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## **THE MAIN CELTIC HOLIDAYS AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MODERN IRELAND**

Ireland is a country with a long history, a multifaceted culture and unique traditions. Traditional Irish holidays have deep historical roots, reflecting the syncretism of the ancient Irish faith and Christianity. The most famous Celtic holidays are Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain [1]. All of them are closely connected with natural periods of transition.

Imbolc is an ancient Irish holiday traditionally celebrated on 1-2 February. The Imbolc celebration symbolises the middle of winter and dates back to pre-Celtic times. In modern studies, it is considered a transitional holiday, marking the transition from winter to spring and associated with the awakening of nature. The name of the holiday has Irish roots: it is derived from the word ‘imb-fholc’, which means ‘purification with milk’. During the festivities, special emphasis was placed on rituals of purification and renewal, in particular through the use of water and fire [2].

Imbolc is closely associated with the Celtic goddess Brigid, who is the patroness of fire, poetry, blacksmithing, healing springs and fertility. With the Christianisation of Ireland, the holiday was adapted to the Christian calendar as St Brigid's Day, also known as Brigid of Ireland. The traditions of celebrating Imbolc have been preserved in the folk rites of many countries, including Ireland, Scotland and some other countries with Celtic heritage. Modern neo-pagans and followers of Wicca also celebrate Imbolc as one of the eight sabbats of the Wheel of the Year (fig. 1), restoring the ancient traditions and customs associated with this period of transition from winter to spring.

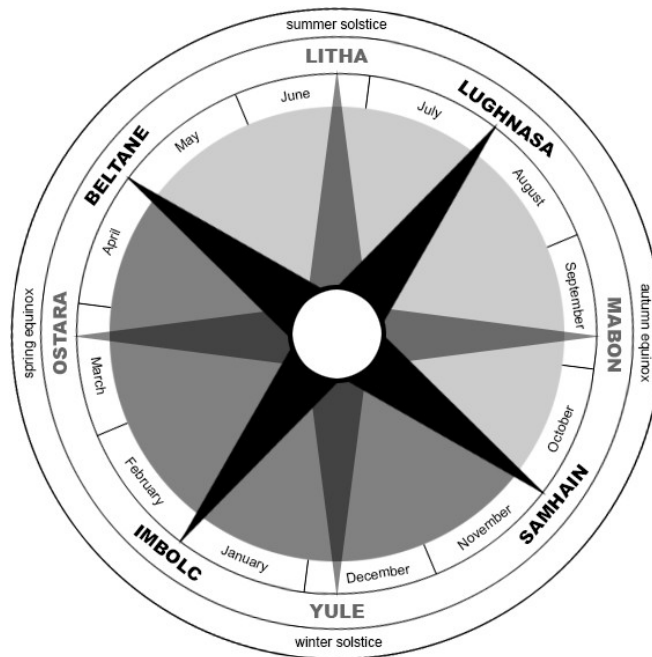


Fig. 1. Wheel of the Year in Northern Hemisphere [3].

Beltane, also known as Beltaine or Gaelic May Day, is an ancient Celtic holiday traditionally celebrated on the night of 1 May. Etymologically, the name has its roots in the Old Irish language, where ‘bel’ means ‘clear’ or ‘light’ and ‘teine’ means ‘fire’, so Beltane is often interpreted as ‘light of fire’. It is a celebration of life, fertility and transition, symbolising the beginning of summer and marking the end of winter [4].

Beltane practices and rituals traditionally include various aspects related to fire, which symbolises transition and purification. Bonfires are central to the celebrations and are believed to promote fertility of land and livestock. People jump over the fire, believing in its protective and healing powers. Like many other ancient holidays, Beltane underwent changes during the Christianisation of Europe, but at the same time remains important to many followers of modern pagan and neo-pagan traditions, including Wicca and Druidism.

Lughnasadh, also known as Lammas, is an ancient Celtic holiday traditionally celebrated on 1 August. This holiday symbolises the beginning of the harvest, in particular grain crops. Its name is derived from the Old Irish ‘Lughnasadh’, which is a combination of the name of the god Lugh, saint patron of kings, skill and heroic competition, and the word ‘nasad’, meaning assembly

[5].

Historically, Lughnasadh was a time of great fairs, competitions and wedding ceremonies, reflecting its social significance in ancient Celtic society. Fairs were not only trading platforms, but also means of social exchange, allowing people to establish and renew community connections. The religious aspect of the festival included the performance of sacrifices (including the first fruits of the harvest) to ensure the deity's protection and blessings for the rest of the harvest season. Over time, Christianity adapted some aspects of Lughnasadh, incorporating it into the calendar as a feast of bread - Lammas. Thus, Lughnasadh continues to be a celebration that encompasses both ancient pagan and Christian traditions, celebrating the fruitfulness of the land and harmony with nature.

Samhain is a traditional Celtic holiday celebrated on the night of 31 October to 1 November and is considered to be the new year according to the ancient Celtic calendar. This holiday is celebrated primarily in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man, as well as among the Irish and Scottish diaspora. Samhain symbolises the end of summer and the beginning of winter, the period when the boundaries between the world of the living and the dead are 'crossed' and blurred. It is believed that this is the night when the afterlife comes closer to the real world, and the souls of the dead can visit the earth [6].

Scholars note that Samhain had both ritual and practical significance. The celebration included a variety of rituals, including animal sacrifice, divination, and the lighting of bonfires as a means of purification and protection from evil spirits. In addition to its religious aspects, Samhain played an important role in the social life of communities: it was believed that during this period all hostilities ended, tribes and clans gathered to discuss issues of living together, establishing rules, alliances, and dividing land and crops. In the modern world, elements of the Samhain holiday formed the basis of the popular Halloween celebration, but its original traditions and significance remain the focus of scholars and historians.

Samhain, Beltane, Imbolc and Lughnasadh are the main festivals of the Celtic calendar, which have great cultural and religious significance. These holidays marked important agricultural and seasonal transitions. The study of Celtic holidays also offers a unique opportunity to delve into the ancient mythology and worldview of the Celtic peoples, their interaction with the natural environment and reveals aspects of their social structure.

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