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## DID POPE GELASIUS CREATE ST VALENTINE'S DAY AS A REPLACEMENT FOR THE LUPERCALIA?

Something weird has begun to happen over the last couple of years. Twitter is filling up with claims that "Christmas is really pagan"; the same for Easter (!), St Valentine's Day - indeed for every single Christian holiday. This is new, and started maybe in 2018, and now has become very commonplace. The object is without a doubt to diminish the Christian significance of American holidays. I get the impression that this may be part of the anti-Trump reaction. It is clearly orchestrated, and obviously a nuisance.

This year I came across the claim that St Valentine's Day is really the Lupercalia (!), and that Pope Gelasius I abolished the Lupercalia and created St Valentine's Day instead. One website calling itself "history.com" [claims](#):

In the late 5th century A.D., Pope Gelasius I eliminated the pagan celebration of Lupercalia and declared February 14 a day to celebrate the martyrdom of Saint Valentine instead, although it's highly unlikely he intended the day to commemorate love and passion.

And the same website on [another page](#):

Lupercalia survived the initial rise of Christianity but was outlawed—as it was deemed “un-Christian”—at the end of the 5th century, when Pope Gelasius declared February 14 St. Valentine's Day.

Google helpfully puts these pages at the very top of the search results if you look for information. They seem to be drawing on an article which otherwise appears a bit further down, National Public Radio, [The Dark Origins of Valentine's Day](#), Feb. 13, 2011, which claims:

Later, Pope Gelasius I muddled things in the 5th century by combining St. Valentine's Day with Lupercalia to expel the pagan rituals. But the festival was more of a theatrical interpretation of what it had once been. Lenski adds, “It was a little more of a drunken revel, but the Christians put clothes back on it. That didn't stop it from being a day of fertility and love.”

Lenski is “Noel Lenski, a historian at the University of Colorado at Boulder”. Of course he may well have been misrepresented by this journalist. But is this true? Did Gelasius establish St Valentine's Day on February 14?

In a 1931 article,<sup>[1]</sup> William M. Green indicates that Cardinal Baronius must take some responsibility for all this.

... in almost all the discussions of the institution it is said that Pope Gelasius in 494 converted the pagan festival into the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin (=Candlemas). This conjecture of Cardinal Baronius<sup>[4]</sup> was based on the fact that Gelasius had suppressed the pagan festival, and that the *quadragesima Epiphaniae* (February 14), the earliest form of the Christian festival, so nearly coincided with its date, February 15. Usener and later writers on Christian ritual <sup>[5]</sup> have recognized Baronius' mistake...

4. C. Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Barri-Ducis; L. Guerin, 1864-83), IX, 603.

5. H. Usener, *Weihnachtsfest* (Bonn: Cohen, 1889), p. 318; T. Barnes, "Candlemas" in Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1908-190; L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship*<sup>5</sup> (London: SPCK, 1923), p.271.

So the modern idea that the Lupercalia turned into St Valentine's Day is itself a bastardisation of an older idea, that the Lupercalia turned into Candlemas.

We do know that Gelasius did abolish the Lupercalia. In Letter 100, to Andromachus, in the *Collectio Avellana* he explicitly says so, and defends his action to his noble correspondent by attacking the remains of the Lupercalia as a degraded superstition. (I was unaware until now that an edition of this exists in the Sources Chretiennes series, 65).<sup>[2]</sup>

Another article by Jack B. Oruch is more forthright:<sup>[3]</sup>

The idea that Valentine's Day customs perpetuated those of the Roman Lupercalia has been accepted uncritically and repeated, in various forms, up to the present.<sup>22</sup> Most of those who offer this now traditional explanation cite no sources or refer only to Butler or Douce. But John W. Hales, in the most substantial and reasonable article written about Valentine's Day, correctly pointed out that the Lupercalia never involved the pairing of lovers or a lottery.<sup>23</sup> As far as I can determine, the first suggestions of a lottery of lovers on Valentine's Day occur in the fifteenth century in poems of Lydgate and Charles d'Orleans, discussed below; the only known attempt to suppress the practice and substitute the names of saints was that of St. Francis de Sales early in his career as bishop at Annecy (1603).<sup>24</sup> Butler's ideas were prompted, in all probability, by a confused knowledge of the date of this isolated event; a less charitable explanation would attribute his remarks to wishful or pious fantasy.

The most complex version of this story - one that links the Lupercalia, Valentine, and Chaucer - has recently been put forth by Alfred L. Kellogg and Robert C. Cox<sup>[4]</sup>... According to Kellogg and Cox, the process by which St. Valentine became a "fertility figure" was an indirect and accidental one. They report: "When, in 495, Pope Gelasius finally abolished the Lupercalia, his procedure followed the accepted pattern. He set in its place a Christian festival of comparable meaning and almost exact date - the Purification of the Virgin, or Candlemas, celebrated on February 14" (p. 112). Then, after the date of the observance of Candlemas was "transferred from February 14 to February 2" (to accord with the fixing of the date of Christ's birth at December 25),

Valentine in some unknown way inherited the associations of the Virgin Mary with purification and fertility. Unfortunately, the account thus far is based upon faulty assumptions and misunderstood data.

Informed scholarship offers nothing to support the claim that Gelasius I “baptized” the Lupercalia by supplanting it with the Feast of the Purification.... Other medieval writers [than Bede] gave different explanations of the origin of the Feast of the Purification, but not until the unfortunate conjectures of Cardinal Baronius in the sixteenth century was the particular pagan festival behind Candlemas. said to be the Lupercalia.<sup>29</sup> While the church did supplant some pagan customs with Christian ones, in the present case the similarities between the Lupercalia and Candlemas appear to be fortuitous and negligible. To suggest a place for St. Valentine in a history already marked by so much speculation is pointless.

Which is pretty direct. There’s simply no evidence, apparently, of any connection with St Valentine.

I’m not quite clear how we discover what the early evidence is for the celebration of a saint’s day. It appears that we must look at early service books, and this is rather an area outside of my knowledge.

The so-called Gelasian Sacramentary does indeed have prayers *in natali Valentini, Vitalis et Feliculae* on *xvi Kal. Martias*, i.e. 14th February. (How interesting to see *natalis* used to indicate an anniversary, rather than a birthday!).<sup>[5]</sup> This has reached us in a Vatican manuscript (Ms. Reg. 316), written around 750 at the nunnery of Chelles near Paris. The prototype was probably composed in Rome between 628-715.<sup>[6]</sup>

I do wonder how we could find out when the feast of St Valentine was first celebrated!

UPDATE: I have just heard from Dr Lenski, disclaiming any responsibility for the mangled comments attributed to him in that NPR article.

1. <sup>[1]</sup>William M. Green, “The Lupercalia in the Fifth Century”, *Classical Philology* 26 (1931), 60-69. [JSTOR](#).↵

2. <sup>[2]</sup>*Gélase Ier : Lettre contre les Lupercales et Dix-huit messes du Sacramentaire léonien*. SC65, 1960.↵

3. <sup>[3]</sup>Jack B. Oruch, “St. Valentine, Chaucer, and Spring in February”, *Speculum* 56 (1981). 534-65. [JSTOR](#).↵

4. <sup>[4]</sup>25. “Chaucer’s St. Valentine: A Conjecture,” in Alfred L. Kellogg, *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1972), p. 108.↵

5. <sup>[5]</sup>H.A.Wilson, *The Gelasian Sacramentary. Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae*, Oxford, 1894, p.167. [Archive.org](#).↵

6. <sup>[6]</sup>Joseph M. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, p.29. [Google Books](#).↵

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