

Feast of the Epiphany and origins of the Befana tradition

Have you
been good?

What will the Befana leave in your stocking? Sweets, lemons, mandarins or lots
of coal?

Have you ever wondered how the traditional celebration held on January 6
originated?

The
character of the Befana finds its roots in pre-Christian cultural traditions
and the etymology of its name derives from the Greek word $\epsilon\pi\iota\phi\alpha\epsilon\iota\alpha$, (epifaneia) which
literally means
"apparition".

The
Christmas Holidays, and therefore the Epiphany as well, have always been
regarded as an important time in the year as they represent the beginning of a
new planting season, crucial for a bountiful
harvest.

The tradition may have started in the as early as the polytheistic Roman
culture. Diana, goddess of the hunt and
fertility, was said to fly over the fields accompanied by other women to
increase their fertility before the seeds were sown. This pagan belief merged and mutated over the
centuries after with the advent of Christianity. The middle ages and the wide-spread
prosecution of witches transformed the goddess into an ugly crone with occult
magic powers so terrifying that she had to be burned at the stake. The practice
of "burning the old to make space for the new" still exists in many
cultures even today.

The Church
further legitimised the Befana persona with the traditional version of the
Saviour's birth: the Three Kings, on their way to Bethlehem, asked an old lady
to give them directions, then
insisted she walk with them to the holy
grotto; she refused, but then regretted her decision so much that, to expiate the guilt, she gave
sweets to all the children she could find.

The figure
we celebrate today is therefore a combination of the "good goddess
Diana" that brings gifts and fertility, and the sinister-looking
hunch-backed old lady who brings small gifts, or leaves coal for those who were

naughty. The unseemly hump on her back serves to remind everyone of the fact that once the holidays are over a new cycle of hard work awaits them..because as the saying goes: The Epiphany leaves with the holidays!