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Samhain — The Origins of Halloween

From ancient Celtic festival to worldwide celebration

What was Samhain?

1

Samhain (pronounced SOW-in)

The ancient Celtic festival marking the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter. Held on the night of 31 October / 1 November. One of the four great Celtic seasonal festivals.

Example: The others: Imbolc (1 Feb), Bealtaine (1 May), Lúnasa (1 Aug)

2

The veil between worlds

Celtic belief held that on Samhain, the boundary between the living world and the Otherworld grew thin. Spirits, fairies (the *sídhe*), and the dead could cross over.

3

Bonfires

Huge community bonfires were lit on hilltops at Samhain to ward off evil spirits and guide the dead back to the Otherworld. The word bonfire may derive from 'bone fire'.

4

Disguise

People dressed in costumes and masks to disguise themselves from wandering spirits. This is the direct ancestor of dressing in costume for Halloween.

5

Colcannon and barmbrack

Traditional Irish Samhain foods. Colcannon (mashed potato with cabbage/kale). Barmbrack (a fruit bread with objects baked inside — a ring predicted marriage, a coin predicted wealth).

