

# Bloodshed and violence in ancient rome history essay



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Ancient Rome was a place filled with bloodshed and violence. Much of the most well known Roman history is that of war. While the Romans were a culture that saw many wars and much bloodshed, they also had many religious festivals. When Rome adopted Christianity as its religion, many of these festivals were adopted and the way they were celebrated continued on in the new Christianized version.

When midnight comes, lending silence to sleep, and all the dogs and hedgerow birds are quiet, he who remembers ancient rites, and fears the gods, rises (no fetters binding his two feet) And makes the sign with thumb and closed fingers, lest an insubstantial shade meets him in the silence.[i]

A major festival in traditional Roman religion was the Lemuria, the festival to honor the deceased, specifically a family's ancestors. This festival was held on May 9th 11th and 13th.[ii]The name of May has roots in this festival. The month of May is named after the Latin word for ancestors, maiores.[iii]This festival served to honor the ancient sacred rites of the Lemures.[iv]The festival of the Lemuria concerned the paterfamilias of the family only. He would rise at midnight, the time preferred by the Lares, to appease them and protect his family. The paterfamilias remained barefoot throughout the ceremony he was obligated to perform. The sign he made with his fingers was an apotropaic sign which was designed to ward off evil.[v]After rising, the paterfamilias would wash his hands in a fountain to cleanse them. He would then take handfuls of beans and toss them over his shoulder while averting his eyes while chanting " haec ego mitto; his redimo meque meosque fabis" (with these beans I throw I redeem me and mine) nine times.

After completing this phase of the ritual he returned to the fountain to

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cleanse himself again, gathered bronze pots to bang together. As he banged the pots he would speak the phrase “ancestral spirit, depart.”<sup>[vi]</sup> Beans were used because they were thought to be full of life. The life in the beans was said to distract the spirit from attacking the man. The shade followed the paterfamilias around the house picking up the beans. The paterfamilias kept his eyes averted to avoid seeing the Lares directly. The banging bronze forced the spirit to listen to man and leave the house.<sup>[vii]</sup> Originally the sacrifice for the Lares was more macabre. The original sacrifice involved the killing of infants to Mania, the mother of the Lares. In 509 BCE Brutus, a founder of the Roman Republic, changed the sacrifice to garlic and poppy heads which eventually changed to the beans.<sup>[viii]</sup>

According to legend the festival of the Lemuria is as old as Rome itself. According to Roman tradition the Lemuria was founded by the original founder of Rome, Romulus. Romulus and his brother Remus were descendants of Mars, the god of war. The two brothers wished to build a city but could not agree on the location. Romulus wished to found the city on the Palatine Hill and Remus preferred the Aventine Hill.<sup>[ix]</sup> The brothers agreed to settle their dispute through divine augury, the interpretation of natural occurrences as omens from the gods. Each brother stood on the hill they wished to build the city on and waited for a sign from the gods. Remus was the first to see something. He saw six vultures. Romulus then saw twelve vultures. Romulus claimed that this was the superior augury because he saw more vultures. Remus claimed that since he saw the vultures first he was the winner.<sup>[x]</sup> Romulus began to build his city on the Palatine Hill and surrounded it with a wall. In an attempt to undermine his brother, Remus hopped over the

wall saying, “ Well, as for this wall, one of your enemies could as easily cross it as I do.”[xi]One of the men on the wall struck Remus on the head and killed him.[xii]After Remus was killed, Romulus buried him and offered gifts to appease his spirit. These gifts were not enough to soothe the spirit of the dead sibling. The night after the burial the bloody ghost of Remus appeared to Faustulus, the shepherd who raised Romulus and Remus, and his wife and demanded that they beg Romulus to have a day of celebration in his honor each year. Faustulus did as he was asked and begged Romulus to dedicate a day every year to his brother. Romulus complied and created the day Remuria.[xiii]The festival evolved over the years to appease the souls of all dead ancestors. The name changed to the Lemuria to reflect this.[xiv]

The Lemuria is still celebrated in modern times and its effects are still felt. The holiday All Saints Day is a Christianized version of the Lemuria. All Saints Day originated in 609 AD when Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon at Rome to the Virgin Mary and all martyrs of the Christian faith. On this day the feast of the dedicatio Sanctae Mariae ad Martyres (dedication to Saint Mary and the martyrs) was celebrated. The day chosen was May 13th.

[xv]This was a traditional day of the Lemuria. This day was chosen because of the similarities between the celebrations being an honor to the dead and seen as a way to de-paganize the day and as a way to allow Roman’s to continue to celebrate in a similar way to what they were used to easing the transition to Christianity.[xvi]It was not until the 8th century when the Lemuria had faded away almost completely that All Saints Day was moved to the current date of November 1st by Pope Gregory III to coincide with the Celtic festival of Samhain.[xvii]The festival of the Lemuria has also affected

wedding traditions. In ancient Rome the month of May was not a month for marriage. The Romans thought that any marriages that occurred in this month were doomed to disaster. This was due to the Lemuria and the association with malevolent spirits. The spirits would grow angry and ensure that the couple would never be happy together.[xviii]This superstition still exists and many people will not marry during May.

The festival of the Lupercalia was held on February 15th. This festival was celebrated in honor of Faunus, the god of fertility and Lupa, the she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus as infants.[xix]The festival began with the sacrifice of two goats and a dog by the Flamen Dialis. The Flamen Dialis was the high priest of Jupiter. Two patrician Luperci, Roman priests, were then chosen to be anointed with the sacrificial blood.[xx]The blood was then wiped off with a knife covered in wool that had been soaked in milk. The Luperci were then expected to smile and laugh. Following the sacrifices a sacrificial feast was held. During the feast the Luperci would cut thongs from the sacrificed animals and cover their bodies with the skin. This was done to make the Luperci look like what it was said Lupercus looked like. The Luperci would then run around the walls of the city holding the thongs in their hands. Any one in their path would be whipped with the thongs. Women would gather around the path that the Luperci were running to ensure they would be whipped. The whipping was said to increase fertility in the girl.[xxi]

Not much is known about the festival of the Lupercalia. The original founding of the festival is unknown. What is known is that it was celebrated as early as the founding of Rome. It is considered the oldest of the Roman Festivals. The Lupercalia was celebrated until the 5th century AD. Exactly how and why the <https://assignbuster.com/bloodshed-and-violence-in-ancient-rome-history-essay/>

festival was celebrated is still unknown. The ceremonial acts that took place during the festival were very numerous and many of them seemed to have no reason.[xxii]

The Lupercalia still exists in the form of Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day was formed in 500 CE to replace the Lupercalia. By this time the Lupercalia had evolved into a holiday about love. During the festival boys and girls would place their names in urns. Each would take a turn drawing a name and the two would be partners for the festival. Many of these couples ended up marrying at the end of it.[xxiii]Pope Gelasius I decided to continue this day of love but under a Christian name. Gelasius renamed the day after the Christian martyr Valentine but kept the traditional feeling of love the same. [xxiv]

Another major festival of ancient Rome was the Saturnalia. The festival of the Saturnalia was one of the most popular Roman festivals. The Saturnalia was celebrated from December 17th to the 23rd.[xxv]The Saturnalia was marked with a general sense of foolishness and enjoyment. All commerce was stopped during the celebration. The only business that was allowed to be conducted during the week of the Saturnalia was baking and cooking. All athletic training was stopped and only enjoyable activities were permitted. [xxvi]It was customary that slaves and masters would switch places during the celebration. Slaves were not expected to serve their masters and were free to speak their minds.[xxvii]All were considered equals and no man was required to serve another. All were welcome at any table and no person could be denied wine or food. Everyone consumed the same food and wine as well. No man was considered unworthy of the finest consumables.  
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[xxviii]The festival started with the untying of the ropes that bound the statue of Saturn during the rest of the year. This was followed by the election of a Saturnalicus princeps. The Saturnalicus princeps was a mock king. People were required to do as the Saturnalicus princeps wished without question. He would often make his guests do ridiculous tasks such as spread lies about themselves or carry a naked girl around the house.[xxix]Each Roman community elected their own Saturnalicus princeps who was allowed to indulge in all of the physical and food pleasures that they wished. At the end of the festival the Saturnalicus princeps was killed. The Romans believed that by killing the innocent man they were destroying the forces of evil and darkness.[xxx]The festival also featured the exchange of gifts. The wealthy were expected to give gifts that reflected their wealth to their less fortunate counterparts. A common gift was the payment of debts. The wealthy would pay any outstanding debts of the poor. The poor were also expected to give gifts. They were not expected to gift outside of their means however. The only requirement was that the gift was sincere and meant something. If a poor person knew how to write an acceptable gift was a piece of writing written by the gift giver.[xxxi]The dress during the Saturnalia was also different than the usual time of year. Instead of wearing togas a synthesis was worn. A synthesis was a colorful, informal dinner outfit that was worn for comfort. Every man also wore a pileus. A pileus was a freedman's hat that was usually worn by a slave who was being freed.[xxxii]The normal thing to do during the Saturnalia was to drink heavily and be rambunctious. Naked people were often seen running through the streets singing loudly. Laws that prohibited gambling and public drunkenness were ignored during the festival

and no man could be punished for damaging property or injuring another person on accident during the celebration.[xxxiii]

The festival of the Saturnalia was celebrated in honor of Saturn. The festival was first instituted in 217 BCE after a military defeat at the hands of the Carthaginians. The goal of the festival was to raise moral of the citizens of Rome. Originally the festival was one day long. Over time the festival expanded to encompass an entire week due to its popularity.[xxxiv] Twice a ruler of Rome attempted to shorten the festival. The first attempt was by Augustus. He tried to reduce the festival to three days. This did not work. Many people ignored the change and continued to celebrate for the entire week. Caligula attempted to change the festival to five days as a compromise between Augustus' change and the way the people wished to celebrate. This was met with the same response as Augustus' attempt.

[xxxv]The original celebration was designed as a agricultural festival.

According to Roman myth, after Jupiter supplanted Saturn as the ruler of the sky Saturn became the king of Latium. As the king Saturn introduced man to the agricultural process. The introduction of agriculture ushered in the mythological Golden Age of man. During this time all men were equal and food was plentiful. This idea is why slaves are not treated as slaves during the Saturnalia.[xxxvi]By the end of the Roman Empire most people did not know the history of the celebration but continued to celebrate it.[xxxvii]

The festival of the Saturnalia was Christianized in the same manner as the Lemuria. In the 4th century CE , Christianity imported the festival hoping to convince the pagan masses to become Christians. Pagans were promised that they could continue to celebrate their beloved festival. To make it  
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Christian they added December 25th to the festival and declared it the day of the birth of Jesus.[xxxviii]As Paganism decreased in prominence, the Saturnalia was phased out until only December 25th was celebrated. The idea of gift giving remained and this is the reason that gifts are given on Christmas each year.[xxxix]Modern day caroling is descended from the practice of people running through the streets drunk and singing loudly.[xl]

The Romans celebrated many festivals for many different reasons.

Christianity condemned the original Roman paganism. To ease the transition from pagan religion to Christianity, many of the traditional festivals were adapted to fit in the new religion and allow the citizens to switch religions while still being comfortable and practicing some of their most beloved festivals.

Endnotes