

## WALPURGISNACHT AROUND THE WORLD:

May 1 marks the final victory of Spring over Winter, the night from April 30 to May 1 is called "Walpurgisnacht", the night of Walpurgis or Walpurga. The festival is marked by numerous rituals to ward off evil.

Legend has it that on Walpurgisnacht the witches would gather on the Brocken, the highest peak in the Harz Mountains. Because of the Walpurgisnacht scene in Goethe's Faust, in which Mephistopheles takes Faust to the Brocken and has him revel with the witches, the witches gathering became widely known.

Walpurgis derives its name from Walpurga or Walburga. Walburga, Abbess of Heidenheim near Eichstätt, a Catholic Saint, was known as the protectress against witchcraft and sorcery. On the Eve of May 1, bells may toll in some areas and prayers may be said; there may be blessings with holy water and blessed sprigs can be found in homes and barns. The most widespread remedy against evil spirits during Walpurgisnacht is noise. As soon as the sun sets, boys of all ages may make noise. Their equipment ranges from boards to beat onto the ground to pistols for firing shots. In Bavaria the night from April 30 to May 1 is called a Freinacht or Drudennacht. For youth it is an opportunity to play tricks. They may stroll in groups through the streets and wind toilet-paper around cars, smear door-handles with toothpaste, unhinge garden doors and carry them a few meters away, and they may displace shoe scrapers. It is said that at one time boys took a sparred-frame cart to pieces and reassembled it on the roof of the house of the owner.

May 1st marks the victory of Spring over Winter, but before departing the Hexen have one last fling and make an attempt to assert their power on Walpurgisnacht. This Hexennacht is the best known in the seasonal cycle. The roots for this fest extend back to a pre-Christian Frühjahrsfest, which was perhaps celebrated in an even more rowdy fashion, as the Valborgs maessafton is still celebrated today in Sweden, Thuringen and elsewhere. Under Christian influence it was probably transformed into a fest to drive out the Hexen. The festival became widely known outside Germany due to Goethe's use of this theme in Faust. The festival is marked by numerous rituals to ward off evil. On the eve of May 1st the bells toll in Luxembourg and many prayers are said, there are blessings with holy water and blessed-palms in the homes and barns.

In Schmalkalden in Thuringen the little girls, dressed as Hexen themselves, chase out the Walpermännchen. They wear paper hats and sometimes carry sticks in their hands. Similarly, in the South Harz region, the young boys ride stick-horses and chase the Hexen out of the fields. The most widespread remedy against evil spirits during Walpurgisnacht is noise. The boys begin making noise as soon as the sun sets. In Bohemia boards are beaten onto the ground in front of the houses, accompanied by this chant: "Hex geh raus, 's brennt deiHaus." Whoever hears a pistol shot on that evening is supposed to say, "Schiess mei Hex a mit!" In Lippe the noise is referred to as "Maiklappen." A lot of noise is especially made in front of the houses of married couples who are childless, because it is believed that it is necessary to "further the blessings."

In the Berner Jura the shepherd boys, on the eve of May 1, stand atop the manure-piles and crack whips in order to drive away wolves. The wolf is the incarnation of evil, and symbolizes the departure of winter. The manure-pile symbolizes fertility of the fields and gardens, and therefore is often the

locale where prayers are said. Farmers who don't have as many cattle help each other out in the summer. They make a pledge-group, which takes this form in Donaueschingen: they go to a nearby chapel and pray, then they climb together onto a manure-pile, hold hands, and say "Mir (=wir) gmaren miteinand," which means "we are helping each other to bring home hay and grain with our cattle." [i.e.they are sharing each other's manure-piles, which is later sprayed onto the fields as fertilizer].

Now, folks, there is a parable here something to really think about -- when we lapse into slinging mud at each other, we should look at it from a higher perspective -- we are really fertilizing each other's fields!

On this day, pour a horn of mead upon the earth in memory of our heroes, drink to each other's health, wealth, and fertility.