

The Roman Festival of Lupercalia

On February 15 the Lupercalia festival was held, in which Juno was involved as Juno Lucina. Despite its infamous reputation as a licentious festival, it is usually understood to be a rite of purification and fertility. Lupercalia was a very ancient and very popular holiday that included rituals to purify the city of Rome and bring fertility to it. The celebrations were centered on the Palatine Hill, where the twins Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome, were said to have originally settled. On this day a goat (or goats) and a dog were sacrificed. From the skin of the goats were made loincloths, which were the only clothing worn by certain groups of young men who ran the bounds of the city carrying whips, also made from the sacrificed goats' skin; with these they hit the people they came across. This act was thought to not only drive away the bad but also to draw in the good in the form of fertility for the people and the city in general, and it is said that women hoping to get pregnant or looking for an easy time in childbirth would deliberately put themselves in their way so they could be hit. Plutarch, who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, when the Lupercalia was in full swing, said that because the Lupercalia was so heavily involved with purification the day was called *februata* or *dies februata* ("the day of purification").

Thus, Lupercalia (from which some modern sources contend Valentine's Day originates) was also known as *dies Februatus*, after the purification instruments called *februa*, the basis for the Roman month named Februarius. (Some sources connect the Latin word for fever (*febris*) with the same idea of purification or purging, due to the "sweating out" commonly associated with fevers. Other

modern sources, much less authoritative, connect the Latin word *febris* with the fiery fever of love—thus assuming Lupercalia to be the origin of Valentine’s Day.) Lupercalia can be traced as far back as the 6th century BCE and it is commonly thought that the annual festival took place to honor the she-wolf who is credited with the founding of Rome itself and to please the Roman fertility god Lupercus. The rituals during Lupercalia combined the features of an ancient wolf-cult and fire-cult. The priests of the god of the wolf-cult, Soranus, performed a rite in which they walked through burning coals and yet were not burned. During the sexually charged part Lupercalia in honor of the Roman fertility god Lupercus, which *turned society upside down* (another historical instance of what social anthropologists term “rituals of social inversion”), the priests of Pan ran through the streets of Rome, helping to make young women fertile. Young men also randomly chose a woman’s name on a billet from a jar to be coupled with for the duration of the festival. Often, the couple stayed together until the following year’s festival.