



An Anthropological Perspective on

St. Lucy's Day



December 13th

Summarize the Text below (min. 5-max. 10 lines)
by Using Some of the Words / Phrases from the Box on p. 3



Bergamo, Italy



Uppsala, Sweden

Legend has it that Lucy (283-304 AD) was a Christian girl from Syracuse (Sicily) who refused her **betrothal** ¹ to a pagan young man and distributed her **dowry** ² among the poor. Upon hearing of this, her betrothed denounced her to Paschasius, the Governor of Syracuse, for being Christian, and she was accordingly asked to **worship** ³ the image of the Emperor – which she refused to do. Lucy was thus sentenced to be defiled in a **brothel** ⁴, but, when the guards came over to take her away, a variety of supernatural events intervened to protect her virginity. First, not even **oxen** ⁵ would be able to move her by an inch in the direction of the brothel, then the wood that had been set on fire to **burn her at the stake** ⁶ kept on getting extinguished. She was finally killed by a guard's sword, even though – according to a later version of the legend – before

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killing her the guards gouged out her eyeballs. Iconography has particularly **highlighted**⁷ this detail of the legend – so much so that in most paintings and frescoes Lucy is shown while carrying her own eyes on a platter.

All of these **gory**⁸ details comply with the traditional motifs of Christian romances involving virgin martyrs – the stories of St. Agnes, St. Agatha and St. Cecily do not significantly differ from that of Lucy. Lucy, however, has been made the object of a special cult in many countries, including some areas of Northern Italy and Sweden. The differences in her iconographies and worship practices bear witness to the different roles this legendary figure is given in the two countries.

In Italy Lucy is accompanied by a **donkey**⁹ and, in some areas, also by a helper named Castaldo. Traditionally, she wears a long veil that hides her completely, and she warns kids of her arrival by ringing a little bell. Even though she plays the role of a donor (that is, a gift-giver), her figure is not entirely reassuring. Whereas Lucy rewards kids who have behaved themselves by distributing candies and gifts (an action remindful of the legendary distribution of her dowry), she also punishes those who have misbehaved by giving them **coal**¹⁰. More disturbingly still, whoever dares to look at her is punished by being blinded with **ashes**¹¹ – which is again remindful of her own martyrdom.

The Italian version of Lucy, then, punishes and rewards – just like a mother does. As the picture above shows, the Italian Lucy impinges on the iconography of the Madonna (the donkey, the veil, the candor of her dress as a symbol of her virginity) and is first and foremost a mother figure. Much in line with the matriarchal complex Italian society suffers from, this mother figure is not entirely positive: she alternatively plays the role of the archetypal mother goddess offering abundance and protection (in her capacity as donor) and of the wicked,

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punishing stepmother from **fairy tales**¹². In this respect, then, she is also related to the figure of the **witch**¹³, and especially of *Befana*.

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By contrast, the Swedish Lucy looks nothing like a mother: the iconography of the white dress and the red **sash**¹⁴ (a symbol of martyrdom) connote her exclusively as a maiden. Her figure has been incorporated into the older Yule tradition, a celebration of the longest night of the year in connection with the winter solstice and the rebirth of the sun. This older tradition accounts for her connection with candles and light and links her also to her (evil) male counterpart Lucifer: in effect, the pagan forerunner to Lucy, Lussi, was a female being with evil traits similar to a witch or a *succubus*. *Lussinatt* (Lussi's Night) was related to the Norse myth of the Wild Hunt of evil spirits, which made it particularly dangerous to be out during that night. Similarly to the current Italian tradition of coal-giving and ash-blinding, also in Sweden children used to be threatened about behaving themselves, or Lussi would come down through the chimney and take them away. The tradition of *Lussevaka* – to stay awake through the *Lussinatt* to guard oneself against evil, has found a modern form through throwing parties until daybreak.

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Unlike

Similarly to

Likewise

By contrast

More ... than

Less...than

Comparatively

Akin to

To bear a
resemblance to

To differ from

Differently from

However