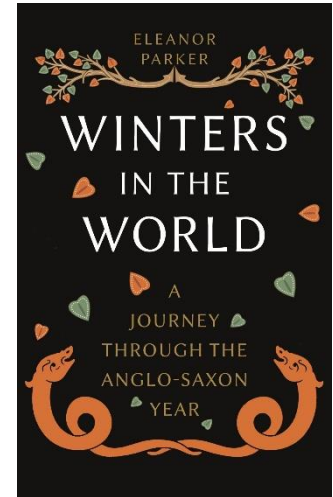


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Winters in the World – A Journey through the  
Anglo-Saxon Year

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*Particularly helpful for earliest sources of ecclesiastical seasons and festivities and their names; and for the way in which the church calendar (and the events it commemorates) is in natural, God-given harmony with the timing both of the natural seasons and of creation itself.*



## The Anglo-Saxon year

**Lent** : 'In Old English, spring is called *lencten*, which derives from the same Germanic root as 'long' and 'lengthen', denoting the season when the days are growing longer.' 17

The calendar was organised seasonally, and dates such as Easter or Martinmas were employed as fixed points of reference for the payment of taxes and tithes. 'This pragmatic use of feast-days continued into the later medieval period and for many centuries afterwards. Festivals, especially the four quarter-days at Christmas, lady Day, Midsummer and Michaelmas, have historically been used to set the dates when rents and payments were due and contracts and leases would begin or end. Remnants of this system still shape the legal, educational and parliamentary calendars. In Britain this explains, for instance, why the tax year starts in April, after 'Old Lady Day'.' 24.

**Lady Day** : NB Old Lady Day = Feast of the Annunciation 25 March, New Lady Day = Feast of the Conception 8 December. Both celebrated throughout the period.

## Winter

### Christmas

'In the depth of midwinter, when the days are shortest and the shadows longest, comes the winter solstice: the return of the sun. Centuries before the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, 25 December - at that time the date of the winter solstice in the Julian calendar - had been chosen as the day on which to commemorate the birth of Christ, and a festival on this date is first recorded at Rome in 336. This date was probably chosen not primarily because it was the solstice, but because it fell nine months after the spring equinox (25 March in the Roman calendar), which had perhaps already gained acceptance, as we'll see later, as the date of Christ's conception. But the winter solstice was of course a meaningful day on which to celebrate the birth of the creator of light. Bede explains this in *De temporum ratione*, articulating the widespread medieval understanding of the relationship between the church year and the solar cycle:

very many of the Church's teachers recount. . . that our Lord was conceived and suffered on the 8th kalends of April [2 March], at the spring equinox, and that he was born at the winter solstice on the 8th kalends of January [25 December]. And again, that the Lord's blessed precursor and Baptist was conceived at the autumn equinox on the 8th kalends of October [14 September] and born at the summer solstice on the 8th kalends of July [24 June]. To this they add the explanation that it was fitting that the Creator of eternal light should be conceived and born along with the increase of temporal light, and that the herald of penance, who must decrease, should be engendered and born at a time when the light is diminishing.

'Another pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon midwinter festival may have been *Geola*, 'Yule'. Instead of being connected with a deity, this seems to be linked to the solstice. It gave its name - again according to Bede - to the months corresponding to December and January in the Julian calendar, 'the earlier Geola' and 'the later Geola'. The etymology of Geola is unclear, and we have no information to tell us how it might have been celebrated in

Anglo-Saxon England. ... It was a word that survived into the Christian period, and it was adopted as a name for Christmas. It's used in this way in some Christian sources from the early Anglo-Saxon period, though it's not common, and from the ninth century onwards, with Scandinavian migration into northern and eastern England, it was reinforced by the related Old Norse name for the midwinter festival, *Jól*. The Viking settlers swiftly converted to Christianity, but seem to have held on to their name for the festival. As a result, 'Yule' continued to be another name for Christmas into the later medieval period and long afterwards, especially in the north of England and in Scotland, areas where Scandinavian settlement had a deep and lasting impact on the local dialect.

In Old English, the name *Cristesmesse*, 'Christmas', appears in the recorded sources surprisingly late, not until the first decades of the eleventh century - at least four centuries after the festival began to be celebrated in Anglo-Saxon England. This may be partly an accident of survival in the written sources, but it may also be because there was already a well-established name for Christmas - another which probably has pre-conversion origins but developed, like 'Yule', a new Christian meaning. That was *midwinter*, 'Midwinter', a term more prevalent in Anglo-Saxon sources than either *Cristesmesse* or *Geola*. This name could refer to the whole Christmas season but was also frequently used for Christmas Day, *midwintres messe daag*, 'Midwinter's mass-day'. 70

## **Candlemas**

Transitional festival between winter and spring, commemorating the occasion when Jesus was presented to the temple in Jerusalem and Mary was ritually purified, 40 days after his birth, and Simeon recognised him as the Messiah and prophesied his future suffering. But it also coincided with a significant point in the solar year, lying midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. It was a natural time for a festival of light, and that's what it became.

## **Lent**

'This custom of preparing for Lent by going to confession later led to the three days before Ash Wednesday being known as 'Shrovetide' - a time for being 'shriven', absolved of sins through confession. On the one hand, Shrovetide was a time for the devout preparations Alfric describes here, in order to start off Lent in a good spiritual state. On the other hand, by the later Middle Ages, it was also a period of last-chance merrymaking and revelry before the soberness of Lent: a carnival of Shrovetide games, riotous plays, and eating up the rich food which would be off the menu until Easter.' This is the etymology of the word 'carnival' itself (from medieval Latin, to do with 'putting away of meat'), and even today many people who don't observe Lent still eat pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, a custom which has its origins in the need to eat up the last of the eggs and dairy products before Lent came in.

'We don't have any evidence to show whether this was a custom in Anglo-Saxon England, but there is some indication that the week of Ash Wednesday was known in Old English as 'Cheese Week' (*cyswuce*). This would make perfect sense as a name for the last week when cheese could be eaten before the fast began. Though there's only slight evidence for this name in Anglo-Saxon sources, it parallels many names for this pre-Lent period in other cultures: the famous example is 'Mardi Gras', 'Fat Tuesday', but there are numerous others, including 'Butter Week' and 'Cheesefare Sunday'. The English name 'Shrovetide' is an odd one out in that context, since it's not named for the food that's given up, but there are some traditional English equivalents too: in northern England, the day before Shrove Tuesday used to be 'Collop Monday', when collops of bacon would be eaten up. Now, too, we often speak of 'Pancake Day', a name which is increasingly taking over from 'Shrove Tuesday' in Britain. English is coming into line with other languages in emphasizing the importance of food at this season, instead of the penitential practice of being shriven - but perhaps this is only returning to the way the Anglo-Saxons did it, in 'Cheese Week'.' 111-12

## **Spring**

### **The Birthday of Time**

'For medieval experts in the calendar, spring was the most important time of year. This was the season when they had to work out the timing of Easter and all the dates in the church calendar which depended on it, as well as

thinking about leap years and when to add an extra day to February. On top of that, they had to reckon with a sequence of days in late March which marked a set of significant anniversaries - the most momentous anniversaries in the history of the world.

'This sequence hinges on 21 March, the date of the spring equinox, and 25 March, which in late antique and early medieval tradition was widely considered to be the historical date of the Crucifixion. That date was worked out from the information given about Christ's death in the Gospels, most importantly its link to Passover and the Jewish calendar: since Christ died at Passover, it was possible to try to establish the date of his death and work out what its equivalent might be in the Julian calendar. The date on which Christ's death and resurrection should be commemorated by the church was a separate issue ... ; nonetheless, it was felt important to identify the Crucifixion as a historical event which took place on a particular date. Christ's conception, commemorated by the feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, was then also fixed to 25 March, because it was thought appropriate that he should have entered the world on the same date that he left it.' His life formed a perfect circle, with 25 March both the first and last day of his earthly existence. Add nine months, and you get 25 December as the date for his birth.

'For the medieval church, Christ's death was the most significant event in history, so it was thought fitting to link to this crucial date other key events connected to or prefiguring his death and resurrection. One of these was the beginning of time itself. That special date, 25 March, was pinpointed as the last of the days of creation, the eighth day on which God rested after completing his work - the end of another significant circle, the world's first week. If the eighth day was 25 March, it was possible to count back and identify the date on which each day of creation fell, starting with 18 March. Medieval calendars for March sometimes mark this date with a note, 'first day of the world' - just another day among the list of saints' feasts and commemorations. So 18 March was the first day of creation, when God separated light from darkness; on 19 March, he created the sky; on 21 March, the date of the equinox, the sun and moon were created, and that was the beginning of time.

'The various arguments which lay behind these systems of dating are too complex to get into here, and it's important to say that this tradition was far from universal in the early medieval church; alternative views were also put forward. In Anglo-Saxon England, however, this schema was the most influential, because it was espoused by Bede. In *De temporum ratione*, Bede explains why the spring equinox was properly dated to 21 March, and why time had to be created on the day when God made the heavenly bodies. (Because how could you have time before there was a sun and moon to measure it by?) He goes on to describe how all this is connected to Christ's resurrection, because the sun and moon themselves prefigure the redemption of mankind:

It is fitting that just as the Sun at that point in time first assumed power over the day, and then the Moon and stars power over the night, so now, to connote the joy of our redemption, day should first equal night in length, and then the full Moon should suffuse [the night] with light. This is for the sake of a certain symbolism, because the created Sun which lights up all the stars signifies the true and eternal light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, while the Moon and stars, which shine, not with their own light (as they say), but with an adventitious light borrowed from the Sun, suggest the body of the Church as a whole... And in the celebration of the supreme solemnity, it was necessary that Christ precede the Church, which cannot shine save through Him."

'What underlies this argument is a belief that the created world, in all its aspects, must reveal truths about God's purpose: God, the creator of light, time, measurement and number, would not do anything without meaning, or anything imperfect, so the date on which he chose to create time and redeem the world must be the most perfect time possible. For Bede, that means it's all about trying to identify the most fitting date on which these events could take place. He argues that it's fitting that Christ's act of redemption should be linked to the spring equinox, when the days begin to grow longer than the nights and light triumphs over the darkness; that it should be at a point in the solar and lunar cycles when the sun and moon express something about the relationship between Christ and his church; and that it should be in the spring, when life returns to the earth. It is, in every sense, the perfect time.

'Bede's arguments and similar ways of thinking about the dates around the equinox shaped learned understanding of this time in the year, though few people could have followed all the intricacies of his analysis.'

## EOSTRE AND EASTER

'One reason Bede pays such careful attention to the spring equinox and its link to Christ's resurrection is that this is key to the dating of Easter... In the first centuries of the church, the date of Easter was a controversial issue, because of problems arising from the difficulties of reconciling the lunar cycle which governs the date of Passover with the solar cycle of the Julian calendar. Early on the principle was established that, to follow a Christianized version of the dating of Passover, Easter should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. However, since ways of dating the equinox varied, as did methods for calculating cycles of the moon, different systems of calculation resulted in varying date-ranges within which Easter could be celebrated. At the time the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, this matter had already been under discussion for centuries!

In the years after the conversion, alternative methods for calculating the date of Easter co-existed in the two main cultural spheres of influence that shaped early Anglo-Saxon Christianity, the Roman missionaries and the British and Irish churches. These different ways of calculating Easter could result in problems, since some people would be feasting while their neighbours were keeping the Lenten fast; Bede records that at the court of Oswiu, king of Northumbria (641-70), the king celebrated Easter on a different date from his own wife. In 664 a synod was held at Whitby to discuss the issue, and from that point on the question was essentially settled within the English church. All this was of great interest to Bede, who writes about it at length in his *Historia ecclesiastica*.

'Within a century of the conversion, the Christian festival of Easter was well established in Anglo-Saxon England. When people today talk about the Anglo-Saxon history of Easter, however, they're often referring not to the controversy about its dating, the question which so exercised Bede and his contemporaries, but to a theory about Easter's history based on much more scanty evidence - a topic to which Bede devotes just one sentence, and in which other Anglo-Saxon writers seem to have had no interest at all. This concerns the origins of the English name for the festival. In most European languages, the name for the feast of Christ's resurrection derives from the Latin word *Pascha*, ultimately from Hebrew *Pesach*, 'Passover'. Central to the Christian festival of Easter is the belief that Christ became the new Paschal sacrifice, so the Latin name, like the date of Easter, originates in a medieval Christian interpretation of biblical references to Passover.

'The English name, 'Easter' is an outlier here. Where did it come from? Bede is the only Anglo-Saxon writer to attempt to answer that question. He does so in his short chapter about the English months, discussing the Anglo-Saxon name for April, *Eastermona*. He says that this month

has a name which is now translated 'Paschal month and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.

'This is all he, or any other Anglo-Saxon source, tells us about a goddess called Eostre, but this brief passage has caused much debate. In the nineteenth century, scholars of comparative mythology, most influentially Jacob Grimm, used Bede's evidence and some German analogues (including a hypothetical goddess Ostara, who is not attested in medieval sources) to argue that Eostre may have been a pan-Germanic goddess - perhaps of spring or the dawn, based on the timing of *Eastermona* and its etymological link with words relating to 'east'. Aspects of this theory have long been challenged, since it relies heavily on speculation and assumes a cultural homogeneity across the 'Germanic' world which doesn't reflect the complexities of the early medieval period. Some have gone so far as to suggest that Bede invented Eostre as a scholarly hypothesis to explain a name he didn't understand - as Grimm did with Ostara.

'However, Bede's claims about Eostre need not be entirely dismissed. Philip A. Shaw has suggested that Eostre may have been neither an invention of Bede's, nor a pan-Germanic deity, but a goddess with a highly localized cult, perhaps centred in Kent in the region around Eastry, a few miles east of Canterbury. He draws a parallel with a group of Romano-Germanic deities called the *matronae Austriahenae*, attested in votive inscriptions dating to AD 150-2.50, found near Cologne; these inscriptions probably reflect a localized cult, goddesses named in some way from the 'eastern people' who worshipped them. Shaw proposes a similarly named Kentish goddess Eostre, whose name, attached to the spring month closest to April, was borrowed for the Christian festival which most often fell in that month. The influence of Kent and Canterbury in the early days of the Anglo-Saxon church might have enabled this name, though local in origin, to spread to other regions (including parts of Germany, where

Christian missionaries from England were active and may have introduced the term). It's plausible that in his explanation of the month-names Bede was using a written source from Canterbury, as we know he did elsewhere in his work. Rather than being a widely known goddess, then, Eostre may have belonged solely to a small - but influential - region of Anglo-Saxon Kent.

'The mystery of the goddess Eostre may never be solved. For the purposes of understanding what Easter meant in Anglo-Saxon England, though, it's important to recognize that even if Easter does take its name from a goddess, that only tells us about the origins of the *name* - not the origins of the festival. The Christian festival of Easter long pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon conversion, and its essential features, including the principle behind its dating, had been established for centuries. What's more, we have no evidence of any symbols, customs or rituals that may have been associated with Eostre in Anglo-Saxon England, or anything to suggest how her festival might have been celebrated. Bede mentions 'feasts' in the vaguest terms, but he probably had no idea what those might have involved. Today, it's become a popular myth that symbols linked in modern Britain with Easter, especially eggs, hares or rabbits, derive from the worship of Eostre, but there's no Anglo-Saxon evidence to support that. None of these symbols were linked to Easter in the Anglo-Saxon period; eggs weren't associated with Easter in Britain until the later Middle Ages, hares and rabbits not until much later still. There's nothing to suggest any continuity of customs between the pre-conversion festival and the Anglo-Saxon Christian Easter, and the modern observance of Easter owes nothing to Anglo-Saxon paganism, with the sole exception of its English name.

'It's also clear from Anglo-Saxon written sources that though the name survived, it didn't have any pagan connotations for speakers of Old English during the period of our recorded sources. Unlike some of the other festivals discussed in this book, the name Easter is plentifully attested in Anglo-Saxon sources, and it's a very stable name, with no recorded vernacular alternatives (unlike Christmas). This suggests that the name took hold early and caught on widely across the English church, quickly losing any pagan associations.' 123-26

### **Palm Sunday**

They probably carried branches of pussy-willow or yew, the traditional substitutes for palms in Britain till the C20th.

## **Summer**

'May and June are marked by three festivals linked to the end of the Easter season: Rogationtide, Ascension Day and Whitsun, which all fall in the fortnight between five and seven weeks after Easter. The feast of the Ascension is celebrated on the Thursday forty days after Easter Sunday, and the preceding Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of that week form Rogationtide. Because of the moveable date of Easter, the timing of Rogationtide varies, but it nearly always falls in May. In the medieval church Rogationtide was a time for prayer, fasting and processions around the countryside, asking for God's blessing on the land and the crops of the future harvest. As one Anglo-Saxon homilist put it, the aim was to 'bless our earthly abundance, the acres and woods and our cattle and all the things that God has given us to enjoy! The customs of Rogationtide are widely attested in Anglo-Saxon sources, and they illustrate well how the liturgical calendar could intersect with the cycle of the seasons. These days provided an opportunity to reflect on the bounty of nature and its role in sustaining human life; they were a time to give thanks for the natural world as a visible expression of God's creative power and loving care. The origins of Rogationtide lie in fifth-century Gaul, around 470, when Mamertus, Bishop of Vienne, instituted three days of penance before Ascension Day in response to troubles afflicting his city. Soon adopted by the wider church, the custom is first recorded in Anglo-Saxon sources in the eighth century.' 156

Rogationtide was marked by processions from the church, carrying relics, crosses, gospel books, stopping at appointed stations for prayers and blessings. The idea was to carry God's blessings beyond the walls of the church into the fields and woods. 'The processions of Rogationtide gave the season one of its Anglo-Saxon names, *Gandagas*, 'Walking Days', from *gangan*, 'to walk, to go'. 159

By the late Middle Ages, the processions would follow parish boundaries, combining the function of blessing the surrounding area with an opportunity to reinforce territorial rights.' 161

## Ascension Day

Poem by Cynewulf (C8/9th) known as *Christ II*, explores Gregory's discussion of the 'leaps of Christ' which identifies Christ with the lover of the Song of Solomon (2.8-13), springing across the mountains to seek his beloved. Survives in the Exeter Book, one of the 4 compilations in which almost all surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry has come down to us.

'So the beautiful bird took to flight.  
Now he sought the home of the angels  
That glorious country, bold and strong in might;  
Now he swung back to earth again  
Sought the ground by grace of the Spirit,  
Returned to the world.

'The King of angels, the Lord mighty in strength,  
will come springing upon the mountain,  
leaping the high uplands; hills and downs  
he will garland with his glory, and redeem the world,  
all earth's inhabitants, by that glorious leap?  
The first leap was when he descended into a woman,  
an unblemished virgin, and there took human form  
without sin; that became a comfort  
to all earth's dwellers. The second bound  
was the birth of the boy, when he was in the manger,  
wrapped in cloth in the form of a child,  
the glory of all glories. The third leap  
was the heavenly King's rush when he climbed upon the cross,  
Father, Comforting Spirit. The fourth bound  
was into the tomb, when he relinquished the tree,  
safe in the sepulchre. The fifth leap  
was when he humbled the host of hell's inhabitants  
in living torment; the King bound within  
the advocate of the fiends in fetters of fire,  
the malignant one, where he still lies  
fastened with chains in prison,  
shackled by sins. The sixth leap,  
the Holy One's hope-play, was when he ascended to heaven  
into his former home. Then the throng of angels  
in that holy tide was made merry with laughter,  
rapt with joy. They saw the glory of majesty,  
first of princes, seek out his homeland,  
the bright mansions. After that the blessed city-dwellers  
endlessly delighted in the Prince's play. 164

This sums up Christ's whole life in less than 30 lines...

## Whitsun

Pentecost. The principal summer holiday of the year, with communal festivity, fairs, plays, games, processions. In the later MA 'Whitsun ales' were feasts that combined shared festivity with the useful function of fundraising for the parish church.

Among the forms of ceremony thought appropriate for Whitsun in Anglo-Saxon England were coronations. The first attested use of the word is in the A-S Chronicle's record of the crowning of Matilda, Wm the Conqueror's queen, in 1068.

In the same poem Cynewulf celebrates the giving of the gifts of the Spirit at Pentecost, in a distinctively Anglo-Saxon way:

He honoured us then, he who created the world,  
God's Spirit-Son, and gave us gifts: eternal dwelling on high with the angels,

and also the manifold wisdoms of the mind  
he sowed and established in the hearts of men.  
To one he sends wise speech  
into his mind's thoughts through the breath of his  
mouth,  
fine perception. One whose spirit is given the power of wisdom can sing and speak  
of many things. One can play the harp well with his hands loudly among men,  
strike the instrument of joy. One can tell  
of the true divine law. One can speak of the course of  
the stars,  
the vast creation. One can skilfully  
write with words. To one is granted success in battle,  
when archers send quivering arrows flying over the shield-walls. One can boldly drive the ship over the salt sea,  
stir the thrashing ocean. One can climb  
the tall upright tree. One can wield a weapon,  
the hardened sword. One knows the expanse of earth's  
plains,  
far-flung ways. Thus the Ruler,  
God's Son on earth, gives to us his gifts.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit typically associated with Pentecost include faith, healing and prophecy - no mention of harp-playing, tree-climbing, seafaring and the rest. But these are all forms of skill and knowledge, part of the 'manifold wisdoms of the mind'. This celebratory approach, honouring practical as well as intellectual and spiritual gifts, accommodates the biblical theme to a topos found in Anglo-Saxon wisdom poetry.

## Midsummer

'For medieval Christians, the concurrence of the solstice with these key feasts made the cycle of the sun a revelation of the plan of their creator - and this could also be discerned in other aspects of the natural world, for those who had eyes to observe its cycles of growth and decay. Such knowledge could be put to very practical use. One of the contexts in which we find references to Midsummer in Anglo-Saxon sources is in medical recipes and rituals, which seek to harness the power of this special time of year for the purposes of healing. In these texts, Midsummer is sometimes recommended as the best day on which to gather specified plants and herbs for use in medicines and remedies! As we saw at New Year, certain days in the year were perceived as having great potency, and Midsummer was clearly one of them.' 175

## Autumn

'The first harvest festival of the Anglo-Saxon year was Lammas, celebrated on 1 August. Lammas is something of a mystery. The meaning of its name, *hlafmesse* in Old English, is straightforward enough: it comes from *hlaf*, 'loaf, bread', and *maesse*, 'mass, festival'. That suggests it was a celebration of the wheat harvest - a feast of bread. The evolution from *hlaf-* to *la-* in the modern form is comparable to two words with the same root, 'lord' and 'lady': these words ultimately derive from the Old English compounds *hlafweard* and *hlaefdige*, which originally meant something like 'bread-guardian' and 'bread-kneader suggesting those who protect and provide for a household. That bread should be associated with such important social roles is an indication of how central it was to medieval life, and it's not surprising that it should have been honoured with a harvest festival.' 194

'Lammas is mentioned numerous times in Anglo-Saxon sources, but it's difficult to pin down what actually happened at this festival. As it falls in August, it was probably a festival of first-fruits, perhaps when loaves of bread made from the first corn of the harvest were blessed ('corn' in this context means wheat or barley, the main cereal crops in Anglo-Saxon England).' This is a plausible supposition, but it's never explicitly stated in any Anglo-Saxon text.' As there are no clear parallels in the wider medieval church for a harvest festival on this date, scholars have often proposed that Lammas may be related to the Irish festival of *Lughnasadh*, which also fell at the beginning of August. This festival, named for the god Lugh, was celebrated with large gatherings at open-air assembly sites, involving games, feasts and sacrifices.' With this comparison in mind, it's been hypothesized that Lammas may be the survival of an older harvest festival celebrated in Britain and Ireland before the conversion to Christianity. This certainly seems possible, but there's no definitive evidence for any continuation of pre-Christian practices at Lammas into the post-conversion period.' 194-95

## Halloween

'The beginning of November is now marked by a chain of three linked days, a season for remembering the dead: Halloween, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. Of these three, only one was observed in Anglo-Saxon England. During the first millennium, feasts in celebration of all the saints developed on different days across the international church, and a feast of All Saints on 1 November began to appear in Anglo-Saxon sources in the late eighth century.' In Old English it was called *ealra halgena maessedeg*, 'the mass-day of all hallows'; *halga* is the usual Old English word for saint related to *halig*, 'holy'. By the later Middle Ages, this had become *halwe* or *halow*, and so the season of All Saints was known by names such as 'All Hallowmas' or simply 'Hallowtide'. The other two days of Hallowtide were later additions to the English festival calendar. All Souls' Day, for remembering the faithful dead not yet in heaven, originated at Cluny and began to be regularly observed in England from the thirteenth century. The widespread observance of Halloween in England is more recent still; the eve of All Saints' Day seems never to have been an important part of the Anglo-Saxon or later English Hallowtide, at least not in the form we understand it today, as a time for encountering ghosts or spirits.' In the past few decades Halloween has become popular throughout Britain, but even a hundred years ago it was absent from most of England, while being widely kept in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and parts of northwest England. This seems to reflect a clear dividing line between regions of what we might call Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture in Britain and Ireland, and that's supported by the complete absence of Halloween from Old English sources.' 200-21

## Blood and blessing

Martinmas is the feast of St Martin of Tours, celebrated on 11 November. Martin (d397) was a Roman soldier who converted and became a monk and bishop. He's usually shown as a mounted soldier cutting his cloak in half to share with a beggar.

When it reached England, Martinmas seems to have replaced a similar festival in the pre-Christian calendar. Bede says the Anglo-Saxon pagans called November *Blotmonad*, 'month of sacrifice' because the cattle to be slaughtered for the winter were sacrificed to the gods. It was also known as *Blodmonad* – linking *blot* (sacrifice) with *blod* (blood).

'Bede draws his readers' attention to the contrast between those pagan rituals of sacrifice and the Christian replacement, 'the sacrifice of praise'. One interesting aspect of that process of replacement was how the language of paganism was preserved and adapted by the Anglo-Saxon church, even as its rituals were discarded. The vocabulary of sacrifice is a striking example. In surviving Old English sources *blotan*, 'to sacrifice' is used of pagan worship, in the context of classical antiquity as well as the Anglo-Saxon past. In that form, the word eventually died out and didn't survive into later English. But the related verb *bletsian*, 'to consecrate with blood' was chosen early in the history of the Anglo-Saxon church as an equivalent to Latin *benedicere*, so it survived and came down to the present-day as a very common word: 'bless'. The root of *benedicere* in Latin relates to 'speaking well', so it's about words of praise and blessing, not rituals of blood-sacrifice; over time *bletsian* gradually took on those senses, losing its bloody connotations. It became part of the standard vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, used in a variety of contexts regarding blessing, consecration and hallowing with words or rituals such as the sign of the cross. As *bletsung* became *blessing*, the similarity between the alliterating *bless* and *bliss* meant they often appeared together in medieval poetry and began to influence each other's meaning. It's a remarkable semantic development, hiding in plain sight: 'bless' has come so far from its bloodstained origins, yet the basic sense, 'to make holy', has not actually changed - only the means of doing it. Such Christianization of pagan vocabulary seems to have been a regular part of the conversion process in early Anglo-Saxon England, and there are other, less dramatic examples of pagan words given Christian meanings, as we've seen with festivals like Easter. Where concepts really were unfamiliar, it was necessary to borrow from Latin, and words like 'bishop', 'monk' and 'mass' represent early borrowings from Latin into Old English. But in the case of several fundamental religious concepts, some old words were preserved in surprising ways.' 226-27

The sacrifices of *Blotmonad* became the festivities of Martinmas. Gregory the Great advocates replacing the sacrifice of cattle to pagan gods with Christian sacrifices when he writes to the Augustinian mission.