

# Old Pagan Traditions Still Honor 12th Night

Twelfth Night is the popular English name for the Feast of the Epiphany, which falls on January 6, just 12 days after Christmas. The word "Epiphany" comes from a Greek word meaning "appearance," usually used in reference to the appearance of a deity in visible form.

The earliest reference to the festival, according to the editors of the Encyclopedia Americana, was in the later years of the 2nd Century, when Clement of Alexandria, in Egypt, spoke of certain Christians observing the 6th of January in memory of the baptism of Jesus. The actual date seems to have been chosen in order to rival some of the popular pagan festivals of that day.

By the beginning of the 4th century, orthodox Christians in the East were observing the festival as a triple celebration. It became an all-inclusive feast, honoring the birth and baptism of Christ, and His first miracle at Cana of Galilee.

### Arrival of the Magi

In the West, however, the particular commemoration assigned to Epiphany was the visit of the Magi. Dur-

ing the Middle Ages, the Epiphany festival was widely observed by the performance of miracle plays in the churches about the Three Kings or Magi. Particularly in England, the day was marked by dramatic productions, though not necessarily religious ones, and this custom survived into the Elizabethan period. Shakespeare took the popular name of Twelfth Night for his play of that title, which was written to be performed on that date.

Since Epiphany concludes the Yuletide festivities, and its date coincides with many ancient pagan customs, it was often celebrated with strange ceremonies in which those customs mingled with Christian rites. Some of these old ceremonies still exist in parts of Europe, where fixed rituals may have origins, often with an overlay of magic, that are lost in the past.

### Up-Helly-Aa Is Norse

Still celebrated in the Shetland Islands is an old Viking ceremony known as "Up-Helly-Aa." The name means "end of the holiday," indicating that the event comes some time after Christmas, actually at the end of January.

The ceremony itself is very dramatic, since it takes place at night, by torchlight. Men in the old wild Viking costumes, complete with high horned helmets, tow a huge 30-foot Norse longboat through the town, in a torchlight procession... then the boat is set ablaze on the beach.

### Haxey Hood Game

Haxey is a place in Lincolnshire, where they still play this famous old hood game, on January 6. Its origins hark back to pagan times, and the "hood" itself is thought to represent the head of a bull. In the game, 13 men take part, one called the "fool," another the "lord," and the eleven others "boggins." A two-team scrimmage takes place, the object being for each man to succeed in placing a folded canvas hood into a particular goal, one after the other. The very last hood, the 13th, called "The Haxey," has to be fought towards the final goal—an inn where there are drinks for all.

### Wassailing the Trees

This unusual torchlight ceremony still is observed in certain parts of England on January 17, which is the date of "old 12th Night." It's another survival from very ancient times.



## SHEPHERDS RECEIVE GOOD NEWS

"That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly an angel appeared among them, and the landscape shone bright with the glory of the Lord. They were badly frightened, but the angel reassured them.

'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem! How will you recognize him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger!'

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,' they sang, 'and peace on earth for all those pleasing him.'

When this great army of angels had returned again to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Come on! Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

They ran to the village and found their way to Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger." (Luke 2:8-16)

—From The Living Bible

## The Friendly Beasts

Jesus, our Brother, strong and good,  
Was humbly born in a stable rude.  
And the friendly beasts around him stood,  
Jesus, our Brother, strong and good.

"I," said the donkey, shaggy and brown,  
"I carried his mother up hill and down,  
I carried her safely to Bethlehem town,  
"I," said the donkey, shaggy and brown.

"I," said the cow, all white and red,  
"I gave him my manger for his bed,  
I gave him my hay to pillow his head,  
"I," said the cow, all white and red.

"I," said the sheep with curly horn,  
"I gave him my wool to keep him warm,  
I gave him my coat on Christmas morn,  
"I," said the sheep with curly horn.

A Christmas Carol by ROBERT DAVIS  
From ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIBLE LIFE —  
by The Millers, published by Harper & Row

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## Scots Celebrate Hogmanay, Day Of First-Footing

What's Hogmanay? It's the Scottish name for New Year's Eve — and first footing is what they call the tradition that dictates Scottish hospitality for the New Year celebration.

The first person to cross the threshold of any house on that occasion is supposed to do so bringing gifts to his or her host — gifts of food or coal, both tokens of warmth and friendliness. In return, the first-footer receives a drink.

But that's not all. People used to compete vigorously for the honor of being a first-footer, and ran races from door to door. Their hosts might or might not be happy to welcome the visitors. If the first-footer were a woman, it meant bad luck for the year. But it was good luck if the first person across the threshold were a man, especially one known to have been born feet foremost — still better if he happened to be dark rather than fair.

Why the word Hogmanay? That's a mystery still — similar words occur elsewhere, but origins are uncertain, at best.

### The Donkey, A Family Favorite

The donkey, or ass, was the most valuable animal to the biblical family, and also the most economical, since he ate only a quarter as much barley as a horse. The most mental of animals, he was famous for his stamina and sure-footedness. Humble as his status was, he would bear the cam-leer on his back, and lead the long, stately strings of camels across the desert.

Even poor families, like Joseph's of Nazareth, could afford one donkey, which they trimmed with blue beads and red wool to show their pride of ownership.

**GREETINGS at Christmas**

"Hello" to our many friends and neighbors who have done much to make the past year a memorable one for us, we thank you most heartily.

MANAGEMENT & STAFF

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