

September

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Halliday.

September, our ninth month, was the seventh month of the old Roman Calendar, and was so-called from the Latin for "seven" septem.

In the calendar of Charlemagne this month was called "Harvest month".

The Anglo-Saxons called it "Gerstmonath" or Barley month, because in this month it was usual to harvest the barley. We ourselves start our Harvest Festival in September, and in Switzerland this month is still called "Herbstmonath" or Harvest month.

Harvest time is the season for gathering the crops. From the most ancient times it has been the season for great celebrations. The Romans held feasts in honour of Ceres, the goddess of the fruitful earth. Throughout the whole world we find men rejoicing at this season because of the earth's bounty. Everywhere the earth has been conceived as the mother of all life, especially kind to humanity, or at least to those who honoured her.

In Northumberland in certain places there is still evidence of an ancient rite in which a wheat sheaf is formed into an image and dressed in a white frock decorated with coloured ribbons. This image is placed on a pole and is called either the "Kern-baby" or the "Harvest Queen", and is given a place of importance at the harvest celebrations.

In Russia a woman representing the "Corn-mother" wraps a boy in the last sheaf of corn, the process of childbirth is represented and the boy cries out like a newly born baby. He is then wrapped in swaddling clothes. In many other places there is still evidence of such ancient rites and "Corn-Babies" or "Corn-Dollies" are still made.

In Scotland the youngest girl in the harvesting work is given the task of cutting the last sheaf of corn, which is called the "maiden". The last sheaf has been worshipped almost everywhere in the world, perhaps as the last child receives special attention.

Not surprisingly the harvest celebrations include games. The Roman Games held in honour of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva began on September the fourth.

In Roman mythology Jupiter was the ruler of the gods. He was a god of the glistening sky, like the Greek Zeus with whom he was later identified. He brought the needed rains to the thirsty earth, the storms to tear out from the trees the dead wood, and the thunder-bolts to re-energise the Earth-Mother with electric power.

Juno, as we have seen earlier, was Jupiter's wife and the goddess of all things belonging to women. Later identified with the Greek goddess Hera, the Queen of Heaven, she was a majestic, magnificent figure representing all things good and honourable in women.

Minerva, later identified with the Greek goddess Athene, was the goddess of war and memory, the patroness of all trades and arts, and later of all wisdom. At Athens her temple was the Parthenon, though at one period a gigantic statue of her crowned the Acropolis. She is said to have sprung full armed from the head of Zeus, a suggestion that all of her attributes logically presuppose each other and come into being together.

The Roman Games had a very close connection with religion, as we should expect from the natural tendency to express joy in a good Harvest by some form of physical activity. "To leap for joy" is still a familiar expression.

At the start of each civil year the Roman consuls vowed to the gods to provide forms of celebration and games, the cost of which were paid for by the Treasury. Thus the public were able to enjoy their games and celebrate their religious rites apparently at no cost to themselves, a wise way of helping to consolidate the Commonwealth of Rome.

But the games became more and more important, and under the empire were viewed as one of life's two necessities. "Bread and circuses" became the empire's slogan.

The ambitious men began to move in on what had previously been a responsibility of the state. Any important event became an excuse for some great display. Caesars wasted the revenues of whole provinces to gain the favour of the people on whose support depended their thrones.

The Roman circus became a fashion parade, a meeting place for gallants, a place for politicians to meet and be seen, a sportsground and arena in which the mob could gather together to satisfy their craving for excitement.

Especially the chariot races became a cause of much rivalry, for the drivers became divided into companies, each bearing its own colour for recognition. Under later Caesar's factions became very important. At one time the defeat of a company was taken with as bad feeling as a military defeat by an opponent of Rome.

When Roman authority transferred its centre to Constantinople, believing its destiny now lay to the East, the disagreements of the various parties at the games became the cause of political cabals and blood battles. In 532 A.D. occurred the famous Nika revolt in which thirty thousand people were killed.

In the amphitheatre wild animals were set against each other or turned loose upon captives or criminals. Sometimes trained hunters fought lions and tigers. Sulla gave one hundred lions for one display. Pompey provided six hundred lions and elephants, these being fought by trained hunters. When the Colosseum was inaugurated nine thousand animals were killed, and to celebrate the Dacian victories of Trajan eleven thousand were slaughtered.

What had begun as a joyous celebration of the Earth-Mother's harvest fruitfulness had turned into a scene of stupid slaughter.

Gladiators or swordsmen, so called from the Latin gladius, "a sword", were professional fighters who fought to the death. The gladiators trainer's name in Etruscan meant "butcher". Slaves who were used to carry off the dead wore masks to represent Charon, the figure who carries the dead into the underworld.

The great battles of the gladiators began with a parade. Prisoners of war, slaves and condemned criminals were forced to fight as gladiators. Those afraid to enter the arena were driven in with whips or red-hot irons.

In the later days of the republic the violence of the gladiators was a continuous

threat to the public peace. Those of the nobility who were temperamentally disposed to violence employed bands of gladiators as body guards.

Finally in 404 A.D. the games were abolished through the instrumentality of the Christian Martyr, Telemachus, who ran into the arena to separate the combatants and for his efforts was stoned to death by the mob.

The true worship of the Earth-Mother could begin again, and the September harvest again be rightly enjoyed.