

## Magusto: the Samhain from Gallaecia

Original text by *Hugo Da Nóbrega Dias*, first published in *Celtic Guide* (2013)

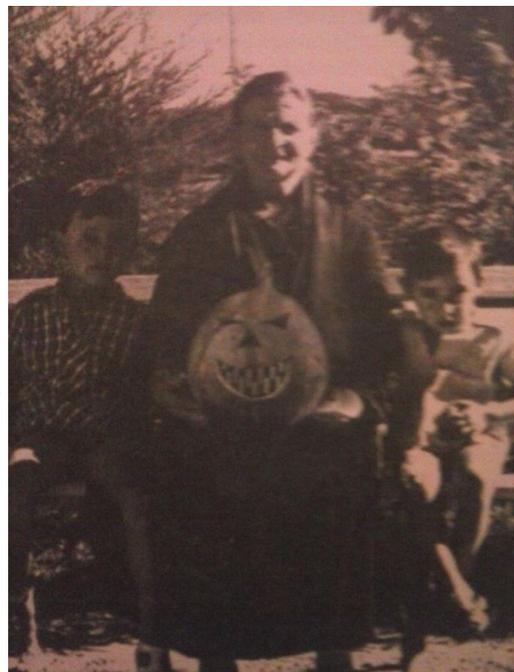
Revised and updated by [IDG](#) (2016)

I had always had a certain reluctance in accepting Halloween entering our lives. It is a tradition that we use to link with the USA, with the carved pumpkins and horror costumes, so popularised in the films. This all reached us when shops started to adopt Halloween paraphernalia in their decorations. They found there a new business opportunity that filled the gap between Summer and Christmas. Yet, when we were children, the night of October 31<sup>st</sup> was always known as 'Night of the Witches', and I remember waiting in vain until midnight in the hope of glimpsing some witch crossing the sky on her broom.

The truth is that the way Halloween was aggressively introduced and promoted also contributed to that reluctance of mine. Plus, we already had our traditional *Magusto* (festivity where people gather to eat chestnuts and drink wine), which is normally celebrated from November 1<sup>st</sup>. Why would I bother with Halloween? There I was, in fact, unconsciously neglecting the lack of studies of our own traditions. It was only when I became an adult that I started to get myself interested in Celtic studies and, in the same way, in the traditions of my own region, Northern Portugal. It was with great amazement that, years later, I found an old black and white picture of an old lady with two boys, sitting on a chair holding a carved pumpkin on her knees. Before that I had only heard some reports and read some odd texts explaining an ancient tradition, linked to the rest of the Celtic world, more embedded in our culture than one might think.

As a matter of fact, north of river Minho, in the land that is nowadays known as [Galiza](#) (Galicia), this way of celebrating the night of October 31<sup>st</sup> was kept alive in some villages. The tradition of carving pumpkins is something that elders remember doing "from long time ago". In those villages, many people thought of it as being connected to other Celtic countries, and not just to our own land, as those traditions were alive and uninterrupted for centuries.

October 31<sup>st</sup> - *Samhain* - was the end of the Celtic year, when the world of the dead and the world of the living would come together. People used to believe (and some still do) that the souls of the dead could walk in our world. It was the time to celebrate the new year with a big dinner, laughters, friends and family, but it was also the time to conduct religious rites that would allow us to communicate with the Beyond, and have a chat with the loved ones who are no longer among us. Hence, derived from the "headhunting" Celtic custom, skulls were to be lit up with



candles, both to protect the living from the evil spirits and to illuminate the path of the good spirits. Those skulls would be left at crossroads, gates, windows or doors, marking and indicating thresholds, passageways. In time, skulls were replaced with turnips and eventually pumpkins.

Over the years, I have been collecting testimonies about a not so distant past. One of these stories happened in Ílhavo, close to Aveiro, home to sailors. In a special cultural event promoted by local authorities, residents were invited to open their houses to visitors so everybody could socialise and get to know the way these people lived. On that occasion, my most kind and hospitable hosts were people from the historic centre of the village. Then Mr. Mário told me, among many other things, about the time when he was young, 30 or 40 years ago, when people in the neighbourhood used to fill those same streets with carved pumpkins for *Samhain*. I was astonished. Also, in conversations with my father and mother and with other relatives – all from old *Gallaecia* – I found out that they all had childhood memories of carving pumpkins for the night of October 31<sup>st</sup> and that they would all gather to eat chestnuts, sausages and to drink wine. One can only imagine the amount of people with similar stories to tell and share.

Thus, although the tradition of the carved pumpkins was mostly forgotten in Galicia and Northern Portugal during the 20<sup>th</sup>C, we can see that from a historical point of view the norm was to celebrate *Samhain* as done in other Celtic countries, or in the USA by influence of the Irish who emigrated there. Not only that, other significant elements associated to the date such as the respect and reverence for the dead, had always been present. In addition, our tradition offers something of its own, the chestnuts, allegedly said to be a favourite meal in the Beyond! Whether or not this last aspect was common in other countries is a different story. In any case, this was the moment when families and communities harvested and gathered the very last produce given by the land before winter, call it wine, pumpkins or chestnuts. This was the transition from the luminous part of the year (summer) to the dark part of the year (winter), and they celebrated it accordingly, getting ready for some harsh weather but with the confidence it would all pass in the end.

It sure is paradoxical, and somewhat ironic, that it was through commercialism that an old tradition was recovered in our country. It sure made many think we were importing yet another new foreign fad, only to discover it was ours all along. It may even annoy us now how American Halloween “twists” the “true” meaning of Irish *Samhain*, or Galician-Portuguese *Magusto*. That is however a good sign, as it evidences how we have rediscovered and accepted a part of our own beautiful ancient heritage.



Reproduced by IDG with permission from author.

(CC) 3.0



(permission to share when citing source, but never to alter, re-adapt or use for commercial purposes)