

## **LITHA or SUMMER SOLSTICE**

*by Merlyn*

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The sun rises straight above the eastern horizon in early June, not in the southeast as it does in other seasons, and by 6 a.m. it can warm you to your bones. It's almost Litha, the Summer Solstice, and time for the return of the Holly King, who will preside over the waning half of the solar year after vanquishing the Oak King whose rule began at Yule.

Many ancient cultures equated the annual solar cycle with the birth, growth, and death of a god who was annually replaced. The goddess was immortal and each year birthed a son at Yule or Eostar. Her son grew into her lover and mated with her at Beltane or Litha. Then he gave his life's energy to warm her earthly body and make the crops grow. The god-king of the waning half of the year also symbolizes the latter half of men's lives, when their desire to nurture and mentor their progeny replaces their youthful drive toward conquest and sex. This part of men's lives is largely ignored by our modern society, which worships eternal youth.

Lugh is the Celtic sun god but his sabbat is celebrated at Lughnassad or Lammass, not Litha. Ra was the royal Egyptian sun god who begat every pharaoh by mating with the Queen Mother which preserved the ruler's divine lineage. Ra was originally said to be born of the goddess Nut, but later the patriarchal culture eliminated his goddess mother and said that Ra created himself.

The ever regenerative powers of the sun's daily and annual cycles were also represented by sun goddesses. The Greek Eos or Hebe, and the Roman Aurora were variants of the same goddess of dawn who gave birth to the sun each day. The Japanese ruling clans traced their lineage back to their sun goddess Amaterasu whose heir is their current Emperor. Atthar was the sun goddess of the ancient Arabs, while the Celts had a sun goddess named Sulis, Sol, or Sul. Sulis was worshipped on top of the 'man-made' Neolithic Silbury Hill in Avebury, England according to Barbara Walker in *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. Other British hilltops that overlooked springs were also used as places for her worship. Other ancient sun goddesses included Ushas, Etain, Grainne, Akewa, and Arinna.

Litha was Christianized as St. John's Day. Bonfires were lit on hill tops and around these fires unmarried villagers danced, flirted, and sometimes stole off to engage in sexual pleasures.

Litha means summer in Saxon and this season offers up distinctly different climates depending on the latitude you inhabit. It is a season of pure joy in northern climates, but a time of hardship and discomfort in subtropical and equatorial latitudes, where the sun's awesome heat can threaten life's very existence.

Northern Scotland lies at the same latitude as the south end of Hudson Bay. Only the warm moist air heated by the New World's Gulf Stream keep the British Isles and Western Europe from being as frigid as Labrador. From October to May, northern Europeans expect a steady diet of cold, gray, damp days. However, by Litha a brief season of warmer temperatures, less rainfall, and deliciously long days finally prevails. The sun rises at 4 a.m. and still hangs above the horizon at 10 p.m. All human desires for outdoor living and freedom from heavy clothing must be satiated during this brief time before the darkness returns.

Traveling northeast from the British Isles to the Baltic region, you find that Litha has replaced Beltane as the traditional holiday celebrating sexual passion and fertility. At Beltane it was still too cold and damp for coupling in the fields.

I grew up in a mild east coast climate, which included long, hot, humid summers. However,

occasional Canadian cold fronts made life bearable for a few days. Going down the east coast to Florida, the summers became much hotter and longer. Here summer is not the year's favorite season for most people. In the subtropical deserts of Arizona, Mexico, Israel, and Pakistan many native plants stop growing until autumn. This is often the fallow season for agriculture.

Litha was traditionally celebrated at noon, the time of day when the Sun's peak heat and light are most intensely experienced. Other Litha customs include wearing bright colors of crimson, orange, gold, or white; decorating your altar, cauldron, or hair with summer flowers, and, of course, dancing around the Litha fire.

Starhawk recommends that you make a 'god-figure' of sticks and an unbaked loaf wrapped in layers of aluminum foil. During the Litha ritual, this 'God' is tossed in the roaring flames. He perishes, but the grain is baked into life-sustaining bread. The god-figure can also be made to be androgynous or female depending on your tastes.

Whatever type of ritual you do at Litha, the best celebration of this Sabbat is to take the time to enjoy the long warm days. Breathe in the aromas of fresh flowers and leafy green vegetation. Become a solar-conscious pagan and note the position of the sun at dawn, noon, and sunset. Remember these locations and compare them with the sun's positions at similar hours on the equinoxes and the winter solstice. Whatever you do remember that life is to be enjoyed--summer is the Goddess' sacred gift to all her creatures.