

World Scientific Series in Astronomy and Astrophysics – Vol. 6

Arvind Bhatnagar  
William Livingston



Fundamentals of  
**SOLAR**  
ASTRONOMY

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ASTRONOMY

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## WORLD SCIENTIFIC SERIES IN ASTRONOMY AND ASTROPHYSICS

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Fundamentals of  
**SOLAR**  
ASTRONOMY

**"The point of living is to study the Sun"**

*Anaxagoras (499–428 BC)*

**Arvind Bhatnagar**

*Udaipur Solar Observatory, India*

**William Livingston**

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*Cover page.* Displaying the Sun as Surya — the Sun god; ancient emblem of the dynasty of Mysore (Udaipur, Rajasthan, India) Kings, along with solar Ceyron Mass Ejections and prominences.

**FUNDAMENTALS OF SOLAR ASTROLOGY**

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**Professor M. K. Vainu Bappu**  
(1927 - 1982)

This book is dedicated to our friend and mentor  
Professor M. K. Vainu Bappu.

*Arvind Bhatnagar*  
*William Livingston*



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## Preface

The aim of this book is to inculcate, motivate and inspire readers to take up the study and observations of our nearest star – the Sun, and enjoy its beauty and glory. Our Sun is the only star in the Universe which presents its surface details, as there is no other star near enough to show features of the order of a few hundred kilometers. Extending from deep inside the Sun, to the solar surface and beyond, the Sun manifests a variety of phenomena, ranging from a few hundred kilometers to thousands of kilometers in size, temperature ranging from a few thousands to several million degrees and in temporal domain from a few seconds to several decades and dynamical events with speeds from a few tenths of km/sec to thousands of km/sec. Thus why not make use of this unique celestial laboratory to study the physical characteristics of matter and to understand other celestial bodies in the Universe.

The remarkable dynamical phenomena occurring on the Sun, such as mass ejections in the form of eruptive prominences, filaments, surges, sprays, Coronal Mass Ejections, transient events; like solar flares, ephemeral regions, sunspots, granulations etc., make the study of the Sun extremely fascinating and interesting. One can see various solar phenomena occurring *right in front of one's eyes* and follow them for hours and days. The purpose of this book is to present some of these fascinating phenomena, in their full glory to the readers through ample number of illustrations, sketches and photographs.

This book is mainly addressed to those who are starting to study the Sun and want to pursue an advanced course in solar physics, but lack the basic knowledge of solar astronomy. To encourage young people, especially the budding amateur solar astronomers, we have pointed out to



the high quality early visual solar observations made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through small telescopes by Father Secchi, Langley, Captain Tupman, Professor Fataley and many others of solar granulations, sunspots, prominences, spicules, solar corona etc. We have emphasized that keen, persistent and careful visual observation through small telescopes can, not only provide extremely useful scientific data, but also gives great joy and fun, and one can always think of serendipity discovery that is just awaiting to be made about the Sun. Thus people with limited means in terms of equipment need not be discouraged, but follow the example of early observers and take up observing the Sun and contribute to its global watch.

From time immemorial Sun has occupied a central stage in all ancient cultures. It had been and still worshiped in many cultures, countries and civilizations. Our ancestors had considered the Sun as god and goddess, because it gave them light, warmth, seasons and the very existence of life on this planet. To perpetuate its glory and might, all the ancient cultures created mythological stories about the Sun, and interwoven them in their daily cultural life and rituals. To give an idea about these ancient myths, in Chapter 1 we have briefly described them, as these are not readily available in the standard texts on solar astronomy. The readers will note that actual solar observations during the year were very important activity in ancient times, to mark the solstices and equinoxes, which were part of the cultural, religious and agricultural life. For this purpose huge structures like the *Stonehenge* were built more than 5000 years ago.

We have tried to keep to bare minimum the use and derivation of mathematical equations, only some basic knowledge of physics and mathematics is required to understand the text. There is some amount of repetition also, which to some extent it is intentional so that various Chapters could be read independently too.

In Chapter 2, we have given a brief description of some of the operating solar optical and radio observatories, ranging from very small observatories with 10-15 cm aperture telescopes to the state-of-the-art observatories, such as the New Swedish Solar Observatory, the Dutch Open telescope, the German Vacuum Solar Observatory, the THIMIS and the National Solar Observatory at Kitt Peak, USA. It has been pointed out that even small observatories have and are significantly

contributing to synoptic solar observations, in spite of available highly sophisticated solar telescopes and space missions. A brief description of some of the operating and planned space solar missions has also been given. We feel guilty of the fact that in this list of solar observatories we have not been able to include the enormous contribution being made by amateur solar astronomers.

In Chapter 3, some of the basics of solar structure, energy generation, transport, irradiance, solar rotation and the neutrino puzzle are discussed. Chapter 4 gives a description of the *Quiet Sun*, although the Sun is never quiet, it is in *action* all the time. In Chapter 5, we present the *Active* aspect of our Sun, covering activities in the photosphere, chromosphere and the corona. To appreciate and enjoy the *Sun in Action*, the readers are advised to see time lapse movies now available from Websites of several solar observatories.

In Chapter 6, we have given methods and techniques to determine basic solar parameters, such as the Solar Parallax, mass, distance, temperature, heliographic coordinates of solar features. These may be found useful for those initiated in solar astronomy from other disciplines. Chapter 7 covers in some detail, description of solar optical instruments, especially the various types of light feeds (solar telescope), spectrographs, imaging equipment, like narrow band filters and spectroheliographs. In this Chapter we have gone to great length in discussing the principle and working of birefringent filters, this is essential because narrow band filters are the heart of any solar observational investigation, and description of such filters is not readily available in standard textbooks. We hope that the discussion given on the birefringent filter will familiarize the readers enough, not to consider it as a 'black box'.

The fascinating phenomenon of the total solar eclipse is discussed in Chapter 8, emphasizing the importance of eclipse observations, and what we have learnt and what more can be learnt. Since the early days in nineteenth century, enormous scientific data and results are now available, but still some unsolved problems persist. However, we urge the newcomers to this field, that there is nothing like watching the whole event of the total solar eclipse with naked eyes (of course after taking due care), and suggest the readers of this book to witness at least once,

one of the nature's most beautiful and fantastic phenomena.

In Chapter 9, we take the readers to the solar interior and introduce the new subject of *helioseismology*. We have not dealt the topic in great detail, but have simply discussed the basic principles of helioseismology and given the latest results obtained through this technique.

In Chapter 10, is a description of personal experience of a solar observer to share his joy of observing the Sun.

The authors feel apologetic that it was impossible to merit or all the references to the enormous wonderful work that is being carried out in solar astronomy and mentioned in this book. Actually, the scientific literature in all sciences, especially in Astronomy is inflating at an exponential rate and it has become almost impossible to keep track of all the research papers in spite of the 'Information highway' and Internet access etc. In this book we have tried to mention at number of places older references on the subject, which had been often forgotten or left out or people are simply not aware of them. Lately, it has been noticed that younger people hardly refer to literature earlier than 10 years, and in this process either miss the earlier findings or 're-discover' the same phenomenon. We found it interesting to look in the past literature and were amused to note that how the concept about our Sun has changed. In the eighteenth century, even the great astronomer Sir William Herschel thought that the Sun could be inhabited and that sunspots are windows to the interior! Now after 300-350 years, we talk of resolving features at the order of 70-100 kilometers, know precisely the physical condition of even the solar interior and are preparing to see the Sun in 3-dimension (STEREO mission).

We strongly feel that to bring out the real beauty of our Sun and its activities, it is most essential to display it through high quality illustration and pictures, which are now available from modern ground-based solar telescopes and solar space missions such as YUUKOH, TRACE, EIT and SXL. Therefore, in this book we have tried to present as many good pictures and illustrations as possible; these would inspire and motivate the beginners to take up Solar Astronomy, as a subject for study, enjoyment and fun. We believe that one good illustration is equivalent to thousand words; hence this book contains a fairly large number of illustrations, which is the crux to manifest the beauty of our Sun. The

Publisher, World Scientific Publishing Company, Singapore (WSPC) had been generous to allow large number of high quality illustrations appearing in this book.

We wish to acknowledge several authors, publishers and individuals who have provided and permitted us to make use of photographs, illustrations for this educational book. We would like to record our gratitude to Ashok Ambastha, Nandita Srivastava, Sushant Tripathi, Kiran Jain, of the Udaipur Solar Observatory for their help in preparing this manuscript. Jingxiu Wang and Li Ting sent us photographs of Chinese observatories and Sun's myth in China. Takeo Kosugi and his student K. Yaji helped to process YOHKOH images of January 14, 1993 event. Pam Gilman and Steve Padilla sent us a latest picture of the 150-foot Solar tower telescope at Mount Wilson Observatory and K. Sundararaman of Kodakunil Observatory sent us pictures of the Observatory and spectroheliograms. Major typing and computer setting of diagrams, text etc., was done very devotedly by Ms. Anita Jain and helped by her husband, Naresh Jain, the authors feel indebted for their help. One of the authors (AB) acknowledges receipt of partial financial grant from the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) for this project, and wishes to thank Professor U. R. Rao, Chairman, Physical Research Laboratory's Governing Council and Dr. K. Kasturirangan, former Chairman, ISRO for their interest in this project.

We have taken great care that no mistake has crept into the text, but if any, we shall be responsible. The Publisher, WSPC has taken great care to perfectly reproduce the large number of color and black and white illustrations presented in this book.

Arun Bhatnagar,  
Udaipur, Rajasthan, India.  
William Livingston,  
Tucson, Arizona, USA.



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## Contents

<b>Preface</b>	vii
<b>1. Ancient Solar Astronomy</b>	
1.1 Mythologies about the Sun	1
1.1.1 In Early Europe	1
1.1.1.1 Norse	2
1.1.1.2 England/Ireland/Scotland	3
1.1.2 North America	5
1.1.2.1 Among the Navajo Indians	5
1.1.2.2 Among the Pueblo American Indians	6
1.1.2.3 Among the Anasazi Indians	6
1.1.3 South America	7
1.1.3.1 In Aztec Culture	7
1.1.3.2 In Mayan Civilization	7
1.1.3.3 Among the Inca in Peru	8
1.1.3.4 Among the Mursuran Amazon Indian tribe	9
1.1.4 Egypt and the Middle East	9
1.1.4.1 In Egypt	9
1.1.4.2 Middle East	11
1.1.5 Greek and Roman Mythology	12
1.1.6 In Asia	13
1.1.6.1 In India	14
1.1.6.2 In China, Japan, and Korea	14
1.2 Major Ancient Solar Observing Sites	15
1.2.1 In Europe	16
1.2.1.1 The Stonehenge	16
1.2.1.2 In Ireland at Newgrange	18
1.2.1.3 In Ancient Germany	19
1.2.2 In Ancient Egypt	19
1.2.3 In Ancient Babylon	21
1.2.4 In the Early Americas	22

1.2.4.1	Solar Astronomy among Native American Indians	21
1.2.4.2	Solar Astronomy among Aztecs	25
1.2.4.3	Solar Astronomy in Maya Civilization	26
1.2.5	In Far East – Asia	26
1.2.5.1	In Ancient China	26
1.2.5.2	In Early Japan	27
1.2.5.3	In Early Korea	27
1.2.6	In Ancient India	28
1.2.7	Solar Astronomy in the Medieval Period	29
1.2.7.1	Solar Observatories at Maraga, Iran and Samarkand	29
1.2.7.2	Solar Observatories in India	40
<b>2.</b>	<b>Modern Solar Observatories</b>	<b>33</b>
2.0	Introduction	34
2.1	Ground based Solar Optical Facilities	37
2.1.1	Optical Solar Observatories in North and South America	34
2.1.2	Solar Observatories on the European Continent	42
2.1.3	Solar Observatories in Asia, Australia	53
2.2	Solar Radio Observatories	58
2.5	Current Solar Space Missions	62
2.5.1	Planned Solar Space Missions	68
<b>3.</b>	<b>Structure of Solar Atmosphere</b>	<b>72</b>
3.1	From the Solar Interior to the Photosphere	72
3.1.1	Hydrostatic Equilibrium in Solar Interior	72
3.1.2	Energy Generation	76
3.1.2.1	Proton – Proton (p-p) Chain	78
3.1.3	Energy Transport and Solar Model	81
3.1.4	The Neutrino Behavior	87
3.1.4.1	Neutrino Flux	87
3.1.4.2	Detection of Solar Neutrino	87
3.1.4.3	The Case of Missing Neutrinos	89
3.1.4.4	Kamiokande and Sudbury Neutrino Observatory Results	90
3.1.4.5	Solution of the Solar Neutrino Puzzle	92
3.2	The Solar Constant - Solar Irradiance	95
3.3	Limb Darkening	94
3.3.1	Limb Polarization	97
3.4	Solar Rotation	97
3.4.1	Solar Rotation from Sunspot Tracers	99
3.4.2	Variation of Rotation Rate with Solar Cycle	103
3.4.3	Rotation of Photospheric Magnetic Field	108

3.4.4 Rotation in the Solar Interior	108
3.5 Fast and Slow Streams – the Torsional Oscillations	111
3.6 Rotation of the Chromosphere and Corona	114
3.6.1 Coronal Rotation from LASCO Observations	116
<b>4. The Quiet Sun</b>	<b>117</b>
4.0 Introduction	117
4.1 The Quiet Photosphere	118
4.1.1 Granulation	118
4.1.1.1 Early Visual Observations	118
4.1.1.2 Early Photographic Observations	119
4.1.1.3 Granules as Convection Cells	121
4.1.1.4 Shape of Granules	121
4.1.1.5 Granule Size, Brightness and Contrast	122
4.1.1.6 Evolution and Life-times of Granules	124
4.1.1.7 Center-limb Visibility of Granulation	125
4.1.1.8 Granule Velocity and Brightness Variations	127
4.1.1.9 Granulation and Magnetic Fields	129
4.1.2 Supergranulation	130
4.1.3 Mesogranulation	133
4.2 The Quiet Chromosphere	135
4.2.1 Introduction	135
4.2.1.1 Early Observations of the Chromosphere	136
4.2.1.2 Early Spectroscopic Observations	137
4.2.1.3 Observations of the Flash Spectrum	138
4.2.2 Chromospheric Heating and its Spectrum	139
4.2.2.1 Heating by Turbulent Motion	141
4.2.2.2 Heating by Wave Motion	142
4.2.2.3 Heating by Magnetic Field	144
4.2.2.4 Heating by 5-minute Oscillations	145
4.2.3 Quiet Chromospheric Structure	145
4.2.3.1 Chromosphere on the Disk	145
4.2.3.2 Chromosphere at the Limb – Spicules	147
4.2.3.3 Spicules on the Disk	148
4.2.3.4 Evolution of Spicules	150
4.2.4 Quiet Chromospheric Model	151
4.3 Transition Region	153
4.4 The Quiet Corona	154
4.4.1 Introduction	154
4.4.2 Coronal Components, Brightness and Structure	155
4.4.3 Coronal Structure	157
4.4.4 Observations in Short Wavelengths & Coronal Hole	161



4.4.5	Temperature and Density Profile of the Corona	165
4.4.6	Coronal Bright Points	166
4.4.7	Radio, EUV and X-ray emissions from the Corona	167
4.4.8	Coronal X-ray and Extreme Ultra Violet Emissions	172
4.4.9	Coronal Magnetic Fields	173
4.4.10	Coronal Heating	176
<b>5.</b>	<b>The Active Sun</b>	<b>179</b>
5.0	Introduction	179
5.1	Photospheric Activity	179
5.1.1	Sunspots	180
5.1.1.1	Pre-telescopic Observations of Sunspots	180
5.1.1.2	Early Telescope Observations of Sunspots	182
5.1.1.3	Evolution of "Pores" and Single Sunspots	184
5.1.1.4	Evolution of Sunspot Groups	187
5.1.2	Sunspot Penumbra	189
5.1.2.1	Bright Ring around Sunspots	190
5.1.2.2	Microns in Sunspot Penumbrae	191
5.1.2.3	Asymmetric Evershed Flow and 'Flags' in Sunspot Spectra	194
5.1.2.4	Wave Motions in Sunspots	197
5.1.2.5	Proper Motions of Sunspots	198
5.1.3	Structure of Sunspot Umbra	198
5.1.3.1	Umbral Granules or Dots	198
5.1.3.2	Umbral Light Bridges	199
5.1.4	Bipolar Characteristics of Sunspots	200
5.1.4.1	Magnetic Fields in Sunspots	201
5.1.4.2	Measurements of Sunspot Magnetic Fields	202
5.1.4.3	Distribution of Magnetic Fields in Sunspots	204
5.1.4.4	Center-Fimb Variation of Magnetic Fields in Sunspots	205
5.1.4.5	Variation of Magnetic Field across a Sunspot	205
5.1.4.6	Direction of Lines of Force in Sunspots	206
5.1.5	Sunspot Models	206
5.1.5.1	Umbral Model	207
5.1.5.2	Penumbra Model	211
5.1.6	Wilson Effect	211
5.1.7	Life-times, Number and Latitude Variations of Sunspots	213
5.2	Faculae	216
5.2.1	Photospheric Faculae	216
5.2.2	Chromospheric Faculae or Filoculi or Plages	217
5.3	Chromospheric Activity	218
5.3.1	Hilman Bombs - Moustaches	219

5.4 Evolution of Chromospheric Active Regions	221
5.4.1 Magnetic Field and Chromospheric Filiculi	223
5.5 Large Scale Magnetic Fields	224
5.5.1 Fine Scale and Ephemeral Magnetic Regions	227
5.5.2 Dispersion and Annihilation of Magnetic Fields	229
5.5.3 Polar Magnetic Fields	229
5.5.4 Migration of Fields	232
5.5.5 Generation of Magnetic Fields	234
5.6 Solar Prominences and Filaments	237
5.6.1 Classification of Prominences	238
5.6.2 Filaments	241
5.6.3 Quiescent Prominences	242
5.6.4 Disruption Braque	243
5.6.5 Active Prominences	245
5.6.6 Loop Prominences	245
5.6.7 Eruptive Prominences	246
5.6.8 Surges and Sprays	249
5.7 Support and Stability of Prominences	250
5.8 Solar Flares	252
5.8.1 Flare Classification	253
5.8.2 Temporal Characteristics of Flares	254
5.8.3 Optical Flares	256
5.8.4 Two Ribbon Flares	257
5.8.5 Homologous Flares	259
5.8.6 Filament Associated Flares	259
5.8.7 Limb Flares	259
5.8.8 White Light Flares	260
5.8.9 Flare Associated Phenomena	260
5.8.10 Radio Emission from Flares	266
5.8.11 EUV and X-ray Flare Emissions	268
5.8.12 Gamma Ray Flares	272
5.8.13 Cosmic Ray and Proton Flares	273
5.8.14 Flare Haarves	273
5.8.15 Flare Energy Build-up	274
5.8.16 Flare Energy Release	275
5.8.17 Flare Models	277
5.9 Coronal Mass Ejection (CME)	280
5.9.1 Morphology and Development of CMEs	280
5.9.2 Source Regions of CMEs	283
5.9.3 Mechanism for Generation of CME	283
5.9.4 Driving Mechanism	284
5.9.5 X-ray Blow Outs (XBO)	284

<b>6. Observational Techniques</b>	<b>287</b>
6.1 Evaluating Solar Seeing	287
6.2 Determination of Fundamental Solar Parameters	289
6.2.1 Solar Parallax and Distance	289
6.2.2 Solar Mass	290
6.2.3 Solar Diameter, Density and Surface Gravity	290
6.2.4 Solar Luminosity $L_{\odot}$	291
6.2.5 Temperature of the Sun	292
6.2.5.1 Effective Temperature	292
6.2.5.2 Brightness Temperature	293
6.2.5.3 Color Temperature	294
6.2.5.4 Kinetic Temperature	294
6.2.5.5 Excitation Temperature	295
6.2.5.6 Ionization Temperature	296
6.2.6 Position Determination of Solar Features	296
6.2.6.1 Determining Solar $D-W$	299
6.2.6.2 Grid Overlay Template Method	302
6.2.6.3 Mathematical Method	303
<b>7. Solar Optical Instrumentation</b>	<b>307</b>
7.1 Solar Optical Telescopes	307
7.1.1 Cokerent	308
7.1.2 Heliostat and Siderostat	310
7.1.3 Coronagraph	313
7.2 Solar Image Guides	314
7.2.1 Active Mirrors and Adaptive Optics	315
7.3 Spectrographs	317
7.4 Imaging the Sun	319
7.4.1 Spectroheliograph	321
7.4.2 Narrow Band Filters	323
7.4.2.1 Principle of Lyot Type Birefringent Filters	323
7.4.2.2 Principle of the Birefringent Sole Filter	327
7.4.2.3 Transmitted Intensity through Birefringent Filter	328
7.4.2.4 Contrast Element	331
7.4.2.5 Tuning of Birefringent Filters	331
7.4.2.6 Field of View of Filters	334
7.4.2.7 Throughput or Filter Transmission	336
7.4.3 Principle of Fabry-Perot (F-P) Filter	337
7.4.3.1 Thin Solid F-P Etalon Filter	340
7.4.3.2 Lithium Niobate Solid F-P Filter	342
7.4.4 Special Purpose Narrow Band Filters	342
7.4.4.1 Magneto-Optical Filter	342

7.4.4.2 Polarizing Michelson Interferometer	344
7.4.5 Filter-based Solar Magnetograph	346
<b>8. Solar Eclipses</b>	<b>353</b>
8.1 Eclipse Geometry	353
8.1.1 Saros Cycle	354
8.2 Eclipses as Time Keepers	357
8.3 Solar Corona and Cosmic Magnetism	358
8.4 Scientific Results from Eclipse Observations	360
8.5 Observing a Total Solar Eclipse	361
8.5.1 Logistic, Site & Weather Conditions etc.	362
8.5.2 Eye Protection	363
8.5.3 What to Look for	363
<b>9. Solar Interior and Helioseismology</b>	<b>366</b>
9.0 Introduction	366
9.1 Solar Oscillations	366
9.1.1 $\nu$ - $\nu$ Diagram	370
9.1.2 Solar Standard Model (SSM)	371
9.1.3 Observations of Solar Oscillations	375
9.1.3.1 Observations from Space	376
9.1.4 Spherical Harmonic Quantum numbers $l$ , $m$ , and $n$	377
9.2 Salient Results from Helioseismology	379
9.2.1 Turbulence	380
9.2.2 Helium Abundance	381
9.2.3 Temperature and Frequency Variation with Solar Cycle	381
9.2.4 Back Side View of the Sun	382
9.2.5 Sonquakes	384
9.2.6 Velocity Structure & Rotation in the Solar Interior	385
9.2.7 The Neutrino Puzzle	386
<b>10. On the Joy of Observing the Sun – A Personal Experience</b>	<b>387</b>
Appendix I Basic Units, Conversion Factors, Physical and Astronomical Constants	389
Appendix II Glossary	391
Appendix III References	418
Appendix IV Acknowledgement for Illustrations	431
Appendix V Index	436



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## Chapter I

### Ancient Solar Astronomy

#### 1.1 Mythologies about the Sun

Among cultures of antiquity, the Sun has always occupied a central position. It caught the imagination of early man because the Sun gave him warmth, light, life, and acted as his clock. Because of this, he made the Sun his god and goddess, and worshipped it. Even today, in modern times, the Sun is worshipped in many countries and religions. Number of temples dedicated to the Sun god had been built. Many of the great cities of the ancient world were known as "The City of the Sun", such as Babel, Rhodes, and Heliopolis. More than just cult centers, scientists and astronomers of the day who lived in these cities studied the Sun, Moon and planets, in an effort to devise accurate calendar systems. What are the folklore and mythological stories about our Sun from these civilizations? It is of interest to note that many of these stories originated at different times in history, and in far off places, yet they still possess meaning to us.

#### 1.1.1 In Early Europe

In early Europe generally the Sun was considered as a male god, but among the Indo-Europeans it was a female goddess, and the Moon was a male god. In Germanic and Gaelic languages the word for Sun is still female. In many other languages a common solar association is still reflected, for example: in Sanskrit, the Sun is called 'Surya' and Savitra or Savita, in Gaul 'Sulis', in Lithuanian 'Saule', and in Latin and

German 'Sol'. In addition, in Sanskrit the solar year is called 'Sama', which is similar in modern English to the word 'summer', and Celtic words such as 'Samhain' mean summer's end. Commonality is found in the names of the Sun among various cultures.

#### 1.1.1.1 *Norse*

Europe has a long history with celestial deities. It was, in fact, named after the goddess Europa. Long ago a tribe known as Tautens colonized Europe or what is now called the European countries. Tauten people stemmed from an even older people known to us as Indo-Europeans. Early Tautens believed in a Sun goddess, Sol, and a Moon god Mani. Today in the German language, Sun is addressed as Die Sonne, a female noun, and the Moon as Der Mond, male, like the dawn goddesses of the Greeks, Hindus and Egyptians, the early Germans propitiated a dawn goddess known as Ostara, or Eostre. It is this goddess from which the Christians incorporated a ceremony known as Easter, and her season, leneten in Anglo-Saxon, or literally "spring", became the Christian "Lent", leading to the Easter holiday. This reasoning leads to the medieval belief that the Sun "danced" on Easter day. Yet Eostre's most dominant symbol remains the 'egg', which symbolizes birth and renewal.

Celestial knowledge of the Norse is seeped in symbols and myths. For thousands of years, the most sacred and important symbol was the 'Wheel of the Year', represented by a 6 or 8 spoke wheel, or by a solar cross within a wheel. Such wheels are depicted on the famed silver cauldron of Gundestrup, which shows a horned deity touching a wheel. The Norse people, who lived in what is now known as Yorkshire, often cut out a solar wheel and placed it on the tops of mounds, inserting a pole or pillar to make a solar compass or a sundial. As in many other ancient cultures, the solstices played a key role in their lives, customs, and religious traditions. Solstices refer to the most northern and southern positions of the Sun in the sky. The modern word "solstice" stems from the Latin "sol sevit", or literally meaning that the "Sun stands still", and the official modern name of the Sun, Sol also finds its origins in Latin, where sol is a feminine noun meaning 'Sun'.

Norse people devised their calendar taking into consideration the

midsummer solstice. Among the Norse, the god Balder is the most closely associated with the solstices. In a myth that explains the actions of the midsummer and midwinter Sun, Balder, the son of the god Odin, was said to die at the hands of his evil brother who wielded a mistletoe stake each summer solstice. He was reborn at the winter solstice, or what is still known in Germany as Mother Night (the 'mother' in question being the goddess who brings the new horn Sun back into existence)

There are a large number of Norse myths about the Sun. In the epic of Sigurd, also known as Sigurd or Siegfried, the Sun's magic sword is named Bahnung, which means 'Sun beam'. In this tale, the hero comes across a valkyrie surrounded in a ring of fire. It is a lovely Bruahild, who symbolizes a dawn maiden. The Saxon god, Saxnot (sax-sword) also had a magic sword, and one was said to have hung in his temple in such a way as to reflect the dawn's first light. Even Odin was associated with the Sun. The tale explains that Odin, in search of wisdom, once went to the well of Mimir (memory) to drink deeply and gain knowledge in the process. The guardian of the well asked one eye as a price for the act. Odin plucked the eye and threw it into the well, where it became the Sun.

Presently in Scandinavia, on the eve of the summer solstice, thousands of people flock to the hillsides to light bonfires and to watch the Sun set, following a tradition started in the dawn of time. Though originally a tribute to the Sun, the event has since been assimilated by the Christians and transferred to honor St. John. Another notable, and still living midsummer tradition is the construction of large wheels made of wood or straw which are set on fire and rolled down hills to represent the Sun's journey toward the winter.

#### 1.1.1.2 *England/Ireland/Scotland*

Norse tribes such as the Angles, Saxons, and native people of areas such as the Celts and Picts, invaded and influenced the English-Scottish people. This explains the Irish name for the Sun goddess Círan, a female noun. It indicates a close relationship with the Celts culture and their Indo-European descendants. The Irish concept of the 'solar cross' was prevalent and the 'central mound cosmology' was considered sacred centers known as 'Tara'. They were constructed in such a way that from



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