



Candlemas: Feast of Flames (Holiday Series)

By Amber K, Azrael Arynn K

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Beyond the darkness of winter, there is an oasis of light and warmth on the journey from solstice to spring. Known as Candlemas, Imbolg, Brigantia, or Lupercus, it is a hope-filled celebration held in early February to welcome the returning light and the promise of spring. *Candlemas* sheds light on the origins, lore, and customs of this ancient holy day with:

- Myths and stories: Brigit the Goddess, Brigid the Saint, and her meaning today
- Candlemas magick and divination: flame scrying, hearthside divination, candle magick, and protection magick
- Late winter goodies and feasts: Brede's Braid Bread, Guinness Stew, Bubble and Squeak, Mulled Cider or Wine
- February festivals and traditions: rituals for purification, blessings, and renewal, from the Irish, British, Scots, Welsh, Norwegian, Greek, Roman, and Chinese cultures
- Seasonal crafts and games: Brigid's crosses or sun wheels, "Begging for Biddy," and a Brigit corn dolly

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Amber K is a third degree priestess of the Wiccan faith. She was initiated at the Temple of the Pagan Way in Chicago and served on the Council of Elders there. Her books on magick and the Craft have been widely circulated in the United States and Europe, and for nearly 25 years she has traveled across the U.S. teaching the Craft. She has worked with Circle and the Re-Formed Congregation of the Goddess, and served as National First Officer of the Covenant of the Goddess for three terms. She is a founder of Our Lady of the Woods and the Ladywood Tradition of Wicca, and currently is Executive Director of Ardantane, a Wiccan/Pagan seminary in northern New Mexico.

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1

The Festivals of February

In the northern hemisphere, this festival comes while winter's grip is still upon the land. Today we call it Candlemas, Imbolg, or by other names. Once this part of the year was called the Wolf-month, or Dead-month. For many of our ancestors, snow covered the sleeping earth, the nights were still long, and the gaiety of the solstice holidays had long since faded. Food supplies were beginning to look scanty and moldy, and the promise of spring seemed far away. And yet?they celebrated. In the cold darkness, they found reason for hope: a gust of wind less chill, a few minutes more of gray daylight, a solitary crocus pushing through the snow. They created a holy day, a festival, a feast; and under many different names it is with us today.

The festival has been called Imbolg and Oimelc, the Feast Day of Saint Brigid, Candlemas, Lá Fhéile Bríð, and by names spoken in the mists of prehistory, but lost today. There is an overlapping complex of holy days in Europe, clustered around the first to the third of February; and several other related festivals later in the month. We will explore several of these special events, beginning with the days when humanity's hold on survival seemed tenuous at best.

The Ice Ages and the End of Winter

If winter is an inconvenience for some people now, it was a serious challenge to our medieval ancestors. And to our still more distant ancestors, it was a gamble with death every single year.

Imagine the Paleolithic era?the Old Stone Age. Imagine not from our perspective, as a dim prequel to civilization with its abundant food, central heating, and vast transportation networks. Imagine being there, and there is . . . all there is.

Winter, on the vast steppes of Asia. For a thousand miles in any direction there is nothing to break the force of the frigid wind. Gray skies, glaciers far to the north, grass brown and sere where the endless breeze has stripped away the snow. There are seventeen in your clan, since your grandmother left the group. She was

forty-one, an ancient crone, and could no longer keep up with the migration. Now the clan follows the tracks of a herd of musk oxen, hoping for food.

That night you camp in the lee of a low mound, and the people chew on the last dried strips of mammoth meat from a kill made weeks ago. The hunters ranging ahead have not caught sight of the musk oxen, and their tracks may be erased by morning. The wind howls like the spirits of the lonely dead, and there is a current of fear and hopelessness among the living. More than one clansman expects to join his ancestors soon.

The shaman stands. She is a little young for her position, but was the closest thing to an apprentice old Nev had, before he died last fall of the coughing sickness. She speaks: “The Moon has passed through Her cycle once and more, since we marked the Longest Night. You all know this. But the nights still seem long, and food is scarce. You wonder if the winter will ever end, if warmth will ever return to the land. Now I say this: I have measured the length of the nights, as Nev taught me, and they are shorter. The daylight grows. This is the message of the Great Mother, Her promise that spring will come! She sends another message; I have dreamed it. Within two days we shall find the herd, and as much meat as we can carry. So pass around what is left of the mammoth meat; eat what you wish, for more is coming. Trust the Mother!”

She speaks with authority for one of fourteen summers. The people believe, and soon the last of the food is shared out among the clan, and they dance around the hot, leaping flames of the bone-fire they have built.

The Bear Goddess of Neolithic Europe

One of the oldest forms of the Goddess is that of the bear, and one of the earliest recorded holy days of February honors Her in that form, perhaps because the awakening of hibernating animals is one sure sign of spring’s approach. According to Marija Gimbutas, a scholar of Old European deities, “The concept of the goddess in bear shape was deeply ingrained in mythical thought through the millennia and survives in contemporary Crete as “Virgin Mary of the Bear.” In the cave of Acrotiri near ancient Kydonia, a festival in honour of Panagia (Mary) Arkoudiotissa (‘she of the bear’) is celebrated on the second day of February.”¹ The bear was apparently a central figure in the Paleolithic religions of Old Europe and Asia. The hundreds of bear-headed clay figurines found at archaeological sites in Eastern Europe seem to represent the primal mother-goddess; some are seated on thrones and decorated with lunar crescents. Female bears are known for their fierce devotion to their young, and so the bear was a symbol of motherhood.² As the bear protects her cubs, so the bear-goddess protects the tribes by bringing spring with her emergence from winter’s sleep. Bears are also connected with water; bear-shaped vases of early European cultures are covered with zigzags, chevrons, and striated diamonds, all patterns symbolic of flowing water. The themes of water and fire appear again and again in connection with end-of winter celebrations; fire for warmth against the cold, water thawing from ice and snow as spring returns.

The Eleusinian Mysteries of Greece

Let us move ahead thousands of years to another spring festival, in which the goddess has divided into a more human Mother and Her returning Daughter. In ancient Greece, the lesser Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated at the end of January and beginning of February. This festival commemorated the return of Persephone from the Underworld to Her mother Demeter. Demeter, as you may recall, was a Mother Goddess Who brought life to the world, and made the crops grow and the bees give honey. When Her daughter Persephone was stolen away (or eloped, in some versions of the story) to the Land of the Dead with the god Hades, Demeter mourned, life slipped from the land, and the first winter came.

A compromise arranged by the gods allowed Persephone to reign as Queen of the Underworld for half of each year, and return to the world of the living for half. When She returns, bringing the spring, the goddess Hekate and the spirits of the dead chosen for rebirth accompany Her.

The Greeks held a great celebration to mark the occasion. First there was a torchlight procession, in which the participants combed the land and even waded into the sea, recreating the search for Demeter’s lost daughter. When word came that Persephone was found, the assemblage cheered and held a great feast to

celebrate.

Lupercalia

The Romans regarded February as a time of cleansing and purification?Februarius mensis, “the month of ritual purification.” However, fertility and love were also popular themes. Several festivals were celebrated, but their biggest event was the Lupercalia on February 15. This holiday was named for the Lupercal, the grotto where the infants Romulus and Remus came ashore after floating down the Tiber River in a basket. There they were suckled and raised by a wolf, and later grew up to found the city and nation of Rome. Why was the sacred bear of ancient Europe largely replaced by the wolf in classical Rome? Edain McCoy believes that “Lupercalia celebrated the beginning of the wolves’ mating season. . . . Wolves mate for life and their union was seen not only as a sign of spring, but of the eternal union of the Goddess and her Sun God.”³ In part, the festival of Lupercalia honored Faunus (also called Lupercus), a goat-footed god of Nature, flocks, crops and gardens, music, animals, and much more. Goats were sacrificed to him, and then his priests took to the streets wearing goatskin loincloths. They were known as the Luperci (the priests, not their loincloths.) Each carried goatskin thongs and their role was to hit everyone they saw; presumably this token scourging was a symbolic ritual purification.

Married women received a bonus effect, however; the thongs supposedly encouraged fertility. Technically, the Luperci were supposed to strike them gently across the palms, but apparently some women were so serious about the fertility issue that they stripped naked to encourage the Luperci to go further.

The younger people celebrated by putting the names of willing girls into a jar; the boys would draw names and discover who were to be their partners for the festivities. This custom spread and was still popular in England and Scotland hundreds of years later.

Pope Gelasius I, who reigned over the Roman Church from 492–6 c.e., “banned this cheerfully scandalous festival and met with such an outcry that he had to apologize.”⁴ In 496 the feast of Lupercalia was changed to the feast of Saint Valentine, and instead of girls’ names, the names of various saints were put into a box for people to draw out. Prayers would be offered to the saint you drew.⁵ We can only guess how wildly popular this change was with young people. Oddly enough, the custom seems to have evaporated over the years.

The Roman Church was finally able to officially abolish Lupercalia, although its replacement was never quite as respectable as the Church fathers might have hoped.

The Lupercalia was definitely the social event of the season; however, the Greeks and Romans were not stingy with their festivals. A citizen who didn’t have to work for a living could spend the entire month preparing for holy days, celebrating them, or recovering from them. Here is a sampling of the Roman and Greek holidays for the month:

January 31 to February 2: Februalia dedicated to Vesta, “The Shining One,” goddess of fire and the hearth.

February 2: The day honoring Juno Februata as the virgin mother of Mars.

February 6: Festival of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, beauty, creation, vegetation and flowers; known to the Romans as Venus.

February 7 to 9: Feast of the Old Greek, Roman and Slavic goddess Artemis/Diana/Diwitsa, as creatrix, midwife of birthing creatures of all kinds, protector of the young, and punisher of child abusers.

February 12: Festival of Diana as protectress of wildlife; she was also a Triple Goddess of the Moon, Virgin, Mother, and Huntress.

February 14: Feast of Juno, Queen of the Heavens, consort of Jupiter, Great Mother, goddess of Earth and the moon, protectress of women.

February 15: She’s back! Festival of Love for Aphrodite.

February 16: Celebration of Victoria, goddess of victory.

February 26: Day of Hygeia, goddess of health and healing.

February 27: Day of Selene, the Mother aspect of the moon goddess, patroness of magick, intuition, fecundity, and the tides of the ocean.

Each of these deities had other major festivals as well; these are simply their holy days that happened to be in

February.

The Celts and Imbolg

Further north, the Celtic peoples marked the season in their own way. Imagine yourself in an ancient Irish village: the solstice is past, the days are dreary, the memory of warmth seems like a fading dream, and the promise of spring is scarcely to be seen. It is then, “Late in January, as the Wolf Moon wanes or the Chaste Moon waxes to full, we begin to prepare for the Imbolc Sabbat.”⁶

Many of the Celtic peoples were pastoral herders, making their living from their flocks of sheep. Naturally enough, their seasonal festivals reflected their livelihood. One of the major Celtic festivals was Imbolg (or Imbolc), pronounced “em-bowl/g” or “immol’g,” (with a tiny hesitation or unstressed vowel after the “I”). Imbolg means “in the belly” and refers specifically to the pregnancy of the sheep, and more broadly to Mother Earth quickening with new life.

A second name for this holiday is Oimelc (“oy-melk”), meaning “ewe’s milk,” since the ewes were lactating for their new lambs. A folk verse from the Isle of Man makes oblique reference to the abundant milk, calling the holiday “White Brigid’s Day.” Milk was not simply for the lambs, or a nice beverage for people to drink with their cookies, but an important part of the family’s nourishment. Because it was precious, it was worthy of the gods; so an offering of milk might be left out overnight, or poured out on the threshold or the ground, as a libation to thank the goddess and encourage still more bounty.

Imbolg is also considered one of the four great Celtic fire festivals, “but here the emphasis is on light rather than heat, the strengthening spark of light beginning to pierce the gloom of Winter.”⁷ The days technically begin to lengthen at Yule, the Winter Solstice, but by Imbolg we can clearly see the change. Truly the sun’s light is with us longer each day. This is the first harbinger of spring, our assurance that the Wheel is turning and the long, warm days of summer will return. The Scots celebrate the growing light not only with Imbolg but also with Up-Kelly-Aa, a fire festival on January 28 that honors the sun goddess.

It is a busy time of year, and the air is filled with anticipation. Housewives check the family pantry and root cellar, hoping that enough food remains to feed the family through the spring; in the barn, the farmer casts a practiced eye over his hay and grain?it’s a long way yet to the harvest! But with luck and the goddess’ blessing, the fields will be ready for ploughing soon. In the coastal villages the fisherfolk carefully check their boats for winter damage and begin to repair their nets.

Imbolg is about the first signs of spring, the promise of returning life, about sunlight and ripening and the growing conviction that the community will survive another year. Marion Green, who lives in England, brings the feeling to life as she says, “Mother Nature is seen as being renewed at this time; she becomes the Maiden of Spring, when the lambs’ tails of hazel catkins tremble on the bare branches, and the hardiest of bulbs begin their new lease of life, thrusting green spears through the thawing mould. . . . The gamboling lambs seemed to herald the warmer days to come, and overhead, the harbingers of spring, the overwintering birds, were beginning to verbally stake their claims on their territory and sing a song of mating as the weeks of February passed by.”⁸

After a long, hard winter, who could look forward to all this and not want to celebrate?

The Norse Festivals of February

In this season of abundant celebrations, the Norse were by no means lacking in the festival spirit. Prudence Priest, an Asatru priestess, explains that “Among Norse/Teutonic heathens ‘Valentine’s Day’ has long been celebrated as the Feast of Vali, the Honor of Vara, and even occasionally as the climax of Barri. These heathens are known for their rowdy celebrations. . . .”⁹

The Feast of Vali is a solar festival marking the strengthening power of the sun, the beginning of the end of winter, and the survival of the community. It also celebrates loyalty and kinship, and is named after Vali, a son of Woden whose role in mythology was to avenge the death of the beloved god Baldur.

The Honor of Vara is a lunar festival in which the community witnesses and celebrates the vows of lovers. Vara is the goddess who hears us when we swear oaths or make promises, and stands for truth and responsibility. She has been called “the Norse Athena,” and is also analogous to Ma’at, the Egyptian goddess of truth. Vara is a companion of Freya, “The Lady” who is essentially the Norse Queen of the Gods.

Barri is a fertility festival that technically takes place at the lunar New Year, though most Norse religionists simply celebrate it beginning February 1 or 2 and until the full moon in Leo. It commemorates the courtship of the giantess, Gerda, symbolizing Mother Earth, by Freyr, god of fertility, and the power of the waxing sun.

The Norse also celebrated Imbolg under the name Disting-tid. This was the occasion for the “Charming of the Plow,” when plows would be dragged out of winter storage as spring approached, and blessed so that the harvests would be abundant. The event was also a celebration of the first breaking of the ground by metal, which was a huge technological leap from wooden plows. To our ancestors it meant that more land could be cultivated, and thus abundant food produced for their families; a village’s chances of surviving the winter were enormously improved.

The festival’s mythology includes the dwarves, who were both legendary miners of metal from the ground and masters of smithcraft, and crafted the magickal tools for the gods?everything from Thor’s hammer to Frey’s boat.¹⁰ This element of Disting-tid echoes the stories of Brigit, who was the Celtic goddess of smiths. It is, then, doubly appropriate to bless the tools of any craftsperson or artisan on this day. Among Wiccans, ritual tools such as chalices, wands, and pentacles are often cleansed and consecrated at this time.

Festivals of the British Isles

The British Isles have seen many waves of invasion, and it would not have been surprising if the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes of northern Europe had brought very different customs to Celtic England. Yet it seems their customs for this season were quite harmonious with Imbolg.

The second moon or “monath” of Anglo-Saxon England (circa 700 c.e.) was called solmo-nath or “cake-month” by the Venerable Bede, a scholarly monk of the era. Jarman Lord, a modern Pagan linguist, believes that Bede misheard “. . . suhlmo-nath, or ‘Plow-month,’ the month when the plow was charmed.”¹¹ This would be an interesting parallel to modern Pagan practice, when ritual tools are consecrated at the first of February. Lord suggests that Suhlmo-nath was also the occasion of Ewemeoluc . . . “the day the ewes come into milk.” For Celt or Saxon, the facts of life were the same.

The festival that is called the Feast Day of Saint Brigid in Ireland is known as Laa’l Breeshey on the Isle of Man, halfway between Ireland and Wales. The Manx believe that Brigid came to the Isle of Man to receive the veil from Saint Maughold.

To commemorate the event, the lady of the house would gather green rushes, then stand on the threshold and invite Saint Brigid to enter and stay the night. In Manx, she would call out:

Brede, Brede, tar gys my thie tar dyn thie ayms nocht

Foshil jee yn dorrys da Brede, as ihig da Brede e heet staigh,

Which translates as:

Brigid, Brigid, come to my house, come to my house tonight.

Open the door for Brigid, and let Brigid come in.

Then the rushes were placed by the hearth as a bed for the saint.¹²

Author Marion Green describes a festival held in St. Ives, Cornwall, at the beginning of February. People of all ages take part, and many enjoy guising, or dressing in fancy masks and costumes. Local musicians entertain the crowd as they gather to dress Saint Ea’s well with early spring flowers and ivy. Saint Ea, it is said, arrived from Ireland floating on an ivy leaf. The well cures eye complaints and poor eyesight, and runs even in the driest summers.

In the churchyard “a silver ball is tossed against the church wall and when it falls among the gathered people it is carried off, usually by the younger villagers. As the church clock starts to strike twelve whoever has the ball is rewarded with a small money prize. Sometimes new pennies which have been heated up are thrown for the children to catch from the balcony of the town hall. Both the shiny silver ball and the bright, hot new pennies represent ancient symbols of the Sun whose power is being reawakened to bring about the warmer days of spring.”¹³

Once again the immemorial themes of water and fire are at the heart of a February celebration. One wonders, though, just how hot those pennies were; and whether the healing powers of Saint Ea’s well extended to

toasted fingers.

February 1 is also the Wives' Feast in Ireland, and the Wives' Feast Day in northern England, once the Celtic kingdom of Brigantia. On this day women are honored as the preservers of the home and community. It is appropriately celebrated by making dinner for the lady of the house, and presenting small gifts to her and for the household. While no connection with the arrival of spring is immediately evident, the fire theme reappears; women are honored in part as keepers of the hearth.

Brigit's Eve/the Feast Day of Saint Brigid

If February 1 and 2 belong to anyone, they belong to Brigit?the Celtic goddess of Ireland who may be the same personage venerated by Catholics worldwide as Saint Brigid. (In our research, we found that the commonly accepted spelling of the name of the goddess is Brigit, and the commonly accepted spelling of the name of the saint is Brigid.)

Her festival is a time when "home and hearth were cleaned and blessed, a new fire was kindled, offerings of reparation were given, and peace was made. . . ."14 Chapter 2 will be devoted to her mythology, her reported life as an abbess in fourth- and fifth-century Ireland, and the customs and traditions surrounding her legend. We will see all the strands and symbols of the season?lambs and light, fertility and warmth, hope and magic?come together in Brigit's story.

Candlemas

The early Roman Church frequently adopted the dates of Pagan festivals and invested them with Christian meanings, so as to encourage conversions to what was then a new religion. The theology might be different, but the timing of the seasonal celebrations was familiar. Christmas was placed near Yule, Easter near Ostara, Lammas at Lughnassad, and so on.

February 2 was not only the date of Celtic Imbolg, it was the day honoring Juno Februata as the virgin mother of Mars, the goddess who brought the fever (febris) of love to the world. (Christian authorities said the pagan people went about Rome with "candles burning in worship of this woman Februa.") A festival so important to Pagans everywhere was a prime target for co-option by the Church. Pope Sergius renamed the holy day in order to "undo this foul use and custome, and turn it onto God's worship and our Lady's . . . so that now this feast is solemnly hallowed throughout all Christendom."¹⁵

Thus February 2 was selected for the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin. This date was forty days after Christmas, the time span required in Jewish law for a woman to be considered cleansed after the birth of a son. (Had Jesus been a girl, eighty days would have been required, and the Festival of the Purification would have taken place about March 14.)¹⁶ At any rate, this was the day that Mary took the baby Jesus to the Temple, where it was prophesied that he would be a Light to the World.

The other new name for this holy day was Candlemas. The name would appear to refer to a Catholic mass at which the candles were blessed. However, Jarman Lord, a researcher into Saxon religion, believes that "the suffix 'mas' probably does not refer to a Catholic mass. Quite the reverse. The Anglo-Saxons were likely to term any feast day a maest, meaning 'food-mixture' or 'feast;' the term was their own. And we may be very sure our ancestors feasted every chance they got."¹⁷

However the name arose, Christians embraced the wonderful symbolism of candlelight. In England, which could be very gray and gloomy during February, "the shadowy recesses of medieval churches twinkled brightly as each member of the congregation carried a lighted candle in procession around the church, to be blessed by the priest. Afterwards, the candles were brought home to be used to keep away storms, demons and other evils."¹⁸ The custom was banned during the Reformation because it smacked of Pagan magic. However, candlelight has proven far too popular as an adjunct of ritual to disappear quietly into the night; today, the descendants of those stern Protestant reformers enjoy candles on their altars.

The Feast Day of Saint Blaise

February 3 is the feast day of Saint Blaise, Blasius, or Blazey, an Armenian bishop who was martyred about 316 c.e. Blaise was a physician who became a Christian priest, and during the persecutions was denounced by the Roman governor Agricolaus. The governor's men tracked Blaise to a cave hidden in the forest, and

found him surrounded by wild animals.¹⁷ Despite this distraction, the soldiers managed to arrest and imprison him. While in prison he saved the life of a boy who was choking on a fishbone, and this was considered miraculous.

Blasius was quite popular during the Middle Ages, probably because he was thought to perform miraculous cures for both people with throat troubles, and animals. Priests performed a special blessing in his name: two candles were consecrated, held crossed together, and touched to the throat of the churchgoer, intoning the words “May God at the intercession of Saint Blasius preserve you from throat troubles and every other evil.”¹⁹

Saint Blaise is not well documented; The Catholic Encyclopedia states candidly that “All the particulars concerning his life and martyrdom which are found in the Acts are purely legendary and have no claim to historical worth.”²⁰

He does appear in various Pagan mythologies, and even in the legends of King Arthur, where he was Merlin’s teacher and mentor.²¹ Other sources suggest that Blaise is actually Brigid in disguise. (How Brigid, either as a Celtic goddess or an Irish nun, could metamorphosize into a male Armenian bishop is not entirely clear.) It is true that Blaise, like Brigid, is connected with fire; it may be that the word “blaze” comes directly from his name.²²

There is yet another intriguing theory about his origins, explained by Barbara Walker. She believes that Blaise was a “. . . Spurious canonization of the Slavic horse-god Vlaise, or Vlas, or Volos: a consort of the lunar Diana. He was Christianized about the eighth century, but kept his pagan function as a patron of animals.”²³

Saint Valentine’s Day

Valentine’s Day is another of those Christian holidays that happened to land on a Pagan celebration and eventually replace it?sort of. It is based on the legend of Valentine, a priest who lived in Rome during the reign of Emperor Claudius II. According to legend, Claudius had a problem: nobody wanted to join the Roman army, and empires need big armies. Few men wanted to leave their families and march into a howling wilderness on the edge of nowhere to be slaughtered by barbarians?despite the handsome pay: a few ounces of salt each week. In the best tradition of psychotic emperors (remember the one who made his horse a Roman Senator?), Claudius decreed that all engagements and marriages would be banned henceforth. In theory, the men of Rome would instantly give up their girlfriends, look around for something equally enjoyable, and notice the recruiting posters. In practice, most of them continued to prefer the company of women to the lure of armed service, and many of them wound up getting secretly married.

Valentine was one of the priests who were willing to defy the emperor’s ban and perform clandestine wedding ceremonies for the lovelorn. Imagine a hushed ceremony deep in the catacombs, lovers staring soulfully into each other’s eyes, the mood suddenly broken by the harsh sound of marching Roman soldiers. Valentine was arrested and sentenced to death. On the positive side, lots of well-wishers sent him flowers during his incarceration. The jailer’s daughter, in particular, spent lots of time with him trying to cheer him up. Just before his execution, he sent her a nice thank-you note and signed it “Love from Your Valentine.” He was executed on February 14, 269 c.e., ironically, the holiday honoring Juno, goddess of women and marriage.

In 496, the Pope declared Valentine a saint and February 14 his feast day. During the Middle Ages the Lupercalia custom of drawing names from a bowl resurfaced, and celebrants would literally wear the names of their temporary boy- or girlfriend on their sleeves. A few centuries later, the custom of sending flowers became popular, and with expanded literacy, Valentine’s Day cards became popular.

As Campanelli has pointed out, “. . . neither the most contemporary of Valentine’s cards nor even antique ones of the most delicate paper lace show pictures of a martyred saint. Rather they show pictures of Cupid, son of Venus, Goddess of Love, identified by his bow and quiver of arrows.”²⁴ It seems that the Pagan spirit of Lupercalia still survives in a new guise.

More Festivals of February

There are so many ways to celebrate in February, in addition to the Roman and Greek holidays mentioned

earlier. Here is a tiny sampling from around the world.

January 31 to February 3: THE FEAST OF ISIS, the Egyptian Mother Goddess, patroness of magick and healing. Although the seasons in Egypt are not the same as those of northern Europe, Isis is a good choice for any celebration of light and life.²⁵

February 2: A Yoruba/Santeria feast day in honor of OYA, the Orisha of death and rebirth. Though Olodumare is worshipped as the one god, he has many Orishas, who are his aspects and messengers.²⁶ The transition from winter to spring can be seen as moving from death to rebirth.

February 4: This date marks SETSUBUN, the Japanese Bean Throwing and Lan-tern Festival. “Some ancient cultures believed that departed souls lived in beans. Think of the spirit of winter living in some dry beans and toss them away from you to symbolically send winter away. Light lanterns to encourage the return of light and warmth.”²⁷

February 10: LI CHUM is the Chinese Spring Festival. It’s a good time to arrange a vase of spring flowers and begin thinking about your garden.²⁸

Varies: As the great dragon turns the Wheel of the Year, the lunar-based CHINESE NEW YEAR²⁸ falls on different dates each time it comes around. The celebrations last fifteen days, and each day has a different theme. For example, on the second day dogs get extra food and attention, because that is believed to be the birthday of all dogs. On the fifth day, called Po Woo, people stay home to welcome the God of Wealth. On New Year’s Eve, ancestors who have passed on are honored at a banquet called weilu, which means “surrounding the stove.” The stove is just as important to the Chinese as it is to the Irish gathered around the fire to celebrate Brigid’s arrival. Here Chinese families used to have a little shrine with a picture of the “kitchen god” in it.

There will be feasting: fish and chicken, noodles and meat dumplings, oranges and tangerines, sweet rice pudding, and a special candy tray. Each food has a symbolic meaning, such as prosperity, togetherness, or long life.

Many people wear red at this time because it is a bright and cheerful color, sure to bring good luck. The living rooms are decorated with live blooming plants and beautiful flowers to represent the return of spring and the reawakening of nature. Poetic couplets are written on red paper and placed on the doors; they have wishes such as: “May the Star of Happiness, the Star of Wealth, and the Star of Longevity shine on you.” On New Year’s Eve, firecrackers are set off to welcome the New Year, and people dance the Lion Dance to vigorous drumming. At midnight, every door and window is opened to let the old year out.

What happens at the New Year sets the tone for the entire year. Therefore all debts are paid, bad language and unlucky words are avoided, and death and the past year are never mentioned. The whole focus is on a positive and happy future.

There are many parallels with the festivals of Europe. The Chinese New Year is a celebration of spring and new beginnings. There are feasts lit by candles and lanterns, and decorated with spring flowers. Houses are thoroughly cleaned, recalling the purification and cleansing themes of the Lupercalia. The hopes of peoples from different cultures a continent apart are often expressed in similar ways.

And surely we would all welcome the sentiment Kung hay fat choi? “Wishing you to prosper,” the traditional Chinese New Year’s greeting.

About February 28: The Chinese FEAST OF LANTERNS is an opportunity to encourage the return of light and warmth; hold a party with lots of colorful lanterns and put a light in the window overnight. “Lanterns are hung from high poles and carried in procession. . . . Some representing animals, birds, and very importantly the dragon. The high point of traditional celebration is the parade or dance of the dragon. The creature is made on a long framework of bamboo (up to or over 100 feet long!) and covered with bright paper or silk. . . . Temples, homes, and trees were strung with lanterns for dazzling light and beauty as soon as dusk came.

Here is [part of] a poem written over five hundred years ago by Xin Qiji on such a festival occasion:

An easterly breeze prompts a thousand trees to bloom at night,
It also blows [the blossoms] off, which fall like a rain of stars. . . .
The flute is heard in the air,

The lights of the jade-like lanterns are glittering.

All night the lanterns of fish and dragons keep dancing. . . .29

Late February or early March: HOLI, the Festival of Colour, is a

Hindu festival celebrating spring. Celebrants take buckets full of brightly colored water and drench one another, in imitation of the deities Krishna and Radha who splashed each other in the river on a fine spring day. Caste and gender barriers are forgotten, and everyone enjoys delicious foods. The night before, an image of Holika is burned on a big bonfire; Holika was the villainess in an ancient legend about a noble prince.³⁰

Varies: The more modern SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL brings thousands of snow sculptors and more than two million sightseers

to the island of Hokkaido in Japan each February. Teams of sculptors create hundreds of giant statues from snow: gods, mythological figures, cartoon heroes, dinosaurs, and even great castles. A single sculpture may require several hundred truckloads of snow.

The chances are that Brigit would delight in the inspirational and artistic energy of Sapporo. The sculptures themselves disappear after

a few days; like the snows from which they are formed, and the winter itself, they are just one part of the cycle?and must make way for spring.

The Themes of the Holy Day

We are so diverse, we humans, and yet so much alike in the deep recesses of our spirits. If we could bring together, in some winter village outside of time and space, a sampling of our species, what might happen? Imagine an Irish girl of the seventeenth century, a Mongol soldier from the Khan's army, a priest of Faunus from classical Rome, an aristocratic Egyptian lady who prayed to Isis, and a Saxon farmer from the Dark Ages. As the winter darkness gave way to light and warmth, and the first spring flowers pushed through the snow, would they not find a way celebrate together? After one year or several, would there not be a feast by candlelight, and homage to the sun, and windows open to the fresh air for spring cleaning? Wherever people gather and find any reason for hope, there is celebration.

These are the common themes that run through the complex of midwinter holy days. First, there is the theme of returning light, the first signs of spring, and the promise of renewed life and fertility. This is usually associated with the sun, and sometimes with fire generally. Second, we find the theme of practices of outer and inner cleansing?everything from house-cleaning to washing one's body to spiritual purification. And third, there is the theme of initiation; echoing the new beginnings associated with spring, the idea that individual human beings can "die" to their old lives and be spiritually "reborn" into a higher spiritual state. All these themes will be explored more deeply in the chapters ahead; let us continue the journey with a visit to a goddess.

NOTES

1. Gimbutas, Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, pp. 190–195.
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3. McCoy, The Sabbats, p. 98.
4. Farrar, Eight Sabbats, p. 65.
5. Manning-Sanders, Festivals, pp. 43–44,
6. Campanelli, Ancient Ways, p. 2.
7. Farrar, pp. 61–62.
8. Green, A Calendar of Festivals, p. 18.
9. Letter from Prudence Priest to The COG Newsletter, author's files.
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11. Jarman Lord, "The Anglo-Saxon Year Division," files of Amber K; original publication source unknown.
12. From the files of Amber K, author unknown.

13. Green, p. 19.
14. Crescent 2000, RCG
15. Walker, A Woman's Encyclopedia, pp. 134–135.
16. Leviticus 12:2–5
17. Lord.
18. Chalice Center online.
19. "Saint Blaise," Catholic Encyclopedia online
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22. McCoy, pp. 87–88.
23. Walker, p. 110.
24. Campanelli, Ancient Ways, p. 25.
25. Crescent 2000, RCG
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. The following sources were used for this section:
 1. Marco Polo, quoted in Manning-Sanders, Festivals, pp. 42–43.
 2. Fitzjohn et al, Festivals Together, pp. 202–213.
 3. San Diego's Chinese Community Home Page
 4. China website
29. Festivals Together, p. 38.
30. Ibid. pp. 40–41.

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