

Valentine's Day

Pagan Origins of a Christianized Festival

As an estimated one billion cards are exchanged this St Valentine's Day spare a thought for the ancient Pagan custom that the Catholic Church has tried to hide from you, for St Valentine's Day is the Eve of Lupercalia, the Pagan Roman festival of fertility. In fact, the 14th of February was the day specially set aside for love lotteries in Pagan Rome. A holiday devoted to Juno, Queen of the Gods, and patroness of marriage, the 14th was also the day on which young girls' names were written on slips of paper and thrown into jars to be picked out by the boys. Chooser and chosen would then be partnered for the duration of the Lupercalia festival. Such arbitrary pairings often resulted in lasting relationships. The Catholic Church later substituted the names of dead saints in place of those of flesh-and-blood girls to subvert the lusty Pagan practice. The Lupercalia proper began on the 15th of February with animal sacrifice and ritual flagellation. After slaughtering a goat and dog in the sacred grotto of the she-wolf who suckled the legendary founders of Rome, the young men would run through the streets whipping women and crops with the flayed hide of the goat to promote fertility. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Lupercalia, far from being restricted to Rome, was practised in other cities in Italy and Gaul. Dating from remotest antiquity, the Lupercalia was celebrated until as late as the reign of Anastasius I in 491-518 CE. It was towards the end of the 5th century in 498 CE that Pope Galesius decided to dedicate the Eve of Lupercalia to the long-dead priest. The lottery system was banned as being un-Christian and the Pope did his best to make people forget about other un-Christian ideas such as fertility. However, the Pagan principles of the people proved irrepressible. Memories of the Roman Lupercalia combined with folklore beliefs in Britain and France that the 14th of February marked the beginning of the mating season amongst birds to ensure that this day would persist in the popular imagination as a day of love.

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The First Valentine's Card

The oldest extant Valentine message is a poem written by Charles, Duke of Orleans, in 1415 to his wife. He had good reason to write: he was imprisoned in the Tower of London after being captured at the Battle of Agincourt. It proved a popular idea and some years later Henry V hired John Lydgate to compose a Valentine missive to Catherine of Valois. Despite such early precedents, St Valentine's Day did not become a widely celebrated event in Britain until the 17th century. Printed cards did not appear until the late 18th century, but it was not until the 1840s that Esther A. Howland started selling the first mass-produced Valentine cards in the United States. But why send a card and why make it anonymous? Either we believe one of the Christian legends and accept that we all celebrate the giving of a love token of 3rd century priest by sending a replica, or look deeper. The giver's identity is carefully concealed. The card itself acts simply as the vehicle of the giver's desire. The message that accompanies such cards is most often in the imperative, Be My Valentine, Be My Love, and so on. The structure of this exchange is similar to many magical formulae. So, the next time you ask someone to be your Valentine, try not to forget that you are engaging in a millennia old fertility rite and, what is more, dabbling in a little magic to boot.

LUPERCALIA



You can find out more about witchcraft and Wicca at Dr Leo Ruickbie's website Witchology.com. Dr Ruickbie is the director of the Witchcraft Information Centre & Archive (WICA) and the author of *Witchcraft Out of the Shadows* (2004) and *Faustus: The Life and Times of a Renaissance Magician* (2009).

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