]</sup> *The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn* tells how each Samhain the men of Ireland went to woo a beautiful maiden who lives in the fairy mound on [Brí Eile](#) (Croghan Hill). It says that each year someone would be killed "to mark the occasion", by persons unknown.<sup>[38]</sup> Some academics suggest that these tales recall human sacrifice,<sup>[39]</sup> and argue that several ancient Irish [bog bodies](#) (such as [Old Croghan Man](#)) appear to have been kings who were ritually killed,<sup>[40]</sup> some of them around the time of Samhain.<sup>[41]</sup>

In the [Echtra Neraí](#) ('The Adventure of Nera'), King [Ailill](#) of [Connacht](#) sets his [retinue](#) a test of bravery on Samhain night. He offers a prize to whoever can make it to a [gallows](#) and tie a band around a hanged man's ankle. Each challenger is thwarted by demons and runs back to the king's hall in fear. However, Nera succeeds, and the dead man then asks for a drink. Nera carries him on his back and they stop at three houses. They enter the third, where the dead man drinks and spits it on the householders, killing them. Returning, Nera sees a [fairy host](#) burning the king's hall and slaughtering those inside. He follows the host through a portal into the Otherworld. Nera learns that what he saw was only a vision of what will happen the next Samhain unless something is done. He is able to return to the hall and warns the king.<sup>[42][43]</sup>

The tale *Aided Chrimthainn maic Fidaig* ('The Killing of Crimthann mac Fidaig') tells how [Mongfind](#) kills her brother, king [Crimthann](#) of Munster, so that one of her sons might become king. Mongfind offers Crimthann a poisoned drink at a feast, but he asks her to drink from it first. Having no other choice but to drink the poison, she dies on Samhain eve. The [Middle Irish](#) writer notes that Samhain is also called *Féile Moingfhinne* (the Festival of Mongfind or Mongfhionn), and that "women and the rabble make petitions to her" at Samhain.<sup>[44][45]</sup>

Many other events in Irish mythology happen or begin on Samhain. The invasion of [Ulster](#) that makes up the main action of the [Táin Bó Cúailnge](#) ('Cattle Raid of Cooley') begins on Samhain. As cattle-raiding typically was a summer activity, the invasion during this off-season surprised the Ulstermen.<sup>[46]</sup> The [Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh](#) also begins on Samhain.<sup>[47]</sup> [The Morrígan](#) and [The Dagda](#) meet and have sex before the battle against the Fomorians; in this way the Morrígan acts as a [sovereignty](#) figure and gives the victory to the Dagda's people, the [Tuatha Dé Danann](#). In *Aislinge Óengusa* ('The Dream of Óengus') it is when he and his bride-to-be switch from bird to human form, and in *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín') it is the day on which Óengus claims the kingship of [Brú na Bóinne](#).<sup>[39]</sup>

Several sites in Ireland are especially linked to Samhain. Each Samhain a host of otherworldly beings was said to emerge from [Oweynagat](#) ("cave of the cats"), at [Rathcroghan](#) in [County Roscommon](#).<sup>[48]</sup> The [Hill of Ward](#) (or Tlachtga) in [County Meath](#) is thought to have been the site of a great Samhain gathering and bonfire;<sup>[26]</sup> the [Iron Age ringfort](#) is said to have been where the goddess or druid [Tlachtga](#) gave birth to triplets and where she later died.<sup>[49]</sup>

In *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996), [Ronald Hutton](#) writes: "No doubt there were [pagan] religious observances as well, but none of the tales ever portrays any". The only historic reference to pagan religious rites is in the work of [Geoffrey Keating](#) (died 1644), but his source is unknown. Hutton says it may be that no religious rites are mentioned because, centuries after Christianization, the writers had no record of them.<sup>[25]</sup> Hutton suggests Samhain may not have been *particularly* associated with the supernatural. He says that the gatherings of royalty and warriors on Samhain may simply have been an ideal setting for such tales, in the same way that many [Arthurian](#) tales are set at courtly gatherings at Christmas or Pentecost

