

The Origin of the Month of February

February takes its name from the Latin *februa*, meaning “religious purification” and so means “the month of purification” or “the cleansing month,” referring to the numerous festivals of that theme held then, especially the Roman festival of Lupercalia. (Februa: Middle English Februarius, Latin Februarius [“of Februa”], Latin *dies februatus*: “day of purification.”)

Februarius had 28 days, until circa 450 BC when it had 23 or 24 days on some of every second year, until Julius when it had 29 days on every fourth year and 28 days otherwise. In the early days of the lunar calendar, March, as the month when spring takes hold, had been thought of as the first month of the year; and so many holidays in the last half (the waning half) of February centered around the theme of endings, including the Terminalia on the 23rd, honoring Terminus, the God of boundary stones. (The 23rd for whatever reason had a ritual significance as the last day of the year, even though the month mostly held 28 days; in a lunar calendar the months are aligned with the moon phases, but since the lunar cycle fits imprecisely into the solar one—it’s off by 11 days—every other year or so, depending on the system, an entire extra month needed to be added to keep it more or less in sync, and the Terminalia had been the traditional time for doing so.)

February was an important festival month in the Roman calendar and began with a purification ceremony known as Juno Februa (“Juno the Purifier”). The most prominent of the Roman matriarchal deities, Juno was essentially the goddess of essence itself. She is considered a moon goddess because her worship originally

revolved around the lunar cycle: She is the state of Being, illustrated by the waxing white moon appearing out of the black void.

In the Roman calendar, February is a month of universal purification, and begins the new year. In book II of his *Fasti*, Ovid derives the month's name from *februae* (expiations); lustrations designed to remove spiritual contamination or ritual pollution accumulated in the previous year.

The Romans, being animists, believed not only plants, animals and inanimate objects such as rocks, mountains and bodies of water possessed a spirit (*genius loci*), but core truths or principles as well. Thus, the month of vital ceremonies required more than simple purification practices, it was necessary to invoke the essence of purification herself: Juno Regina (the queen goddess). Some say Juno Februa occurred at the second full moon following the Winter Solstice prior to Rome's adoption of a solar calendar, but by the beginning of the common era, the date of the festival was fixed at 40 days after the Winter Solstice festivities.

Juno Februtis was an aspect of that great Roman Goddess as a purifier and fertility Goddess, who was especially connected with the month of February and the festivities in its latter half. (She would seem to be related to Juno Lucina as a childbirth Goddess.) February was the month of purification to the Romans because in their early calendar it was the last month of the year and so considered an appropriate time to get rid of the bad, stale, or unclean in *preparation for the new year*. (There is also a Roman god by the name of Februus, a deity dedicated to purification, who was considered the patron god of the month of February. He may personify February's cleansing festivals. It's possible that Februus was associated with a goddess named Februa as his female counterpart.) All that said, Juno

Februtis would seem to be an aspect of Juno connected with the purificatory rites of February, and the fertility and creativity that can be had when *the old is cleared out to make way for the new*. (The references to Juno Februtis are few, however, and much of the information about her would seem to be of more recent derivation. *The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* give the names Februlis, Februata, Februta, or Februalis as alternates.)

Under Christian rule in the Roman Empire, Juno Februa became a celebration of the purification of the Virgin Mary following the birth of Jesus. The mass was celebrated with a procession involving the lights of many candles, the same as the earlier Roman holiday. Mary took on the role of Juno and the day's association with purification as well as Juno's white lily, which became a symbol of Mary's renewed purity. Juno, however, though a mother like the Blessed Virgin, required no such purification because the idea of pollution in childbirth was foreign to her followers. She came to bestow purification, not to partake of it, and would give birth a full month later to her son, the god Mars. The birth of Mars was also a virgin birth: Juno conceived through the fragrance of the white lily, which was a part of Juno herself. In other words, Juno impregnated herself and the white lily symbolizes self-generation.

From Juno Februa and Lupercalia to Candlemas

While there are many longstanding pagan holidays observed at the beginning of February, the Christian celebration of Candlemas sprouted from a specific Roman observance.

Some attribute Candlemas to Gelasius I, the 5th century pope, however, it appears his problem was with the climactic February Lupercalia, an orgiastic fertility festival, which some modern sources contend was eventually replaced by St. Valentine's Day. The anti-pagan Gelasius may have been successful at quashing Lupercalia, but people continued to celebrate the rite of Juno. As a consequence, in 684, Pope Sergius I officially instituted the mass of the Purification of the Virgin Mary to be celebrated February 2 on the church calendar. (Another successful co-optation of a popular pagan festival by the Church fathers.)

From the beginning, many theologians protested the event, arguing that Mary would have required no purification because she had been impregnated not through sexual congress but by the Holy Spirit. Within the logic of Christianity this was correct, but as time wore on, the church was plagued by conflicts at Candlemas, not only by remnants of the Roman pagan cult, but by propitiation to weather deities and fire goddesses elsewhere. The tension between theological purists and synergistic forces was eventually satisfied by fixing the time of the presentation of Jesus at the temple, which is referenced in scripture, at 40 days following his birth, or the 2nd of February. Nevertheless, the focus on Mary remained popular with the masses, so the celebration of the purification of the Virgin, while declining in emphasis, never totally vanished.

Today among witches and many other pagans, February 2nd is a time for vows and initiations. Many practices are based on Celtic and Germanic beliefs, but the Roman observation of Juno Februa also fits nicely into this understanding of the holy day. During this time of commitment, one's intentions should be unassailable, infused by the essence of Juno Februa herself.