

More than Tricks and Treats



In the western world it's time for ghosts, spooky fun, and sugar overload! We have all heard that Halloween is the modern day, Samhain, a festival celebrated in ancient Celtic and Druid societies. Samhain, is the Gaelic word for November and is thought to come from "sam-fuin" which means "summer's end". It was in fact when ancient civilizations of the British

Isles celebrated the end of the current year and beginning of the new and Gaelic cultures refer to it as the beginning of the Dark Half, as the sunlight continues to wane. In the damp Celtic mists on the night of Samhain, the great festival began with a giant bonfire. Tribes and clans would gather at the fire to burn food and animal sacrifices to offer the Gods their share of the year's harvest and herds. At the festival dancers would act out the drama of birth and death of The Wheel of Life. These dancers were the first costume wearers of modern day Halloween. In general their costumes served three primary purposes. The first purpose was to honor the dead that were turned loose by the Lord of the Dead to progress to their new incarnations. The second was to hide from vengeful or malevolent spirits. The third purpose was to pay homage to the deities of the harvest to thank them for the year's bounty and to gain their favor in the coming harsh months of winter. At the close of the celebration, participants would each take a torch lit from the bonfire and use it to light their own hearth fires. It was believed that this sacred fire would protect the house and its inhabitants in the winter to come. The rites of Samhain have been spoken about in Irish writings from the 10th century onward but the reverence and mythology of this constellation began much earlier.

It is believed that Samhain actually began as an astrological holiday associated with the constellation of The Pleiades. Samhain is a cross-quarter day, astronomically speaking. That means that it is the midway point between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice. On that night The Pleiades reaches its culmination, or highest point in the sky, at midnight. Halloween has been fixed on October 31st, and All Saints day on November 1st, by tradition but technically The Pleiades climbs to its highest point around the third week of November adjusting for the precession of equinoxes. And yes, technically, due to the tilt of Earth's axis it's not at the exact zenith but...just go with it.



The Pleiades is often called The Seven Sisters. It is the triangular constellation pretty much straight up in the autumn sky. The constellation consists of seven stars, all of which can be seen by the naked eye, away from city lights. The entire cluster of stars consists of about 400, relatively young stars that are about 100 million years old. They are practically our apartment building neighbors at only 400 light

years away and hopefully Orion won't be seen around the complex again or we'll have to call security, but that's a story for another blog post. Anyway, Seven Sisters refers to the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione. Atlas rebelled against Zeus and was punished by having to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders. His celestial daughters huddle together to mourn their father's fate. The sisters are Alcyone, Asterope, Calaeno, Electra, Maia, Merope, and Taygete. The stars are also sometimes associated with the seven virtues, Truth, Purity, Faith, Patience, Kindness, Temperance, and Determination. As one of the brightest and closely gathered constellations in the sky, it is one of the easiest to pick out without the need for a telescope and has been admired by sky watchers since the beginning of time. Ancient cultures both celebrated and feared this constellation.

Ancient structures around the world from stone circles in Britain, to Polynesian temples, to the Pyramid of Teotihuacan, to the Great Pyramid at Giza are thought to be aligned with the Pleiades. Depictions of The Pleiades have been found in the Paleolithic drawings in the caves of Lascaux which have been dated back some 17,300 years. Chinese texts mention the Seven Blossom Stars as early as 2357 BCE and it is mentioned in the Bible, as well as the Koran.

Egyptians referred to the constellation as the seven Hathors, who are named in a spell of the Egyptian Book of the Dead which was written around 1550 BCE. The Egyptians believed that when the Pleiades reached its zenith, disasters and war could more easily occur. Many cultures shared this belief including the Maya and Aztecs of Central America. They based their calendars on the position of the Pleiades and when it reached its zenith in the sky they performed all night rituals to ward off negative effects. These rituals often included human and animal sacrifices. Even the Turkish name for The Pleiades, Ulker which means, "troops in battle formation", depicts the volatile energy associated with the constellation. It has been speculated that cataclysms such as the Great Flood, plagues of Egypt, and sinking of Atlantis occurred shortly after the autumn culmination.

The indigenous people of North America were known to be avid astronomers and The Pleiades is depicted in Native American artwork and featured in many traditional songs and stories. Early Dakota legends refer to it as the abode of the ancestors and the Hopi believe that their civilization originated there. In a Lakota legend seven maidens are being pursued by a bear. They prayed for help and the ground erupted lifting them high into the air. The bear angrily clawed at the sides of the raised earth creating Devil's Tower in Wyoming while the maidens were placed permanently out of harm's way in the heavens.

On the night between Halloween and the Feast of All Souls, turn off your porch light so you can have the last few Mini-Snickers bars for yourself and take a second to notice the bright triangle in the sky. Just take a second to sit with the idea that a Paleolithic cave artist was doing the same thing more than 17,000 years ago...Well, except they only had a grub to eat or piece of bark to chew on. You Halloween revelers on a Paleolithic diet can follow that tradition as well if you wish and good luck with that!

Happy Halloween and Merry Samhain!