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► **To cite this version:**

Frédéric Armao. The ‘Time of Ireland’: an Interpretation of the Four Irish Festivals. Time and Culture, 2016. hal-02508047

HAL Id: hal-02508047

<https://hal.science/hal-02508047>

Submitted on 16 Mar 2020

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The “Time of Ireland”: an Interpretation of the Four Yearly Irish Festivals

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Abstract. The four yearly Irish festivals of Samhain, Imbolc, Lughnasa and Beltaine were –and to some extent still are– celebrated respectively in early November, February, May and August of our modern calendar, especially in the most rural parts of Ireland. Those festivals were an important part of the rural Irish life up to the first half of the XXth century: they divided the year in seasons, regulated the activities of the farmer and were connected to a large number of superstitions, sayings and miscellaneous customs and beliefs. Most researchers agree that those festivals are a modern adaptation of ancient festivals which were most likely connected to the Celtic set of beliefs and culture. There seems to be no consensus however as to why those specific dates –that do not seem to correspond to any obvious astronomical event such as solstices or equinoxes– were chosen when adapting those ancient traditions first to the Julian, then to the Gregorian calendar. This paper will aim at giving a plausible reason for the specific place in the year of the four Irish festivals, using both ancient sources and accounts of modern popular belief.

Keyword: Ireland, festivals, folklore, mythology, *Beltaine*, *Samhain*, *Lughnasa*, *Imbolc*, calendar, season.

“Lughnasa was one of the quarterly feasts of the old Irish year. The other three were *Samhain*, *Imbolc* (or *Oimelg*), and *Beltaine*. The division of the year into quarters, each of which began with a festival, is well known, much taken for granted, and hitherto little studied. It is one of the great facts of the Celtic past and the strength with which it was rooted in consciousness and has survived to this day is remarkable. The four feasts were identified (when and how we cannot tell) with November first, February first, May first, and August first of the Julian calendar.”¹

The Festival of Lughnasa by Máire MacNeill is a seminal work as regards the study of folklore, and more specifically “the four Irish festivals”: it remains to this day the bedrock of most research concerning the matter. MacNeill reminded us that, up to the first half of the XXth century, the Irish year was divided into

¹ Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa* [1962] (Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Eireann, 1982), 1.

four quarters of three months each. They all started in connection with a specific festival: *Samhain* in early November marked the beginning of winter, *Imbolc* in the first days of February, the beginning of spring, *Bealtaine*² in early May and *Lughnasa* at the beginning of August respectively the start of summer and fall. This division of the year was especially recognised in the most rural parts of Ireland. It has been shown that those four modern celebrations are to be linked with ancient festivals which were Celtic by nature,³ at least to some extent. It is however highly likely that the modern folkloric versions of those festivals were adapted to and “augmented” by several cultures; the successive waves of invasion of Ireland and the miscellaneous commercial and cultural exchanges with other nations necessarily played a role in modifying and changing the ancient festivals into their contemporary counterparts.⁴

“When and how” the festivals were identified with the aforementioned dates “we cannot tell”, says MacNeill; this statement is in itself an invitation to more thorough research as, fifty years later, no definitive theory seem to prevail among researchers. Only a few historic/traditional facts appear to be undisputed: it is for instance acknowledged that the festivals of *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa* bore the name of “quarter-days” in many areas; the two major festivals, *Samhain* and *Bealtaine*, were called “half-year day” as they divided the year into two main parts –or seasons: even if three-month seasons were acknowledged, many informants⁵ mention a six-month-long winter that would begin at *Samhain* and end at *Bealtaine*; conversely, a six-month summer began at *Bealtaine* and would end six months later at *Samhain*, in the first days of November.⁶ This leads us to believe that *Samhain* and *Bealtaine* were the most important festivals, an idea that is shared in many folkloric accounts.⁷ The first of November and the first of

² The spelling of the four festivals tends to vary.

³ One of the first attempts was carried out by MacNeill herself.

⁴ We tackled this issue in the following article: Frédéric Armao, “La Charnière de mai : *Beltaine*, fête celtique ou fête irlandaise ?” in *Ollodagos* (Brussels: Institut des Hautes Etudes de Belgique, vol. 28, 2013), 61-128.

⁵ The most precious primary sources as regards the modern folklore of the Irish festivals are the *Irish Folklore Commission* manuscripts collected in the 1940s and the *Schools’ Collection* manuscripts of the 1930s. For this specific point, see for example *IFC 1947 MS. 1096* §71 (Galway), §93 (Sligo), §114 (Cavan), §123 (Fermanagh). Read “Manuscript of the *Irish Folklore Commission* number 1096, collected in 1947, informant number 71, County Galway”.

⁶ Among many instances, *IFC 1947, MS. 1095* §17 (Cork).

⁷ *Samhain* was often associated with a New Year festival, although this also happened in connection with *Bealtaine*. “In West Limerick May Day was looked upon much as the same way as New Year’s Day – the beginning of another period – a new and better period”. *IFC 1947, MS. 1095* §57 (Limerick). “May Day was always looked on as the starting of the year.”

May appear to have been the two crucial turning points of the year regarding the activity of the labourers and the farmers.⁸

However, the question of why those specific dates were chosen remains unanswered, as they do not correspond to any evident astronomical observations – a solstice or an equinox for example. It must be added that, although tradition generally holds that the four Irish festivals were celebrated on the first day(s) of November, February, May and August, the date of celebrations could vary quite substantially.

In modern folklore, the feasts were connected with countless traditions, sayings, superstitions and customs, most of which were linked with the rural world and the activities of the farmers – a fact that reinforces the connection between the festivals and the passing of the seasons. On the other hand, some references to those festivals do exist in the ancient myths of Ireland collected by the Irish monks from the Vth century onwards⁹. Irish folklore and Celtic myths¹⁰ are therefore not dissociable when dealing with *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa*¹¹ and both aspects (folklore and myth) ought to be tackled when trying to understand the essence, impact and/or origin of the celebrations.

This paper will try and give a plausible explanation as to why the four Irish festivals were originally associated with (and later adapted to) specific times of the year in Ireland – and other places throughout Europe.¹² Ultimately, the goal

IFC 1947 MS. 1096 §114 (Cavan). Note that the term May Day is often preferred by English-speaking informants talking about the festival of *Bealtaine* which, indeed, translates as 'the first day of May' in modern Irish.

- ⁸ Transhumance was supposed to start and end at *Bealtaine* and *Samhain*; seeds were planted at or around the time of *Bealtaine*; the activity of the laborer should be over by *Samhain* and so on. "Moving cattle, sheep, horses and asses to graze on rough pasture. From May Day to November Day". IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §70 (Galway). 'Potato crops should all be planted by May Day'. IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §127 (Antrim). "Farmers were always anxious to have their seeds in the earth before May Day as the real growth commenced about that date", IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §70 (Galway), to mention but a few representative examples.
- ⁹ For instance Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc'h, *Textes Mythologiques irlandais* I (ed. & trans.) (Rennes : Ogam-Celticum, 1980).
- ¹⁰ The term "Celtic myth" should be qualified, as most of our sources on the matter are manuscripts written down by Irish monks, implying a potential Christianization and/or adaptation of the myths.
- ¹¹ Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc'h & Françoise Le Roux, *Les Fêtes celtiques* (Rennes : Ed. Ouest-France, 1995).
- ¹² Even if this is not the primary subject of this paper, it is interesting to remark that some celebrations seem to share common ground with the Irish festivals, not only in Western Europe (May Day, *Walpurgis*, Saint Brigid/Michael/John's Day to name but a few) but perhaps more interestingly in Central and Eastern Europe (for example the festival of Saint

of this study is to question the substance and symbolic significance of the four feasts in connection with their place in the Irish year.

We have already mentioned that the modern Irish festivals were celebrated in early November, February, May and August. Most of the time – that is, according to most informants– the festivals were supposed to be held on the first day of those months precisely. However, this was not always the case.

According to a number of accounts, the “appropriate” day to celebrate *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa* was the first Sunday of the months. A limited number of accounts even mention the second Sunday¹³ or even the Sunday preceding those months. The reason for this shifting might be twofold: first, given the cultural, traditional and even social importance of the four festivals, a shift to the following (or preceding) Sunday could prove more practical: pilgrimages, festive assemblies, cattle/horse fairs, hiring fairs and many other customs were associated with the four festivals and setting up or even taking part in such events obviously took time; Sunday is, almost by definition in the Christian tradition, a holiday: celebrating those feasts on such a day was simply a way to make it more accessible to the workers. The second reason is precisely to be attributed to the Christian tradition: celebrating a holiday/festival (and all the more a supposedly pagan festival) on a Sunday amounts to assimilating it to the Christian religion. Holding a mass on the Sunday following or preceding the “original” date of the feast – which happened in many counties– was in fact a way to Christianize it. In some cases, the Christianization of the festivals was even more obvious: we could mention this account from County Leitrim which tells us that *Bealtaine* was always held on the first Sunday on May “if it happened to be Whit Sunday”.¹⁴

Many folkloric accounts refer to alternative dates: the four festivals are often said to be held on the 11th or the 12th day of the month, occasionally the 6th, 8th, 9th or 10th.¹⁵ According to MacNeill, the reason for this is quite evident: “An important factor to be borne in mind when looking for the survivals of old popular festivals is the effect of the change of the calendar from Old Style to New

George), Scandinavia and even the Baltic nations. See Armao, “La Charnière de mai”, for a comparison between *Bealtaine* and other European festivals or Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland* (Dublin : Mercier Press, 1972) for the study of other similarities.

¹³ IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §30 (Cork), §62 (Waterford). MS. 1096 §87 (Mayo).

¹⁴ IFC MS. 1096 §106 (Leitrim).

¹⁵ This list is by no means exhaustive. We have for instance found accounts mentioning the 20th or the 21st of May (IFC MS. 1095 §28 (Cork), MS. 1096 §93 (Sligo)) which may or may not indicate an attempt to harmonize the celebrations with Whit Sunday or even solstices and/or equinoxes.

Style. The Gregorian reform of the Julian calendar was not adopted in Great Britain until 1752. By that time, the British calendar lagged eleven days behind the Gregorian, and the Act for correcting the Calendar, passed in March 1751, laid down that the correction should be made by dropping eleven days out of reckoning between the 2nd and the 14th day of September 1752."¹⁶

The very idea of moving the date of the festivals seems to have been rejected by a portion of the population. In England, the reluctance was partly due to the opposition to papal authority. However, we are inclined to believe that the resistance against this decision of Parliament, which by definition was to apply to all subjects of the British crown, had a more profound origin: "The folklore attaches great importance to the right day for celebrating a festival. The unit of time with which a festival is identified is regarded as having an inherent solemnity, and it is important to know exactly when to observe it in order to enjoy its efficacy [...]. The idea that its place in the yearly round could be changed or regulated by an Act of Parliament was something so strange as to be almost inconceivable."¹⁷

Consequently, both dates (the first day of the month or the 11th/12th) were kept in Ireland – some people holding to the "old day", others switching to the new one: festivals called Old *Bealtaine*, Old Hallow Eve, Old *Lughnasa* Eve and Old Brigit's Day then appeared. A manuscript from the mid-XIXth century describes an occurrence happening sixty years earlier, about a century after the adoption of New Style in the English Parliament, and gives us an idea of how difficult it was for some people to accept the change: "Since the introduction of New [Style], the two days are kept in commemoration [...], and one is called "Ure". "*La-baltaine-Ure*" that is new May Day, and the First of August "*La-loon-as-na-Ure*". Preference is now given to the New, but the Old, the Eleventh day is not forgotten. The writer of this was told by an old man who was present at a fair [in] county Donegal, and when first the New Style was attempted to be made known to them, and the method taken to do so was that a man with a handbell, a "Bell-Crier", walked the streets and shouting in a loud voice that the first of May of that year was ten days earlier. Some made the news a laughing sport, the people could not understand his method of explanation, and gave the man the benefit of being a fool, but at last the Crier was brought to a standstill by a rough countryman [...] telling him that he was a "lying-fool" and with an appended salutation "your body to the devil [...], who is going to believe you? Where to did you send the other ten days?"¹⁸

¹⁶ MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, 20-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hugh Dorian, *Donegal Sixty Years Ago* (Derry: St. Columb's College, year unknown), 301-2. MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, 24.

Ultimately, the “new” dates became more popular and the beliefs connected to the celebration of the Old Style were transferred to the corresponding dates of the Gregorian calendar. The Old Style did not completely disappear however. First of all, because according to the *Calendar Act* of 1751, the changes were not to apply to fairs and markets. In other words, a fair that was held on the first of November/February/May/August according to the Julian calendar (and there were hundreds of instances) was not to be transferred to the first of the month of the Gregorian calendar: they were consequently held on the 11th/12th of the New Style.¹⁹ The other factor, which we have just mentioned, is the attachment towards the old dates, especially in the most remote areas of Ireland. Disparities and confusion ensued: an informant from Co. Clare for example maintains that Old May Day was celebrated on the “8th or 9th”; another only partially confirms this idea while assuring that, in Co. Tyrone, Old May Day was held on the 9th; several informants from Munster and Ulster, mainly from Co. Donegal, placed the festival on the 11th. But it is the 12th day of the month, the proper adaptation to the Gregorian calendar, which remained most popular among people celebrating the Old Style festivals.

Among the many superstitions and beliefs connected to the four festivals, some of them were transferred to the first New Moon or the first Full Moon of the month, which may imply a symbolic association, if not a calendar connection. For example, in the folklore of *Bealtaine*, weather omens were common and superstitions allegedly bringing good weather for the following year were frequently observed on the date of celebration. Those omens and superstitions were occasionally transferred to a date corresponding to the New or Full Moon: “The old people used to look out for May moon to see if it was a good moon which meant fine weather.”²⁰ “Year was expected to be good or bad according to the brightness of the May moon.”²¹ “A [full] moon coming early in month foretold a good grass season and if coming late in month a bad one.”²² “Spring tide of the birds” The May Spring-tide – the first spring-tide with the May moon. No fear of the birds’ nests in the needle-fish till the brood is reared.”²³

The first Full Moon of the month was considered by many as the last Full Moon of Spring and was used as a reference point – just like *Bealtaine* was –

¹⁹ 24 George II, Chap. 23. *An Act for regulating the Commencement of the Year, and for correcting the Calendar now in use*. Section 4. A.D. 1751.

²⁰ IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §23 (Cork).

²¹ IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §6 (Cork et Kerry).

²² IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §123 (Fermanagh).

²³ IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §79 (Galway).

especially as regards planting: when some believed that the "proper" day of sowing was *Bealtaine* or *Old Bealtaine*, others referred to this Full Moon.²⁴ Sometimes this Moon of May was related by informants to a Moon of October/November which were both supposed to be shinier than any other Moon in the year and had a beneficial impact on the cattle²⁵. Indeed, the number of customs that were carried out by farmers to protect their cattle on *Samhain* or even more specifically on *Bealtaine* was extremely high – the most famous and popular one, besides having the beasts drink the water of a holy well, was to drive them between two fires.²⁶

The Moon of May was also quite dreaded, just like the festival of *Bealtaine* was a time of fear and hope; fear that the weather of the following year would not be profitable, fear that the livestock may become ill, stolen or cursed and, at the same time, hope that the customs and superstitions carried out in connection with the festival (or the Moon) would prevent this: "When people see the new moon for the first time they pray for God to deliver them from the dangers of the moon."²⁷ "Some of the old folk feared that great evil would come with a Saturday new moon in May."²⁸

The New/Full Moons were sometimes associated with the fear of witches and fairies, extremely common at *Bealtaine* and *Samhain*, as those festivals were supposed to be the time of the year when the gates between the world of the living and that of the dead would open: "at New Moon and Full Moon in May [some] used to gather at night herbs and other requisites needed for charms".²⁹

²⁴ IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §103 (Leitrim).

²⁵ IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §16 (Cork), MS. 1097 §171 (Westmeath).

²⁶ The most detailed accounts are to be found here: IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §9 (Kerry), §61-2 (Waterford), MS. 1096 §137, §142 (Donegal), MS. 1097 §189 (Laois). For direct mentions of this practice in ancient texts, see Guyonvarc'h/Le Roux, *Les Fêtes celtiques*, 103 or Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc'h & Françoise Le Roux, *Les Druides* (Rennes : Ed. Ouest-France, 1986), 235.

²⁷ IFC 1947, MS. 1096 §103 (Leitrim).

²⁸ IFC 1947, MS. 1095 §57 (Limerick).

²⁹ *Ibid.* Even if the term Red Moon (*Lune Rousse* in French) is never used by the informants, the parallel between the Moon of May and this Red Moon, which was well known in Europe, seems obvious. The Red Moon is "la lune qui suit la première pleine lune de printemps, c'est-à-dire la lunaison qui suit la date de Pâques. (...) La Lune Rousse avait si mauvaise réputation qu'on lui attribuait le pouvoir de brûler de ses rayons les jeunes pousses et les bourgeons des arbres fruitiers, de dévaster les cultures, de rendre les femmes et bêtes stériles. Elle est surnommée la 'lune sorcière'." Antoinette Glauser-Matecki, *Un Aspect du cycle de mai en Europe occidentale, rites et coutumes des calendes de mai, la nuit de mai* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1996), 155-6.

It is interesting to note that the connection between the Irish festivals (or more generally the month associated with the Irish festivals) and the Moon can be found in a number of ancient texts. We will here note the recurring association between the mythical settlers of Ireland with both *Bealtaine*/the month of May and the “day of the Moon”, that is Monday. Let us first mention Parthólón and his tribe, one of the first groups of people who settled in Ireland, according to mythological texts: “There came a plague upon [the four sons of Parthólón] on the kalends of May, the Monday of Beltene; nine thousand died of the plague until the following Monday, upon Mag Elta, five thousand and four men and four thousand women, who were dead between the two Mondays.”³⁰

Later, the Túatha Dé Danann, the “principal family of euhemerized pre-Christian deities in Old Irish tradition”,³¹ reach the shore of Ireland in early May, also on a Monday: “And they came to Ireland, on Monday, the kalends of May, in ships [and vessels].”³² “On Monday in the beginning of the month of May, to be exact, [the Túatha Dé Dánann] took Ireland.”³³ This is also confirmed in the mythological battle of the *Second Battle of Moytura*, much later reprised by Keating in his *History of Ireland*: “Concerning the Túatha Dé Dánann, they, having spent seven years in the north of Scotland, came to Ireland; and, on their coming to land, Monday Bealtaine in the north of Ireland, they burn their ships.”³⁴

The mythological tales of the *First* (and *Second*) *Battle of Moytura* had indeed placed the arrival of the tribe on that day precisely: “[They] all set sail, and after three years and three days and three nights landed at wide Tracht Mughá in Ulster on Monday of the first week in May.”³⁵

We will finally mention that the *Cattle Raid of Cooley/Táin Bó Cuailnge*,³⁶ another famous mythological episode, took place “since the Monday of the beginning of November till the beginning of spring”, according to Queen Medb.³⁷

³⁰ R.A.S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Erenn (Book of the Taking of Ireland)* (ed. & trans.) [1933], (Dublin: Irish Text Society, 1939), Vol. III, 21(R2/R3).

³¹ Peter Berresford Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Santa Barbara : A.B.C.-Clio, 1992), 414.

³² R.A.S. Macalister [1941], *Lebor Gabála Erenn* (1939), Vol. IV, 139 (R2).

³³ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 203 (R3).

³⁴ Guyonvarc’h, *Textes Mythologiques irlandais* I, 84. Geoffrey Keating, *History of Ireland* (Comyn, D. & Dineen, P. ed. & trans.) (Cork: C.E.L.T., Corpus of Electronic Texts, a Project of University College Cork, 2002), Book I, Section X, 213.

³⁵ See Guyonvarc’h, *Textes Mythologiques irlandais* I, 29. Trans. J. Frazer.

³⁶ See <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G301012/index.html> and <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G301035/index.html> for the edition of Cecile O’Rahilly (Cork: C.E.L.T., Corpus of Electronic Texts, a Project of University College Cork Corpus of Electronic Texts Edition: G301012 and G301035).

Taken separately, those mythological instances are not sufficient to stand as proof that the four Irish festivals were connected, directly or not, to the course of the Moon – for instance as a part of a luni-solar calendar. They raise however the question of the calendar justification of *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa*.

Before mentioning the various theories regarding this peculiar division of the year, it should be noted that this division does not solely belong to modern folklore: old Irish texts confirm that the year used to be divided in four distinct seasons/quarters (occasionally connected with festivals), therefore supporting the fact that this subdivision was inspired by ancient traditions, more specifically the Celtic one. For example, we can find the following remark in the *Second Battle of Moytura*:

"Ireland shall reap a harvest in every quarter of the year (...) The spring for ploughing and sowing, and the beginning of summer for the end of the strength of corn, and the beginning of autumn for the end of the ripeness of corn and for reaping it. Winter for consuming it."³⁸

It can also be found in several other documents, including *The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn*, which incidentally mentions the four festivals and their possible – yet widely discredited – etymology in detail:

"For two divisions were formerly on the year, viz., summer from *Beltaine* (the first of May), and winter from *Samuin* to *Beltaine*. Or *sainfuin*, viz., *suain* (sounds), for it is then that gentle voices sound, viz., *sám-son* 'gentle sound'. To *Oimolc*, i.e., the beginning of spring (...). To *Beldine*, i.e. *Beltine*, viz., a favouring fire. For the druids used to make two fires with great incantations, and to drive the cattle between them against the plagues, every year. Or to *Beldin*, viz., *Bel* the name of an idol. At that time the young of every neat were placed in the possession of *Bel*. *Beldine*, then *Beltine*. To *Brón Trogaill*, i.e. *Lammas-day*, viz., the beginning of autumn."³⁹

The *Senchus Mór*, a collection of early Irish laws, also brings up the existence of a "great caldron of each quarter [...] which is used for the preparation of feast every quarter of a year"⁴⁰. Interestingly enough, another extract from the

³⁷ Christian-Joseph Guyonvarc'h, *La Razzia des vaches de Cooley*, ed. & transl., (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), 252.

³⁸ *The Second Battle of Moytura* (Cork: C.E.L.T., Corpus of Electronic Texts, a Project of University College Cork, 2002). Full text: <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T300011.html> (Last visited December 2015).

³⁹ *The Wooing of Emer by Cú Chulainn* (Cork: C.E.L.T., Corpus of Electronic Texts, a Project of University College Cork, 2002). Full text: <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T301021/> (Last visited December 2015).

⁴⁰ John O' Donovan, *Senchus Mór, Ancient Laws of Ireland* (ed. & trad.) (Dublin: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1865-1901), 135. Also see 127.

same document explains that transhumance was to start in May and end "at Allhallow-tide", therefore indirectly dividing the year of the farmer in two "half-years" corresponding with the festivals of *Bealtaine* and *Samhain*.⁴¹

A number of researchers believe that the very essence of the Celtic calendar, which most likely inspired the traditional Irish division of the year, was pastoral. In other words, the four festivals were chosen because they suited and accompanied the year of the farmer:

"Le caractère essentiel du calendrier celtique est pastoral. Il se règle non sur l'année solaire, mais sur l'année agraire et pastorale, c'est-à-dire sur le début et la fin des travaux agricoles et de l'élevage."⁴²

We do not deny the fact that the four festivals were intimately connected with the year of the farmer (the large number of traditions and superstitions in relation with the cattle or crops is in itself quite relevant). However, if the Irish/Celtic calendar was exclusively "pastoral" and not connected whatsoever to astronomical observations, how can we account for the specific dates mentioned in both ancient texts and modern folklore? How to explain their mythological, then folkloric, relevance? Isn't "the unit of time with which a festival is identified [regarded] as having an inherent solemnity?"⁴³ Were the beginnings of the months of November/February/May/August chosen to celebrate the festivals simply by convention? Did the first mythical inhabitants of Ireland berth in early May just so as to correspond to the start of rural activities? Did the gates of the Otherworld open at *Samhain* and *Bealtaine* simply because the dates marked the end and the beginning of transhumance? This is all highly unlikely and an astronomic justification seems necessary as it implies a sense of mysticism that was required: symbolically speaking, an astronomic justification is a divine one.⁴⁴

⁴¹ "For taking care of the green, i.e. the field of grass and corn, i.e. to keep the cattle from the fields when going out in May; or in going from the green of the old winter residence to a summer pasture in the mountains, i.e. to keep the cattle and the people out of the green in removing from the old winter residence. For removing to the houses, i.e. for removing to the hayloft belonging to the old winter residence at Allhallow-tide". *Ibid.*, 133. For another division of the year in two parts, see Eleanor Knott (ed. & trad.), XXII, poem n° 9, §14 (Dublin: *Irish Text Society*), 59.

⁴² "The Celtic calendar is essentially pastoral in nature. It is not based on the solar year but on the agrarian and pastoral year, that is the beginning and the end of agricultural and cattle-related activities". Glauser-Matecki, *Un Aspect du cycle de mai*, 22.

⁴³ MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, 20-1.

⁴⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le profane* [1957] (Paris : Gallimard, 1965), chap. II.

Other researchers tried to prove that the dates of the four Irish festivals were remarkable positions of the equinoxes and solstices. Their main argument was that, because of the axial precession (or "precession of the equinoxes") – the slow modification in the orientation of Earth's rotational axis through time – 4000 years ago the sidereal first of November was closer to the Autumn equinox than it is today: consequently, all four festivals were created because they used to correspond to the equinox or solstice that is now observed around 40 days before the modern days of celebration. In other words, according to this theory, *Samhain* used to be celebrated at the time of the Autumn equinox, *Lughnasa* at the time of the summer solstice as so on.⁴⁵ This hypothesis is not convincing either: Guyonvarc'h and Le Roux noted that we had to go back 25,000 years to actually see the dates of the four festivals and the equinoxes/solstices correspond, thus forcing us to attribute the creation of the calendar to a "mysterious ancestors of the Celts".⁴⁶

The research of MacNeill, who tackled the subject, was also unsuccessful: the association of *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa* to the rise and fall of Sirius did not prove convincing.⁴⁷ On the other hand, some researchers suggested that the observations of the Pleiades might have played a role in the creation of the original calendar. The use of those stars in the annual cycle is attested in many cultures, including the Greeks' (since Hesiod) and the Romans' as well as in Mesopotamia and even India.⁴⁸ Yet their importance is not confirmed in the Celtic culture in relation with the four festivals; furthermore, the rising of the Pleiades (or even the culmination of the stars in the sky) did not seem to correspond to the dates of the festivals at any time of history when the Celtic calendars were allegedly created and shaped.

According to most researchers, the Celtic calendar(s) were based on both the observation of the Moon and the Sun and there is every reason to believe that the "original" calendar used to set the dates of the festivals was similar to that found at Coligny:⁴⁹ in the Coligny calendar, the year is divided in two halves,

⁴⁵ For instance J.M. Lecontel & P. Verdier, *Un Calendrier celtique; le calendrier gaulois de Coligny* (Paris : Ed. Errance, 1997), 21-2.

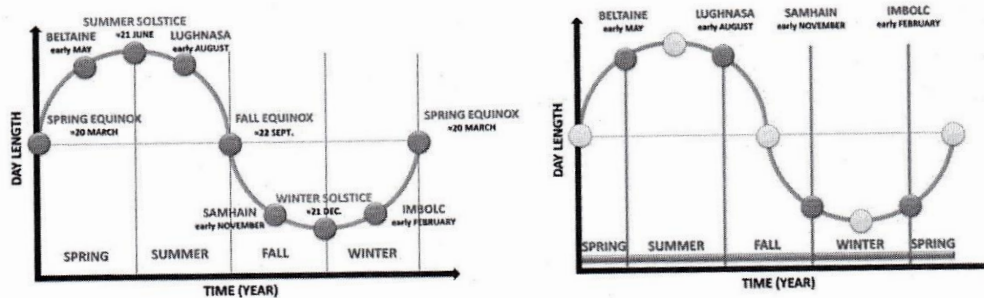
⁴⁶ Guyonvarc'h & Le Roux, *Les Fêtes celtiques*, 31-2.

⁴⁷ MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, chap. II.

⁴⁸ Louis Bazin, *Les Calendriers turco-mongols et médiévaux* (Paris : Université de Paris, 1972), 711-3.

⁴⁹ Alwyn & Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage, Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* [1961] (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 86-7.

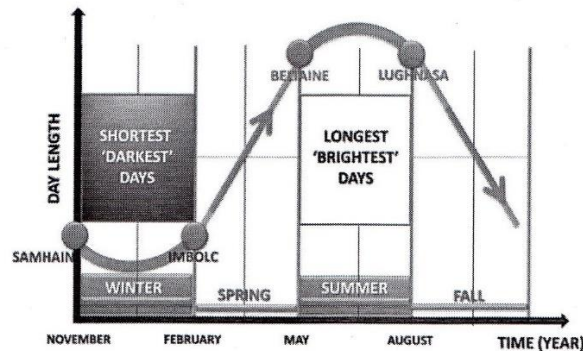
winter and summer, from *Samon-* to *Giamon-* and from *Giamon-* to *Samon-*,⁵⁰ suggesting that the two half-year day festivals were originally the most important ones.⁵¹ A simple and rather convincing theory regarding the place of the four Irish festivals in the year could simply rely on the course of the Sun and that of the Moon. It is easy to see that the four festivals are situated approximately at midpoints between the solstices and equinoxes (the first of November for instance is about forty days after the fall equinox and fifty days before the winter solstice). When, in our modern calendars, summer starts at the summer solstice and ends three months later, at the Autumn equinox, the Irish calendars preferred those approximate midpoints. Compare, for example, the place of the four seasons in the following two charts –the first one indicating our modern seasons, the second the Irish folkloric ones:



Interestingly enough, the Irish seasons followed an internal logic based on the duration of the day which is quite different from that of our modern calendar, where the days get gradually shorter right after the summer solstice. As shown in the next chart, the Irish winter opened the part of the year when the days are shorter, followed by a season where daylight would increase (“spring”, from *Imbolc* to *Bealtaine*); then a summer including the brightest days of the year followed by a season of decreasing daylight (“fall”, from *Lughnasa* to *Samhain*):

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Also Joseph Loth, “L’Année celtique d’après les textes irlandais, gallois, bretons et le calendrier de Coligny”, *Revue Celtique*, XXV (1904) and more recently Donatien Laurent & Michel Tréguer, *La Nuit celtique* (Rennes: Terres de Brume, 1997).

⁵¹ “La division de l’année, comme celle du mois, en deux parties approximativement égales, opposant une moitié lumineuse à une moitié obscure, semble être une disposition simple qui caractérisait l’année gauloise comme celle de l’Inde et de l’Iran.” Paul-Marie Duval & Georges Pinault, *Recueil des Inscriptions gauloises. Vol. III : les calendriers (Coligny, Villards d’Héria)* (Paris: Ed. du C.N.R.S., 1986), 405



In other words, the emphasis was laid on the length of days, on how luminous⁵² those days were (or were not), more than on the weather itself. Everything leads us to believe that there were originally only two six-month seasons – a long winter from *Samhain* to *Bealtaine* which included the darkest days of the year and a long summer from *Bealtaine* to *Samhain*, with the brightest days.

"Approximate" midpoints between solstices and equinoxes were chosen: the four festivals were not fixed in time and were partially movable, which is mirrored in the fact that virtually any date in "early" November/February/May/August was accepted for celebrating the modern festivals. A theory, which is largely inspired by the work of Donatien Laurent,⁵³ would suggest that the Moon may have played a role in selecting the date of the festivals each year:⁵⁴ it would consequently account for the "approximate nature" of those midpoints, as relying on the course of the Moon would imply a yearly variation. In other words, the Irish festivals might have corresponded to a remarkable position of the Moon while observing an approximate midpoint between the solstices and equinoxes: it is plausible (although by no means provable) that *Samhain*, *Imbolc*, *Bealtaine* and *Lughnasa* were celebrated on the first Full Moon (possibly the first New Moon) following (preceding?) the midpoints between solstices and equinoxes. The concept of "midpoint" is, in itself, quite compatible with what we know of the Celtic culture and traditions: it is most likely that the feasts were neither truly positive nor negative, black or white, good or bad, hopeful or

⁵² Maybe we should remind the reader that Lug, the most important god of the Celtic pantheon, was inherently associated with the idea of light as his name meant "luminous" (Guyonvarc'h, *Les Druides*, 402); the association between Lug (as well as the Dagda) and the four festivals leaves little room to doubt. See Armao, "La Charnière de mai" for more detail.

⁵³ Laurent, *La Nuit celtique*, 85-132.

⁵⁴ The importance of the Moon in both folklore and mythology also strengthens this idea.

dreaded; they were not even solstitial or “equinoxal”; their precise day of celebration was not even entirely fixed. The four Irish festivals (and especially *Samhain* and *Bealtaine*) relied on the notions of change, balance and possibly uncertainty – the kind of uncertainty a farmer faces when confronted with nature and the elements. They may have been phases of transition, symbolic hinges that embodied “points of equilibrium”, that represented time while being “out of time”⁵⁵; it is plausible that the course of the Sun combined with the phases of the Moon, the two most obvious astronomical cycles to be observed, played a role in the selecting of the dates as they corresponded to (or perhaps inspired?) this rather subtle symbolic significance.

The notion of time in Ireland studied through the prism of the four festivals can barely be touched in one single article. We have tried to present here the most relevant pieces of information that might lead us to understand how they were articulated and what they truly implied. The Irish festivals marked the passing of seasons in connection with myths, beliefs and rituals that were intimately linked with the idea of transition, balance, uncertainty; they stood as midpoints between solstices and equinoxes that were possibly adjusted via the observation of the Moon and later adapted to our modern calendars. It is likely that the original substance and the very essence of those celebrations will never be completely understood and deciphered: the sources are too scarce and prone to interpretation. Our attempt to put together interesting examples from both mythology and folklore is but a modest step towards a convincing demonstration of how, why and when the original festivals were held and created.

⁵⁵ “Fêtes hors du temps” is an expression coined by Guyonvarc’h and Le Roux.