



WHY SCANDINAVIA CELEBRATES LUCIA

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Sunday, December 13, The Feast of Santa Lucia is celebrated in many churches and throughout Scandinavia as well as in various Scandinavian communities (like Sanford, Florida) within the USA. Lucia was an actual person who lived from 283 to 304 in Syracuse, on the island of Sicily.

She is venerated in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Orthodox churches. Yet, no one knows for sure why a 4th. century Sicilian Roman Catholic Italian saint, came to be so revered in Protestant, Lutheran Scandinavia. Given my Italian and Swedish ancestry I was always interested in her story and determined to separate truth from the Legend regarding Lucia.

Her current popularity extends beyond the Neapolitan song Santa Lucia. In the Inferno Lucia appears as Dante's angel. She is only one of eight

women (along with the Virgin Mary) commemorated by name in the Canon of the Catholic Mass.

Her legend, which can be traced to Italy, honors a young wealthy Christian bride-to-be who gave away her dowry to the poor; an act which angered her prospective groom and caused him to report her Christian religion to the Roman authorities. She was condemned to death by fire.

Sometime in the 15th. Century a number of legends said that just before she died an intense inner light transformed Lucia (I suspect her hair, which in those days were groomed with lots of lard, easily caught fire and thus created such a bright light) so everyone present fell prostrate. Thus Lucia, a sign of light and hope to the poor died on December 13 in A.D. 304 (illuminated by what those present described “as a heavenly glow”).

In actuality, Lucia was probably a victim of the wave of persecution of Christians that occurred late in the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian. Definite references to her are found in early Roman sacramentaries; and at Syracuse in an inscription dating from AD 400.

The Lucia legend spread to Sweden at a time of great famine in the 1700s. In the province of Vanern, a large vessel appeared on Vanern Lake (Sweden’s largest lake and the third largest lake in all of Europe). At the vessels’ helm stood a maiden dressed in a gleaming white robe. (Figureheads of females with flowering hair were predominate in those days.) Believed to be Santa Lucia, she guided the ship along the lakeshore, distributing food to the poor and hungry, - probably the act of a philanthropist. The ship disappeared as soon as its mission was completed, and thus the veneration of Lucia arrived in Sweden.

Santa Lucia festivities, with pageantry and good food, mark the first day of the Scandinavian Christmas season that begins on December 13, the shortest day of the year, and lasts one month until January 13. Santa Lucia day begins very early in the morning on December 13 in Scandinavian homes. The oldest daughter of the house, usually dresses in a long white gown, dons a crown of evergreens and lighted candles on her head, sings the song “Santa Lucia,” and serves special Lucia cakes and warm drinks to the rest of the family.