

Festivals - Roman

Key Terms

Lupercalia - a Roman festival in honour of the god Lupercus

Lupercus - a Roman god of fertility and purification

Luperci - a priest of Lupercus

Noble - a member of the upper class in Rome

Lupercal - the cave in the Palatine Hill in Rome where the Lupercalia took place

Mola salsa - *salted flour* - was a mixture of coarse-ground, toasted emmer flour and salt prepared by the Vestal Virgins and used in every official sacrifice

Saturnalia - a Roman festival in



Rome's founders Romulus and Remus suckling on a wolf (Lupus)

Key Knowledge

The Lupercalia

Origins of the festival

Festival in honour of a god of fertility and purification Lupercus,
Or

In celebration and remembrance of Rome's founder Romulus who suckled on a wolf to survive: Lupus meaning wolf in Latin

Officials.

The priests were called the Luperci and were chosen especially for the day from the noble male population.

The programme

- The priests would meet in the Lupercal
- A sacrifice of dogs and goats would take place
- There would then be a race around the Palatine Hill

The sacrifice

On entering the cave the Luperci sacrificed dogs and goats to Lupercus. These animals were known for their virility and suited a sacrifice to a god of fertility. The animals were sacrificed by sprinkling mola salsa on their heads. Once the animals had bowed their heads in acceptance, their throats were slit. When the animals had been killed, a knife was dipped in the blood, which was dripped onto the foreheads of the participants. The blood was then immediately wiped off with wool soaked in milk. At this point the Luperci were expected to let out a laugh. Following the killing of the animals a haruspex would read their entrails for positive signs. If the entrails were positive, the participants would eat the sacrificial meat and drink large amounts of wine. Once the feast was consumed, the Luperci cut the skins from the animals into strips; some of these were used for covering parts of the body, while others were used during the race.

The race

Many women of rank also purposely get in their way, and like children at school present their hands to be struck, believing that the pregnant will thus be helped to an easy delivery, and the barren to pregnancy. Plutarch, Caesar, 61.2

The Saturnalia

Origins of the festival

The Saturnalia was held in honour of the Roman god Saturn. The festival celebrated a number of things:

- As Saturn was the Roman god of sowing and the seed, the festival celebrated the end of the winter sowing.
- The festival began at the Winter Solstice and celebrated the coming of new light, rebirth and the promise of a positive future.
- Saturn was believed to have ruled the earth during the Golden Age, a time when both men and gods lived together in prosperity as equals.

The festival brought hope of a return to this Golden Age. The Saturnalia was considered unique amongst festivals because all levels of society took part, including men, women, children and slaves. At its longest the festival lasted from the 17th to the 23rd of December. However, during the reign of Augustus (28 BC-AD 14), the festival was shortened to three days before being extended again to five days during the reign of Claudius (CE41-CE54). The festival remained popular throughout the Roman period right through to the fourth century CE, when it became incorporated into the Christian celebration of Christmas.

Possible Questions

1. How did the animal sacrifice that took place during the Lupercalia differ from the scene shown in source A? (2)
2. Do you think the Romans would have enjoyed the Lupercalia or Saturnalia more? (8)



Source A - A Roman sacrifice

Sources

Prescribed

None!

Further

Ovid, fasti, 2.267-474:
February 15th, the Lupercalia