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Sacrificial Magic and the Twofold Division of the Irish Ritual Year

Abstract: The pre-Christian Irish ritual year was, in ancient times, divided into two major seasons, and the juncture points of these divisions, called Samhain and Bealtaine, were considered to be especially potent times for enacting protective magic. The historical development of St. Martin's Day in Ireland, and its relationship with the more ancient festival of Samhain is examined, revealing circumstances that saw much of the ritual nature of Samhain being adopted within a Christian context in the medieval period. Consideration is also given to the festival of Bealtaine, at the other end of the year, revealing commonalities in terms of ritual, magic and prophylaxis.

Key words: St. Martin's Day, Samhain, Bealtaine, ritual, calendar custom, sacrifice

The Christian festival of All Hallows falls on November 1, and perhaps more significantly, All Hallows' Eve, or Hallowe'en, occurs on the night of October 31. This was traditionally a night of celebration, merriment and mischief in Ireland in recent centuries, and continues to be observed throughout the country as a vibrant expression of Irish calendar custom. Hallowe'en is known in the Irish language as *Oíche Shamhna*, or November Night, falling as it does on the commencement of November, and the beginning of winter. In this regard, it is related to the more ancient Irish festival of Samhain, a feast-day that was observed in Ireland before the advent of Christianity. This was a time for assembly, and great fairs were held at this time, down to the early Medieval period (Hutton 1991: 177). It was also a time when cattle were brought in from summer pasture, and rent or tribute was paid to lords in the form of slaughtered animals (Kelly 1997: 46, 59–60, 320, 357, 461). Martinmas, or St. Martin's Day, falling on November 11, was also a widely-observed feast in Ireland, which involved the slaughtering of animals, and the consumption of their meat, but its roots in Ireland are unlikely to be as early as those of Samhain. The killing

of animals at Martinmas was most often conducted in a ritualistic manner, with offerings of the blood made in honour of St. Martin of Tours, who was often viewed in Irish tradition as a protector of animals and people (Ó Súilleabháin 1957: 252). The relationship between the two feasts will be examined, to see if there is a plausible link between the two feasts, and if the Feast of St. Martin has inherited its ritual importance from the pre-Christian feast of Samhain. Great caution must be exercised when pursuing such an argument, however, as the broad theories of 'pagan survivals' so espoused by Frazerian anthropology have been critically deconstructed as a valid model for analyzing folk tradition, and interpreting modern customs as vestiges of ancient religion can prove to be an academically precarious exercise (Watkins 2004: 144).

Samhain Origins

Early Irish tradition saw a division of the year into two seasons, as witnessed, for example, in the early medieval tale "The Wooing of Emer". The dating of this text has been ascribed to the tenth century, but appears to be a slightly modified form of an eighth century original (Toner 1998: 87). The relevant section reads as follows:

For two divisions were formerly on the year, viz., summer from Beltaine (the first of May), and winter from Samuin to Beltaine. (Meyer 1901: 245)

It has been proposed that, in the Indo-European reckoning of time, there were originally two major seasons, summer and winter, and that this twofold division continued into the early medieval period. This was an ancient system, and survived down to the historical period in a number of European countries (Anderson 2003: 219). In the scheme of a twofold year, *Samhain* appears to be a point in the Irish calendar where the grazing term ends, cattle were brought to the infields for the winter, and some of these animals were selected for slaughter. Indeed, the case has been made that meat was once a central component of the feasting at Samhain. Joseph Nagy has identified a series of references to feasting on meat at this time. Incidents from the medieval tale "*Macgnimartha Finn*" describe Fenian warriors consuming pork at *Samhain* (Nagy 2003: 314). Also discussed are events in the eleventh-century mythological tale "*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*", where characters feast upon a living

pig (Stokes 1901: 9–61; 165–215; 282–329; 390–437, 391). Another famous Irish tale, “*Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*”, presents the imagery of feasting on a swine, and again the incidents of the story are said in a poem from the eleventh or twelfth century to have taken place at Samhain (Gwynn 1924: 193). A further piece of evidence from Early Irish literature seems to agree with Nagy’s hypothesis. It consists of one of four quatrains that were written about the ancient festivals, of Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasadh (Meyer 1894: 48). It clearly outlines the fact that meat was consumed at Samhain, and the inclusion of the word *cadlla* in the first line, which is translated as the small intestine, indicates that it is most likely the offal from freshly-slaughtered animals that was consumed. If meat was once a central component of Samhain celebrations, this was not the case in the post-medieval period, where it was seen as a night where one abstained from the eating of meat. As Christianity came to dominate Ireland from the fifth century onwards, the importance of the ancient pagan festivals was lessened, and Christian feast-days came to dominate the calendar. The celebration of All Saints’s Day (November 1) and All Souls’ Day (November 2) can clearly be seen as Christian festivals that greatly influenced the development of Samhain (Hutton 1996: 360). Like many feast-days in the Christian tradition, meat was forbidden from being consumed on All Saints’ Day, which may go towards explaining why the consumption of meat no longer took place at this time (Collinge 2012: 165).

The feast of St. Martin of Tours, in contrast, was a day where meat was traditionally consumed as a central element of the feast in post-medieval Ireland. Ritual slaughter and the eating of meat were of utmost importance. It seems to be the case that meat consumption was transferred from Samhain to the feast of St. Martin, probably during the medieval period. When one considers the fact of a declining economic and political importance of Samhain through the middle ages, it seems that Martinmas took its place in this regard. Great public assemblies once took place at Samhain (Hutton 1996: 361), but Martinmas fairs begin to appear in Ireland the thirteenth century, particularly in areas under control of the new Anglo-Norman regime, who had invaded Ireland in the twelfth century, and began to exert their influence throughout much of the country. For example, in the year 1245, Geoffrey de Turville, bishop of Ossory and former Lord Chancellor of Ireland, obtained

a royal grant for an annual fair in Clonmore, Co. Carlow. The fair was held ‘on the day of St. Martin and 7 following days’ (Carrigan 1905: 148), referring to the Octave of St. Martin. Another such fair, held at Limerick throughout the Octave of St. Martin, was granted permission in 1204 (Lennon 1998: 61). Quarterly assizes began to be held in areas under English rule in Ireland from the thirteenth century, and one of the four quarter-days on which court was in session was the Feast of St. Martin (Mac Ivor 1960–1: 77). The importance of November 11 as an administrative and economic occasion appears to have increased greatly under English rule, and in all likelihood began to eclipse the importance of the older feast of Samhain in areas outside Gaelic rule. The process of the shift in emphasis away from the older Samhain to Martinmas as the end of the summer period is one that seems to have continued throughout the medieval period, and examples of rent being paid (*Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* MS 476: 23 O 48) or tribute being offered (Begley 1906: 366) on St. Martin’s Day in the form of slaughtered animals appear from the fourteenth century onwards. Thus, by the high medieval period in Ireland, Martinmas had become firmly associated with animal slaughter, and likely much of the attendant ritual of Samhain seems to have also transferred to the new date.

Bealtaine

As mentioned above, Gaelic Ireland once reckoned time from Bealtaine to Samhain. Thus, an examination of folk customs at Bealtaine may reveal certain themes and concepts that found similar expression on St. Martin’s Day. If this is so, it will lend further evidence to the idea that St. Martin’s Day partly inherited the role of Samhain as the end of summer, and the close of that half of the agricultural year. Patricia Lysaght has undertaken an insightful study into the rituals and beliefs surrounding the festival of Bealtaine. She describes the many actions people undertook to “promote personal and agricultural luck and prosperity” (Lysaght 1993: 28). There was a perception of danger at this time of the year, which was situated on a temporal threshold between winter and summer. Indeed, at such liminal times, the effects of the supernatural could be most powerful. Thus, to confront and counteract any malevolent forces that might be at play at this time, people conducted particular ritu-

als to reaffirm and redefine boundaries. These could include the use of water, iron, or salt, and these substances were used to mark boundaries, such as the threshold of the house, or the borders of the farmland. These rites of protection were often employed at sunset, on the eve of May 1, which accords well with the idea that liminal time is the most effective for conducting magical acts. Lysaght cites a description given by Kevin Danaher of a protective ritual undertaken in Co. Laois, whereby the hearth, threshold and four corners of the house are blessed with a candle, to ensure protection and prosperity for the coming year (Danaher 1972: 144). Lysaght also mentions the notion that cattle were an important element in the Bealtaine rituals, and the protection of cattle and milk products was a central theme. This is related to the idea of the cattle grazing term usually being calculated from Bealtaine to Samhain, May 1 to November 1.

There are a great many parallels to be seen with St. Martin's Day in these practices. When people killed animals or fowl for St. Martin, they spilled the blood at the threshold of the door, on the doorstep, and often allowed the blood to fall in the four corners of the house. It was also done at the door of the byre or stable. This was undertaken for protective purposes, as the blood was believed to guard against disease, death and evil spirits (Mag Fhloinn 2013: 217). People marked out the boundaries of their domestic space, and indeed the living spaces of their animals. The ritual was most commonly undertaken at sunset on the eve of the feast, when it was thought most effective. A picture emerges with Bealtaine and Martinmas of two temporally-liminal festivals, that employ rituals of protection and reaffirmation of boundaries in order to protect the herds and farm from potential harm and supernatural forces. If the complex of beliefs and activities surrounding Bealtaine can be seen as originating in the human desire for ritual protection against potentially harmful supernatural agencies at the beginning of the grazing period, then the rituals of St. Martin's Day can be seen as an expression of similar desires at the end of the same period. Samhain surely occupied this position in the pre-Christian and early medieval period, but its economic and agricultural significance became transferred to Martinmas during the middle ages. St. Martin's Day, poised on the threshold of winter, is the perfect dichotomous analogue of Bealtaine, and has undoubtedly inherited

the role from Samhain in this regard. It must be mentioned that the twofold division of the year is not just an Irish phenomenon, and in many cases throughout Continental Europe it ran from St. George's Day to Martinmas. Similarities between Ss. George and Martin, in terms of legend, imagery, role and function are apparent, and testify to the similarities between the two festivals that are situated on the axis points for the turning of the pastoral year (Mag Fhloinn 2005: 106–23). Thus, the role of St. Martin's Day as a point of potential danger and ritual protection, can be seen in a wider frame of reference, and contextualises the practices of slaughter and the attendant beliefs in the agriculturally-based belief systems of the people of Europe.

Bloodletting at Bealtaine

There is a body of evidence regarding custom of people letting blood from cattle on May 1, and there is good reason to suggest that this may have had ritual significance. If the balance of evidence points to Bealtaine and St. Martin's Day being ritually connected since they acted as bookends to the cattle-grazing season, then evidence of blood rites at Bealtaine would further confirm an association between the two feasts. Farmers in Ireland used to draw the blood of living cattle at certain times of the year, a custom undoubtedly related to the belief that bloodletting was somehow good for the health of a person or animal (Seigworth 1980: 2022). There are some cases, however, which strongly suggest that it had a deeper importance. There are a significant number of accounts where the eve of May 1, or May Day itself, was the date upon which blood was spilled. In a description given by antiquarian William Wilde in 1853, he talks about elaborate precautions taken by people to protect cattle around the first of May, and writes as follows:

We have known each head of cattle to be slightly singed with lighted straw upon May Eve, or to have a lighted coal passed round their bodies, as is customary after calving; and it was not unusual, some fifteen or twenty years ago, to bleed a whole herd of cattle upon a May morning, and then to dry and burn the blood.

We have more than once, when a boy, seen the entire of the great Fort of Rathcroghan, then the centre of one of the most

extensive and fertile grazing districts of Connaught, literally reddened with the blood thus drawn upon a May morning. Bleeding the cattle at this period of the year was evidently done with a sanitary intention, as some of the older medical works recommended in the human subject; but choosing that particular day, and subsequently burning the blood, were evidently the vestiges of some Heathen rite. (Wilde 1853: 56)

A similar account appears in W.G. Wood-Martin's "Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland" (Wood-Martin 1902: 6). Both of the antiquarian authors mention old forts, which have a strong association with fairies and the supernatural in Irish tradition, and both make much of this fact, seeking to associate the custom with ancient pagan rites or beliefs. There does appear to be some genuine folk tradition that seems to testify to the practice occurring in association with *Bealtaine*, or the first of May, and indeed the bleeding of cattle appears to have taken place, on at least some occasions, within the remains of ancient enclosures (National Folklore Collection of Ireland, Main Manuscripts Collection, MS 476: 327).

A.T. Lucas, in his work on agricultural bloodletting, documents several accounts that testify to the association of bleeding cattle with the month of May, and with May Day itself (Lucas 1989: 212). Another example, from Tullaghobegly in Co. Donegal, describes protective blood letting rituals that were performed upon cattle before being brought to summer pastures at the start of May (Ó hEochaidh 1943: 141). An anecdote recorded in Ballingeary in Co. Cork, makes mention of the custom as being performed around the start of May (Ó Suibhne 1931: 164), amongst many more examples that can be found in Irish tradition. This practice bears more than a passing similarity to the rites that took place on St. Martin's Eve, with both featuring themes of health and protection. The fact that the *Bealtaine* customs were sometimes mentioned as taking place within old forts and enclosures seems to suggest that it may have more ancient, and possibly, ritual, undertones. Forts were considered liminal places, with definite supernatural associations. It must also be borne in mind, however, that the use of ancient enclosures for these purposes may have been purely practical, since they would be useful places to corral cattle, and the supernatural associations may be secondary, or simply a figment of antiquarian speculation. Whatever the case regarding ancient enclosures, the

notion of the twofold year, and the concern for health and protection is a key concern at juncture points, and blood is a powerful symbol present in both situations. People drew some of the animals' blood at the beginning of the grazing season, and spilled the remainder at the closure of the pastoral year. Thus, it seems that a convincing case can be made that the Irish ritual year was once reckoned from *Bealtaine* to *Samhain*, and from May Eve until St. Martin's Day at a later point in history. The ritual importance of St. Martin's Day is a continuence of the earlier *Samhain*, with its attendant blood rites and concern for protection and the establishment of boundaries, and it bore many similarities to *Bealtaine* in this regard.

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Symbolism of Fire, Food, Ritual Objects, and Magical Spaces

THE RITUAL YEAR 10

MAGIC IN RITUALS AND RITUALS IN MAGIC

Edited by
Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská

INNSBRUCK – TARTU 2015

THE RITUAL YEAR 10

Magic in Rituals and Rituals in Magic

The Yearbook of the SIEF (Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore) Working Group on the Ritual Year

General Editor: Emily Lyle

Editors for this Issue: Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, Kamila Velkoborská

Language Editors: Jenny Butler, Molly Carter, Cozette Griffin-Kremer, John Helsloot, Billy Mag Fhloinn, Emily Lyle, Thomas McKean, Neill Martin, Elisabeth Warner

Layout: Liisa Vesik

Front Cover Photo: Yuri Lisovskiy "Four Houses – Four Seasons"

Front Cover Design: Andres Kuperjanov

Advisory Board: Maria Teresa Agozzino, Marion Bowman, Jenny Butler, Molly Carter, Kinga Gáspár, Evy Håland, Aado Lintrop, Neill Martin, Lina Midholm, Tatiana Minniyakhmetova, David Stanley, Elizabeth Warner

ISSN 2228-1347

ISBN (paper) 978-9949-544-54-7

The Yearbook was established in 2011 by merging former periodicals dedicated to the study of the Ritual Year: 9 volumes in 2005–2014.

Innsbruck, Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.

Publication is supported by the authors and the project IRG 225, Estonian Folklore Institute.

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