

# The history behind Valentine's Day

Written by Staff Reports

Friday, 09 February 2024 00:00

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Nowadays, Valentine's Day is full of flowers, cards, and heart-shaped candies. But before all of that, it may have been a Pagan holiday that was then "stolen" by the Christians.

## **A PAGAN HOLIDAY**

Some historians believe that Valentine's Day was placed in the middle of February in an effort to "Christianize" the Pagan celebration of Lupercalia.

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Celebrated at the Ides of February, or Feb. 15, Lupercalia was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus.

To begin the festival, members of the Luperci, an order of Roman priests, would gather at a sacred cave where the infants Romulus and Remus were believed to have been cared for by a she-wolf or lupa.

The priests would sacrifice a goat, for fertility, and a dog, for purification. They would then divide the goat's hide into strips, dip them into the sacrificial blood and take to the streets, gently slapping both women and crop fields with the goat hide.

Far from being fearful, Roman women welcomed the touch of the hides because it was believed to make them more fertile in the coming year.

Later in the day, according to legend, all the young women in the city would place their names in a big urn. The city's bachelors would each choose a name and become paired for the year with his chosen woman. These matches often ended in marriage.

Lupercalia survived the initial rise of Christianity but was outlawed—as it was deemed “un-Christian”—at the end of the fifth century, when Pope Gelasius declared Feb. 14 St. Valentine's Day. It was not until much later, however, that the day became definitively associated with love.

During the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed in France and England that Feb. 14 was the beginning of birds' mating season, which added to the idea that Valentine's Day should be a day for romance.

The English poet Geoffery Chaucer was the first to record St. Valentine's Day as a day of romantic celebration in his 1375 poem *Parliament of Foules*, writing, “For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne's day / Whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate.”

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Valentine greetings were popular as far back as the Middle Ages, though written Valentine's didn't begin to appear until after 1400. The oldest known valentine still in existence today was a poem written in 1415 by Charles, Duke of Orleans, to his wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London following his capture at the Battle of Agnicourt. (The greeting is now part of the manuscript collection of the British Library in London.

Several years later, it is believed that King Henry V hired a writer named John Lydgate to compose a valentine note to Catherine of Valois.

### ***WHO WAS ST. VALENTINE?***

The Catholic Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were martyred.

One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret.

When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Still others insist that it was Saint Valentine of Terni, a bishop, who was the true namesake of the holiday. He, too, was beheaded by Claudius II outside Rome.

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Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons, where they were often beaten and tortured.

According to one legend, an imprisoned Valentine actually sent the first “valentine” greeting himself after he fell in love with a young girl—possibly his jailor’s daughter—who visited him during his confinement.

Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter signed “From your Valentine,” an expression that is still in use today.

Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories all emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic and—most importantly—romantic figure. By the Middle Ages, perhaps thanks to this reputation, Valentine would become one of the most popular saints in England and France.

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