

LA FESTA DELLA BEFANA

Italy, like other Western European societies, observes the Feast of the Epiphany—Epifania in Italian—on January 6th in a special way. According to Christian tradition, this feast celebrates the arrival of the Three Magi at the stable in Bethlehem to offer newly born Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is the first “manifestation” (epiphany in Greek means “manifestation”) of Jesus as man and God to non-Jewish people. The occasion is an extremely important part of the Christmas festivities, and, as the 12th day of Christmas, concludes the Christmas-season celebration. In this month’s essay I want to make a change to the usual subject matter of these essays and write about an aspect of the Christmas season that is important to Italian culture. Since you will be receiving the January bulletin during the current holidays, I thought it would be interesting to describe this important festival that closes the Christmas season.

The FESTA DELLA BEFANA (“Festival of Befana”) for some Italian families is even more important than Christmas itself and is a big day for celebrating and exchanging presents. But Santa doesn’t bring these presents; they’re brought by a witch called Befana who flies in on a broomstick! So just what is the legend of Befana?

In popular folklore, Befana visits all the children of Italy on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany, January 5th, to fill their socks, or even their shoes, with *caramella* (“candy” or “caramel”) or fruit and presents if they are good; a lump of coal, or perhaps even onions or garlic, will be left if they are bad. (In many poorer parts of Italy and, in particular, rural Sicily, a stick was placed in a stocking instead of coal). Today, the coal tends to be rock candy called *carbone* (“coal”) made black with caramel coloring. And, in a change from the past, most Italian children now additionally get a piece of rock candy “carbone” since no child has been perfect over the whole year!



Befana is usually portrayed as a hag riding her broomstick through the air wearing a black shawl and covered in soot because she enters the children’s houses through the chimney (in modern apartments that lack a chimney, she enters through a keyhole). She is often smiling and carries her bag or hamper filled with the prizes she will leave. Being a good housekeeper, many say she will even sweep the floor before she leaves. To some, the sweeping symbolizes the sweeping away of the problems of the year. The family typically leaves a small glass of wine and a plate with a few morsels of regional or local food, which needs to be soft because Befana has hardly any teeth. Children even write short notes to Befana in hopes of winning her favorable judgment on their behavior.

Traditionally this was the feast that children waited for throughout the year, before *Babbo Natale* (“Santa Claus”) was known in Italy. (The legend of Santa Claus has only existed throughout Italy since World War II). Befana, the bony, ragged old lady, was much nearer in spirit to the poverty of Jesus and closer to the poverty experienced by most Italians over the centuries. She was traditionally the only gift-giver for children at this time of year. The gifts she delivered were reminders of the gifts that on Epiphany the Magi following the star had offered to baby Jesus, born in a poor manger in Bethlehem.



The legend of Befana has two basic sources:

1) the many pagan and folk traditions, predating the Christian, that were connected to the New Year and to the twelve days following the winter solstice; and 2) the Christian tradition. Over the centuries, these two came to be combined into the Festival of Befana.

THE PRE-CHRISTIAN PAGAN AND FOLK TRADITIONS

One pagan legend takes its origin from the effigy of the “old lady” that was burned in town squares to celebrate the end of the year, a symbol of the cycles of time that always end and begin anew. The Befana was also related to the mysterious rites of the Celtic peoples who once inhabited the whole *Pianura Padana* (“Po River Valley”) and part of the Alps, when wicker puppets were set on fire in honor of ancient gods. The witch, or the woman magician, (the priestess of the ancient Celtic culture who knew the secrets of nature) took on the form of the Befana. The “coal” that she would leave to the nasty children was actually also a symbol of fertility connected to the sacred bonfires and the *ceppo* (“tree stump”) used in Celtic rituals. The other almost universal symbol accompanying the old lady, the broom, which clearly resembles a magic wand, was also connected to the tree and the nature rituals of the Celts in their forests.



Another pagan source of the legend is in the pre-Christian calendar solstice rites that were used to celebrate the yearly cycle of the sun, and were slowly merged with the cycle of the life of the human being and the generations, each following one another. This eternal cycle was represented by symbols to exorcise anxiety about death.

In European folk traditions, the twelve days between Christmas and the Epiphany were the period in the year when the presence of witches was most felt. Especially on the 12th night (*see Shakespeare*), the night of the Epiphany, which was considered one of the most magical nights of the year. And Befana with her broken shoes actually flies on a broom, another important magic symbol in a number of European folk cultures. The Epiphany, the last festivity of the Christmas season, is considered a celebration of renewal, announcing the coming of the new season. In the peasant culture, this was the time when forecasts and predictions about the future were made by interpreting natural phenomena, and people sat around the fireplace or open fire telling fantastic tales.

THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

One Christian legend has it that the Magi stopped to ask Befana for directions to Bethlehem, but she didn't know what to tell them. So, she offered to put them up for the night since her house was the best-kept one in town. The Magi invited Befana to travel with them, but she said she had too much housework to do. However, after they left, Befana kept thinking about the invitation, and eventually she decided to follow the Magi to find Jesus. She carried a sack filled with bread and whenever she saw a child, she gave the child a piece of bread hoping that he might be Jesus. Sadly, though, Befana never managed to catch up with the Magi, and she never found the stable in Bethlehem. So, she continues to wander throughout Italy on her broomstick looking for the baby Jesus and leaving goodies for the children she sees.



Another Christian legend of Befana is similar to this first one. Its story begins at the time of the birth of Jesus. Befana spent her days cleaning and sweeping. One day the Magi came to her door in search of baby Jesus. Befana turned them away because she was too busy cleaning. However, later she noticed a bright light in the sky and she thought this pointed the way to baby Jesus. She brought some baked goods and gifts for the baby in her bag and took her broom to help his new mother clean. Thus, she began her search for baby Jesus. She searched but never found him, and so she continues her search today, after all these centuries. On the eve of the Epiphany, Befana comes to a house where there is a child and leaves a gift. Although she has been unsuccessful in her search, she still leaves gifts for good young children because Jesus can be found in all children.

A third Christian legend takes a slightly darker tone. Befana was an ordinary woman with a child whom she greatly loved. However, her child died, and her resulting grief maddened her. Upon hearing news of Jesus being born, she set out to see him, delusional that he was her son. She eventually met Jesus and presented him with gifts to make him happy. The infant Jesus was delighted, and he gave Befana a gift in return; she would be the mother of every child in Italy. Thus, she travels the whole of Italy rewarding or admonishing her “children.”

THE CELEBRATION OF LA FESTA DELLA BEFANA TODAY

Besides the giving of candy and presents, today the Festa is celebrated in different ways throughout Italy. January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, is a national holiday in Italy, and Befana has become a national icon.

In central Rome, the Piazza Navona is the site of a popular market each year between Christmas and the Epiphany, where toys, sugar carbone, and other candies are sold. Romans believe that at midnight on the morning of January 6, the Befana shows herself from a window of Piazza Navona, and people always go there to watch her on their way to the festival to buy candies, toys and sweets.



In the regions of Marche, Umbria, and Latium, Befana's figure is associated with the Papal States, where the religious feast of the Epiphany held the most importance while these regions were under Papal control until the *Risorgimento*. Thus, the religious aspect of the Befana legend took primacy here for centuries. The town of Urbania, in the region of Marche, is considered Befana's official home. January 2-6 every year, the national Befana Festival is held here to celebrate the holiday. About 30,000 to 50,000 people attend the festivities each year. Hundreds of *Befane* are present, swinging from the main tower. They juggle, dance and greet all the children. A "house of the Befana" is built and the post office has a mailbox reserved for letters addressed to the Befana, mirroring what happens with Santa Claus in places where that legend is celebrated.



In the Veneto region, *roghi* ("wood bonfires") are lit on the night of the January 5th to predict the future by observing the direction of the smoke. Florence and other cities have large parades, usually led by three men dressed as the Magi on horseback.

In Venice, the *Regata delle Befane*, ("regatta of the witches") takes place on the Grand Canal. Retired gondoliers and members of various rowing clubs are dressed as old *Befane*, or *vecie maranteghe* in the Venetian dialect, and race from San Tomá to the Rialto Bridge, from which a large stocking is hung. Crowds of spectators fill the bridge and line the sides of the Canal, cheering on their favorite "Befana" while a band plays at the bridge to add to the joyous excitement of the festivities. And as with all Venetian regattas, the winners are awarded silk pennants at the finish line.



There are numerous poems about Befana, which are known in slightly different versions throughout Italy. Here is one of the most famous versions in Italian and English.

*La Befana vien di notte
con le scarpe tutte rotte
col vestito alla "romana"
viva viva la Befana!!
Porta cenere e carboni
ai bambini cattivoni
ai bambini belli e buoni
porta chicchi e tanti doni!*

*The Befana comes by night
With her shoes all broken
With a dress in Roman style
Up, up with the Befana!!
She brings ashes and coal
To bad nasty children
To the nice good child
She brings candies and many gifts!*

I hope you have enjoyed this look at an ancient Italian festival celebrated every January. The combination of pre-Christian pagan and Christian traditions into the story of Befana shows the conservation of the ancient with the modern. The Festa della Befana has given Italians in different regions and towns throughout the Italian peninsula, and in other countries to which Italians emigrated, a common cultural bond joining them together in celebration of this aspect of Italian culture.

N.B. The Leonardo da Vinci Society of San Francisco and the Museo Italo Americano are celebrating La Festa della Befana on Saturday, January 6, 2018 at 4:00 pm at the Museo. For information, please use the following link: <https://fortmason.org/event/festa-della-befana/>

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: "Celebrating La Festa della Befana and Epiphany on January 6th" on Dream Discover Italia website, posted January 6, 2015; "The Befana" on Italy Heritage website; "Italian Christmas tradition of 'La Befana' " on Italian-Link website; "Introducing La Befana: An Italian Christmas Tradition," Walks of Italy website; "Italian Christmas Traditions: The Legend of La Befana" on One Day in Italy website; and Wikipedia.

To all of you, I wish a heartfelt: Felice Anno Nuovo!!

