

# Mediaeval Holidays

by Mark D F Shirley

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Here is a list of holidays celebrated in mediaeval times. Most of these are from the Western Rite (a.k.a. the Roman Catholic Church). In addition to the Catholic ceremonies listed here, there would be a number of festivals celebrating the feast days of locally popular saints, as well as fairs, which would have been held in various locations throughout the year, particularly in summer. Vigils were held on the eves of the feasts of the Apostles except for Philip, James, and John

I have also included some of the more popular Ancient Roman festivals, which may be of interest to magi. For example: a magus conducting a ritual spell designed to raise the shade of a dead Roman might only have luck during the Lemuria, the festivals in May when the Roman dead walked. A Merinita magus trained in a strict Roman tradition might use spells to increase the fertility of the land on the 15th February, the Lupercalia. At the option of the storyguide, spells might be more effective at these times.

Birthdays would not be celebrated by mediaeval people. Instead, their saint day - that is, the feast day of the saint that they are named after - would have greater importance to them. Magi might well have a celebration on the day that they passed their Apprentice's Gauntlet.

This list also includes the equinoxes and solstices, which would be of more importance to magi and astrologers than to commoners. The Quarter days, which lie half way in between the equinoxes and solstices, may also be of importance - many of these have importance in the Christian calendar as well.

## Jan-Feb

- 1 Jan: New Year's Day
- 2 Jan: Feast of the Circumcision
- 6 Jan: Epiphany, ceremony commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, in the persons of the Magi
  - Twelfth Night: the last day of the rural festival of Yule
  - Christmas Day, as celebrated by Eastern Rite churches
- 11 Jan: Juturnalia, a Roman water festival to Juturna (Diuturna), goddess of still waters. She was honoured by the college of aqueduct and fountain-builders.
- 2 Feb: Feast of the Purification of Mary, more commonly called Candlemas after a tradition of holding candlelit processions on this day. The parish priest would also bless candles on this day to be taken away by the people, which were believed to be especially helpful in times of sickness.
  - St. Bride's (or St. Brigit's) Day

- Imbolc or Oimelc - the Quarter Day of the waxing light, when days are getting noticeably longer, a time of renewal, as the first stirrings of seeds are occurring after winter.
- 13-26 Feb: Parentalia & Feralia, ceremonies sacred to the Roman Gods of the Dead. All businesses and temples were closed, and tombs were decorated with violets, roses, lilies and myrtle, and food was deposited on them.
- 15 Feb: Lupercalia, one of the most important festivals in the Roman calendar, and sacred to Faunus, god of fertility. Goats and dogs were sacrificed to the god, and rites would be conducted to ensure women became pregnant.

## **Mar-Apr**

*Easter, and associated festivals, often occurs in this period. See the table below, for details.*

- 1 Mar: Matronalia, the Roman festival of Juno Lucina, was celebrated on this day. It was a family festival, with the mistress of the house being the central figure, receiving a present from her husband and serving the slaves at the table.
- 17 Mar: Liberalia, the Roman festival in honour of Liber Pater, god of fertility of the fields and of vines, when adolescents first start to wear the clothing of a man.
- 19-23 Mar: Quinquatrus, the five days of the Spring Equinox sacred to both Minerva & Mars in ancient Rome.
- 21-23 Mar: Vernal Equinox, or Ostara. The transition point between the dark half and the light half of the year. The time of the triumph of light over darkness.
- 25 Mar: Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (a.k.a. Lady Day), in commemoration of the announcement of the Incarnation made by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary.
- 4-10 Apr: Ludi Megalenses, one of the six major celebrations in Ancient Rome, when public games were held.
- 12-19 Apr: Ludi Cereales, one of the six major celebrations in Ancient Rome, when public games were held.
- 21 Apr: Palilia, a Roman ceremony dedicated to the goddess Pales. Purification of houses and stables, along with the livestock.
- 25 Apr: St Mark's Day. The Eve of St Mark (24 Apr) was a day that many divinations were performed by rural folk.
- 28 Apr-3 May: Floralia, a licentious festival to Flora, Roman goddess of the spring, and to Venus, goddess of Love. At this time were also held the Ludi Florales, public games.
- 30 Apr: Walpurgisnacht, or May Eve. People light bonfires and leap through the flames in ceremonies harking back to pagan times.

## **May-Jun**

- 1 May: May Day, Festival of Sts. Philip and Jacob the Apostles
  - Beltane, the second Quarter Day of the year, is celebrated in most countries, often under than name of May Day. May Poles are erected, and in rural areas there is a day of feasting and celebration.
- 9, 11, and 13 May: Lemuria, Roma festivals to the Ghosts of the Dead, when fathers of families scattered beans in expiation of the dead.
- 23 May: a Roman rose festival in honour of Flora, goddess of flowers

- 29 May: Ambarvalia, the Roman festival of Mars as a purely agricultural deity. It was a purification festival, in which a pig, a ram and a bull was immolated to the god.
- 7 June: the Vestalia was the day sacred to Vesta, Roman goddess of Fire. Mothers of families brought plates of food to her sanctuaries.
- 21 Jun: Summer Solstice, called Litha by the Saxons, is the mid-point of Summer. bonfires are lit on the highest points of the land. Many fairs occur on this day
- 24 Jun: Feast of St. John the Baptist, or Midsummer, was the culmination of the post-Easter festive season, whose celebrations contained pre-Christian echoes. Popular were huge bonfires, staying up the whole night on Midsummer's Eve, parades and military displays, and civic processions. A vigil was held on the day before the feast day

## Jul-Aug

- 6-13 Jul: Ludi Apollinares, one of the six major celebrations in Ancient Rome, when public games were held.
- 23 Jul: Neptunalia, a festival sacred to Neptunus, god of the Sea. Romans would build huts of branches on this day to shelter against the sun.
- 1 Aug: Feast of the Birth of St. Peter
- 2 Aug: Lammas - the festival of the First Harvest, loaves made from the first corn are consecrated in church.
  - Lughnasad: the Third Quarter Day, and the last day of Summer. This is the traditional time for great fairs
- 9 Aug: Vinalia rustica, a Roman festival to Venus.
- 10 Aug: St Laurence's Day, a day of vigil
- 15 Aug: Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in commemoration of the reception of the Virgin Mary into Heaven. Because of its date, often became a harvest festival as well. This provided a break in the heavy toil to attend diversions such as morality and mystery plays. A vigil was held on the eve of Assumption Day
- 17 Aug: Portunalia, the Roman festival dedicated to Vulcan, as god of the River Tiber. In ancient times, human sacrifices were offered to Vulcan on this day.
- 21 Aug: Consualia. In Roman times, the first part of the ceremony to Consus, god of sowing, occurring after the harvest. Consisted of chariot races, entertainments and dancing.
- 23 Aug: The Volcanalia, festivals sacred to Vulcan, the god of the Thunderbolt and the sun.
- 27 Aug: Voltornalia, another festival sacred to Vulcan, this time as god of the Tiber River.
- ?? Aug: Feast of the Birth of St. Paul

## Sept-Oct

- 5-19 Sep: Ludi Romani, the Roman Annual Games, consisted of athletic contests, especially chariot races, and were held in honour of Jupiter.
- 7 Sep: Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in commemoration of the birth of Mary.
- 14 Sep: Holy Cross Day, or Holy Rood Day, the festival of the exaltation of the cross. A day of fasting. Traditional to go nutting on this day.
- 21 Sep: Autumnal Equinox, or Mabon, is the time of the Second Harvest. It is also the transition day between light and dark - from now on, days are getting darker.

- 29 Sep: Michaelmas, the Feast of St. Michael. First day of the agricultural year, and the day that many rents were due.
- 31 Oct: All Hallows' Eve, or Hallowe'en: At night, ghosts and evil spirits traditionally haunted the living. A vigil is held all night

## **Nov-Dec**

- 1 Nov: Feast of All Saints.
  - Samhain: the last pagan Quarter Day, this is also the time of the Final Harvest. All animals not required for work or as breeding stock are slaughtered for the winter. Traditionally, the Festival of the Dead, when ancestors are remembered.
- 4-17 Nov: Ludi Plebeii, the Commoner's Games, were held in Roman Times in honour of Jupiter, and consisted mainly of foot races and theatrical entertainments.
- 12 Nov: St Martin's Day, traditional time for animals to be brought in from pasture and stalled in barns, and some were slaughtered to provide meat for the winter.
- 24-30 Nov: Beginning of Advent, the closest Sunday to St Andrew's Day (30 Nov). Although technically as solemn as Lent, observations of this fast were generally not as strict.
- 25 Nov: St. Catherine's Day. Very popular feast, and the traditional time for young women to perform various rituals (such as noting whether the shape of an apple peel allowed to fall to the floor resembled any initial) which were believed to help foretell the name of their future husband.
- 1 Dec: Bona Dea, the wife of Faunus (a.k.a. Fauna) was celebrated in a mysterious ceremony forbidden to men, which degenerated into an orgy.
- 6 Dec: St Nicholas' Day. A time for role reversal in the schools, where one of the boys would be elected as Bishop for the day, presiding over a court of misrule. Also a time for gifts.
- 13 Dec: St Lucy's Day. The Wednesday, Friday and Saturday following St Lucy's Day were called Ember Days, days of fasting.
- 15 Dec: Consualia. The second ceremony of the Consualia, dedicated to Consus, occurring after the crops have been sown. Consists of chariot races using mules.
- 17-23 Dec: Saturnalia, the first of seven days of feasting in honour of Saturn. This was a period of unrestrained festivity, including an immense feast. Masters served slaves, and all public activity ceased.
- 19 Dec: Opalia, sacred in Roman times to an ancient Sabine deity called Ops, the personification of creative force and agricultural fertility.
- 20- Dec: Winter Solstice, or Yule, a celebration of midwinter day, which begins properly on Mother Night, the 20th December. The main festival occurs on the solstice, and the celebrations continue until Twelfth Night (6th Jan)
- 25 Dec: Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. A vigil is held the night before.
- 26 Dec: St Stephan's Day, when lords and servants might reverse roles, and those in service received their yearly gift of a set of clothes or livery.

## **Easter and associated festivals**

- 41 days before Easter: Shrove Tuesday, customs of wild revelry and overindulgence that preceded the beginning of the Church's most solemn fast the next day.
- 40 days before Easter: Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. This forty-day period of fasting (no meat other than fish was to be eaten, and the faithful were encouraged to

go even further in their devotion) was by far the most important period in the medieval church--a time for introspection and acts of piety. Traditionally, palms left over from the last Palm Sunday were burnt to produce the ash which the priest used to mark each parishioner with the sign of the cross. Once yearly confession became mandatory for all Christians, they were encouraged to do it during Lent. No marriages could take place during this period without special dispensation.

- Sunday before Easter: Palm Sunday, when the faithful would bring "palm leaves" (usually willow, box or yew) or rushes into the church in honour of Christ's procession into Jerusalem. In the later Middle Ages, this evolved into an occasion of great pageantry, with costumed parishioners representing the Prophets processing around the churchyard along with the church's relics and a consecrated Host in an elaborate container, carried under a canopy.
- Week starting on Palm Sunday: Holy Week
- Thursday before Easter: Maundy Thursday. Great acts of charity were often done on Maundy Thursday, and a special Mass was held where all the candles were symbolically extinguished one by one during the liturgy to symbolise the coming darkness of the Crucifixion.
- Friday before Easter: Good Friday. On Good Friday, the people of the parish followed the custom of "creeping to the cross"--approaching a special cross barefoot or on one's knees to kiss its base. One of the Hosts consecrated the night before was then placed, along with this cross, in a special sepulchre in the north side of the church, and a guard was placed on it until Easter morning.
- Sunday after first full moon following the vernal equinox: Easter Sunday. Falls between 22 Mar and 25 Apr
- Monday after Easter: Hock Monday. The weeks following Easter were a time of great merriment--Lent was past, and the hard work of planting crops was over, except perhaps the planting of flax and hemp for spinning and weeding of the fields. On Hock Monday, the young women of the parish would capture passing men on the streets, only releasing them after a small ransom was paid into the parish funds. The men got their revenge the following day, Hock Tuesday, when the custom was reversed.
- Five weeks after Easter: Rogation Sunday. The parish priest, along with the people, would "beat the bounds" - walking around the boundaries of the parish, accompanied by handbells, offering up prayers to insure the success of the crops; a large session of communal drinking often ensued.
- Thursday after Rogation Sunday: Ascension Day
- 7th Sunday after Easter: Whitsunday [a.k.a. Pentecost]. A day of fasting, with a vigil being kept beforehand.
- 3 days following Whitsunday: Whitsuntide [a.k.a. Days of Solemnity]
- 12 weeks after Easter: Corpus Christi festival, with its focus on the consecrated Host of the Mass; in England, this became the traditional time for the presentation of pageants and plays commemorating the life of Christ, often sponsored by the town guilds. Falls from May 21 - Jun 23