



# St. Lucy

**An Anti-Hagiography**

by Wren Awry



At the end of one of the tunnels in the Catacombs of St. Lucy is an alcove with a stone bench. I noticed it the moment we stepped underground, and it distracted me as the guide described the catacomb's burial chambers and its origins as an ancient Greek aqueduct system. The alcove seemed, so clearly, to be the destination point in the version of St. Lucy's story I knew best: the one where she walked through the damp, protective dark to reach a grotto where her persecuted brethren hid, wearing a crown of candles on her head to light the way and carrying a bundle stuffed with bread and wine in her arms. Lucy not as martyr or saint but as a determined teenage girl, navigating passageways beneath the Roman-occupied Sicilian city of Syracuse to sustain fellow believers in an imperfect, but incendiary, new faith.

In 380 CE, seventy-six years after Lucy was executed by the state, Rome declared Christianity its official religion and jump started the church's long and ongoing history as a tool of control, violence, and colonization. But in

the early fourth century CE, the religion was a fringe offshoot of Judaism that believed, as Jamie Mackay writes in *The Invention of Sicily*, in “an imminent resurrection of the dead and the overturning of the established order.” Although exactly how Christianity arrived in Sicily is contested—it may have been through apostle Paul of Tarsus, while others link it to Jewish refugees fleeing anti-Roman revolts in the eastern Mediterranean—it began to attract converts in the island’s urban centers where, as across the rest of the empire, starvation and pestilence were common, free expression was policed, and the population was surveilled. The empire pushed back on this growing sect, arresting Christians and executing those who refused to recant and worship the Roman gods.

The nascent religion had multiple variations—from Gnosticism, which was relatively feminist with strong pagan elements, to the militaristic version later adopted by Rome<sup>1</sup>—and developed a local character in many of the plac-

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1 Gnosticism viewed God as androgynous, permitted greater sensuality and, at least as part of an offshoot called Manichaeism, allowed women to be priests. This contrasted with the patriarchal and militaristic world-

es where it took root. Sicilian Christians, perhaps driven by the persecutions on their island, had a distinct reverence for martyrdom. An earlier Sicilian martyr, St. Agatha,<sup>2</sup> played a pivotal role in Lucy's life and later hagiography. Born to a wealthy family, Lucy—who was raised by her mother Eutychia after her father's death—converted to Christianity at a young age and, soon after, visited Agatha's shrine in nearby Catania to ask the saint to heal her mother from a bleeding disorder. Her supplications were successful and, in gratitude, Eutychia permitted Lucy to give away their possessions. This was an act of redistribution that went against Roman views on squandering wealth and, as it

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view of what is often called “traditional Christianity,” adopted by Rome because—as Evans argues—it fit with the empire's already patriarchal, militarized culture. I don't know exactly what version of Christianity Lucy followed.

- 2 Much as we'll see with Lucy, St. Agatha has taken on a syncretic and folkloric role in Sicily. Simeti, in *On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal*, writes about Agatha's association with Mt. Etna and the tradition of carrying her veil in procession to stop the volcano's lava flows.

was carried out by two women, the patriarchal social order. It meant not just selling her jewelry to buy provisions for hungry neighbors but also, according to some versions of Lucy's story, risking—and ultimately giving—her life to personally resupply the religious rebels hiding out in the catacombs.

“This is the catacomb where the saint was buried, not necessarily the one she would have visited,” the guide tells me when I ask about Lucy's midnight expeditions, then gently reminds me that the tour focuses on archeological history, not religious lore. “That bench,” I remember her adding, “Wasn't built until the twentieth century, when the catacombs were used as a bomb shelter during World War II.”<sup>3</sup>

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3 The history of Sicily before and during World War II is complex. Fascism was finally popularized on the island by the Catholic Church and the nationalism fomenting around the colonization of Ethiopia, and occurred well after Mussolini's rise to power. But Sicilians were also somewhat racialized by other Italians, and by 1940 Sicily was treated as, as Mackay writes, a “subaltern, sub-national territory” within Italy. By the time Allied forces entered Italy through Syracuse, liberating Sicily in

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My partner and I are in Southern Italy to visit the places where some of my birth father's ancestors came from, but we're in Syracuse specifically for Lucy. I was raised Catholic and, despite having left the Church years ago and having an active disinterest in the institutional aspects of the religion, I'm still drawn to elements of folk catholicism through which pre-Christian and nature-centered beliefs have been smuggled and re-imagined over the centuries. This vernacular spirituality—historically carried on by those on the peripheries of power—often includes devotions to the Madonna and saints, among whom St. Lucy is a personal favorite.

Lucy is also revered in Scandinavia, and I tell people that I grew up celebrating her feast day because my mother is Swedish-American (I'm not, I'm

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1943, support for fascism on the island had substantially waned. Still, the Allied invasion entailed the carpet bombing of the island's major cities and wrought tremendous destruction. Meanwhile, Sicilian anti-fascists like Pompeo Colajanni joined the partisan struggle in northern Italy.

adopted), but it's an oversimplification: my mom wasn't raised with the holiday but, after I read about it in an American Girl novel, I insisted we observe it, and she got on board. For all of elementary school, I'd wake up early on the morning of December 13 and, following the Scandinavian custom, put on a white dress with a red sash. At first, I wore tinsel in my always-tangled dark hair but, after my mom found a Lucia Krona at a store while visiting relatives in the Midwest, I twisted on the battery-operated candles attached to the green plastic wreath before placing it on my head. Swedish Lucias carry a tray with coffee and sun-colored saffron buns called lussekatter as an homage to the saint's food redistribution but, since my parents didn't drink coffee and declared making the buns too much work, I filled up my wooden tray with water and toast instead. I delivered the food to my parents in bed while singing the lyrics of "Sankta Lucia" in garbled Swedish to the tune of "Santa Lucia," a Neapolitan folk song.

I didn't know this then, but I was re-enacting an age-old story about light in midwinter grafted onto a Christian saint. December 13 was the solstice on the Julian calendar and, in Scandinavia, the longest night of the year was



when witches were out in full force. Among these was the Lussi who, with her entourage of demons called lussifreda, roamed the skies, snatching away naughty children and heedless adults. To appease Lussi, it was customary to stay inside and up all night, feasting and socializing, in a house brightly lit with candles. The Lusse celebration survived in parts of Sweden through the 1800s and, as Lovisa Sényby Posse writes, “was mainly celebrated by men or women dressing up in white with a crown of flowers, holding candlesticks and walking around the farm with food while singing in the morning.” Later that same century, it spread across the country as part of a wave of renewed interest in folk customs.<sup>4</sup> Over eight hundred years of Christianity, the celebration was syncretized to the story of St. Lucy: the saint’s onomastic similar-

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4 This interest in folklore was tied to, as Sényby Posse writes, “the first wave of nationalism” and “nobleites and burgees caused the tradition to spread over Sweden as a trend and soon students picked up on this celebration.” St. Lucy is still used as a symbol of the Swedish nation state but, like any religious and ceremonial figure, she has a multiplicity of meanings for people occupying various perspectives and social positions.

ity to Lusse and the date of her feast paired perfectly with the idea that she was part of the solstice, a promise of the returning sun in the long-but-necessary winter. But she was likewise considered the patron saint of those in need, and so the food carried in rural Lusse celebrations became symbolic of that which Lucy carried through the catacombs.

We stopped celebrating St. Lucy's Day when I was in middle school, after Catholicism's entrenched patriarchy got to me so much that I became indignantly agnostic and was more interested in pop punk and Beat literature than an ancient festival of light anyway. But Lucy's lesson around the primacy of sharing food as a radical act never left me. My interest in anarchism was catalyzed by volunteering with Food Not Bombs in the mid-aughts and, even after I left home to dive into radical projects elsewhere, food always seemed to be a part of it, from cooking breakfast for a direct action campaign against mountaintop removal to interviewing friends and comrades who organized disaster relief kitchens.

It wasn't until years later, while staying with a friend in rural Arizona, that my interest in St. Lucy was reignited. My host had also been raised Catholic,

and we were both avowedly against the Church while retaining an affinity for the syncretic religious traditions of women and queers. We talked about our favorite saints—mostly Joan of Arc and Mary Magdalene—often. As I fell asleep on the couch in my friend’s living room one night, watching the flickering of the wood stove, something about those flames illuminating the dim quiet reminded me of Lucy, and I decided to revisit her story. Pulling up Wikipedia on my phone, I was surprised to find that she wasn’t, as I always presumed, from Scandinavia. She was Sicilian.

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It’s in the Swedish tradition, not the Italian one, where the story that inspired me as a child—Lucy bringing food to persecuted early Christians, a crown of candles on her head—is prominent. By contrast, what I mostly encountered during my short, touristic time in Syracuse was a fascination with her death. While this squares with Sicilian Catholicism’s intense focus on martyrdom, it’s also the least interesting part of Lucy’s story. The broad strokes of her execution are almost identical to those of other young, female martyrs from the

Roman Empire, and the fixation on it is emblematic of a Church that, time and again, values female saints based on their often-cruel deaths instead of the lives they lived. Here's the abbreviated version: Lucy rebuked a powerful suitor, he outed her to the authorities as a Christian and, when she refused to swear allegiance to the Roman pantheon, she was tortured and killed.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Lucy's life and death, like most hagiographies, has many different versions. If you absolutely need one, here's the story from *Heroines of God*, a picture book for children published in 1962 by the Archdiocese of New York: "It happened that a young man who did not believe in Christ loved Lucy. He wanted her to marry him. When he heard she was a nun, he was furious. He ran to the Roman Judges. 'Lucy is a Christian,' he said. The soldiers seized her. They threw her into a raging fire. But the flames did not hurt her. God protected her pure body. So the soldier's plunged a sword into her heart. And her pure soul went straight to heaven." Other versions of her death are even more brutal, incorporate sexual assault, and are anti-sex worker.

Caravaggio's "Burial of St. Lucy," shows the saint's chiaroscuro corpse surrounded by mourners, their waxen faces both plaintive and distraught as Rome-employed gravediggers pierce shovels into the subterranean earth. Commissioned by Syracusan authorities in 1608 as part of an effort to revitalize the saint's cult, the painting currently hangs above the altar of the Basilica Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. Lucy was buried in the nearby catacombs that bear her name but, after her body was stolen in the early Middle Ages (it bounced around various empires, and now resides in Venice) a hole was cut in the rock at her gravesite and a circular chapel built in front of it. The chapel's altar is directly below the chiseled gap and in a glass case beneath it is a statue of Lucy that's reputed to miraculously sweat. Her body—a metal-encased corpse in an embroidered scarlet dress with mummified feet—was loaned back to the city by the Venetians for the first time in 2004 and put on display in Syracuse's main cathedral.<sup>6</sup>

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6 This obsession with the saint's body disturbs me in a way that Italian folk catholic traditions surrounding remains largely do not, perhaps because it's so explicitly tied to the institutional Church, who has always

This cathedral, located in a ritzy neighborhood on Ortigia Island, maintains a room of relics related to St. Lucy. Stepping into it, I studied a torn and loose-weaved fragment of her purported burial cloth and a sepia dress with a sash labeled, simply, “Veste di S. Lucia.” In a nearby case ex-votos in the shape of eyes were on display, commemorating a story that crawled into her hagiography in the Middle Ages: she is said to have clawed out her own eyes to rebuke her Roman suitor and later received new ones, with stronger spiritual

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approached Lucy’s story with a sinister misogyny. By contrast, I find a lot of beauty in the cult of the anime pezzentelle—primarily associated with Naples—which arose in the 17th century and gained popularity after a wave of Bubonic Plague in 1656. The practice involves ordinary Neapolitans, often working-class women, adopting abandoned and anonymous remains that are kept in places like the Fontanelle Cemetery and the Purgatoria ad Arco church. They care and pray for the bones and—in a link to pre-Christian southern Italian paganism—ask for favors in return. This practice, as *Atlas Obscura* notes, was suppressed by the Cardinal of Naples in 1969 but continues to this day.

sight, from God in return. This story added “patron saint of eye diseases” to her portfolio, and the ex-votos are still carried by devotees praying for ocular cures and clearer vision. But the focal point of the room is a sixteenth-century silver-and-gold statue that’s paraded between the cathedral and the basilica each December 13th and 20th, as well as during a secondary celebration in May. Its most striking feature is the sword thrust into Lucy’s neck, a reminder of how she was ultimately killed.

The processions themselves stem from when Sicily was ruled by Spain between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, when saints’ feast days—previously simple liturgical services—were turned into citywide spectacles to solidify the island’s Christian identity. These celebrations were the festive side of Spain’s sinister efforts to implement their authoritarian brand of Catholicism, which also included violence towards and the expulsion of the island’s sizeable Jewish and small Muslim populations and, later, the persecution of sex workers, practitioners of magic, accused witches, queers, and Protestants under the auspices of the Inquisition. Despite this, Mackay argues that many Sicilians continued to engage in what has been termed “occult resistance,”

feigning respect for the Church while quietly clinging to folk rituals, subversive beliefs, and syncretic religious practices.

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Down the street from the cathedral, I noticed a handwritten sign in a bakery window advertising *cuccia*, a Sicilian wheat berry and ricotta pudding traditionally eaten on St. Lucy's Day. While I'd made it before, I'd never eaten someone else's version, so I ordered a small container. The ricotta was fresh, and the dark brown wheat berries, mixed with candied fruit, were just sweet enough. The pudding—tied to the saint's association with providing food in times of need and closer in spirit to Scandinavian traditions—felt like an antidote to the dead and dying Lucy I encountered all over Syracuse.

The century and location of *cuccia*'s origin story change depending on the teller—often it's Syracuse, sometimes it's Palermo—but the basic plot points remain the same: during a long, devastating famine in the early modern era, a ship full of grain docked in the harbor. Starving locals rushed to the ship and,



too hungry to mill the grain into flour, ate the wheat berries raw.<sup>7</sup> But preparing *cuccia* entails soaking the wheat berries for three days before cooking them, a step that complicates the dish's provenance. In *Pomp and Sustenance: Twenty-Five Centuries of Sicilian Food*, Mary Taylor Simeti suggests that the story of the famine is a Christianization of an ancient food ritual. She follows a hunch that *cuccia* is related to *panspermia*, a dish of boiled seeds prepared in honor of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun.

The Hellenic connection makes sense: Sicily was, after all, such an important part of Magna Graecia<sup>8</sup> that it's where Persephone—a goddess who, along-

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7 Many Sicilians refrain from eating anything made from milled wheat on December 13. As Simeti writes about St. Lucy's Day in Palermo in *On Persephone's Island*, the typical meal of pasta and bread is replaced with risotto, arancini, and fried chickpea fritters called *panelle*, with *cuccia* served for breakfast or dessert.

8 Syracuse itself is where Artemis was purportedly born and where Orion was cast into the sky. On the north end of Ortigia, the offshore island that's the historic center of the city, are the remains of a Temple to Apollo

side her mother Demeter, has resonances with St. Lucy—was abducted into Hades. In her biannual journey, Persephone made her way through subterranean passageways just as Lucy did, while Demeter was said to have searched the underworld frantically for her stolen daughter, using a torch to light her way. As goddess of the harvest, Demeter was particularly sacred to women and the peasantry in Sicily, worship of her driven by a reverence for the earth and a wheat-centered agricultural system.<sup>9</sup> The statue of Lucy carried

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dating to the 6th century BCE. The island also housed temples to Demeter, Persephone, and Athena, alongside the still-extant Arethusa Spring.

9 Much like St. Lucy was both a symbol of resistance to Roman rule and a tool of authoritarian Spanish Catholicism, Demeter and Persephone have played complex and multilayered roles in Sicilian history. White writes about how they have served as both weapons in the hands of conquering rulers and catalysts for revolt. The tyrant Gelon, who overthrew a democratic government led by commoners and serfs in 5th century BCE Syracuse, consolidated power by building temples to Demeter and Persephone, who were sacred to the peasantry and indigenous Sicilians. Later,

through the streets of Syracuse grasps a palm frond in her left hand that looks strikingly like the wheat—a symbol of nourishment and life—that Demeter brandishes ancient Greek images.

Lucy's symbolic connection to everyday deities of crops and regrowth,<sup>10</sup> alongside the origin myth of *cuccìa*, feels representative of the best aspects of her story. Not the parts where her death is glamorized or her feast day became a tool of Christofascism, but rather Lucy who carried food to her persecuted

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Demeter became a symbol of revolt against Roman rule after her purported hometown of Enna, a city perched on a high rock at the geographic center of Sicily, was plundered by the Romans in the 3rd century BCE.

10 Importantly, Melotti argues that devotions to St. Lucy that are reminiscent of those to Persephone and Demeter are not evidence of a direct, unbroken continuation but rather that, “over the centuries Lucia has acquired elements once special to Demeter and Kore,” complicating overly simplistic narratives around syncretism. Melotti also draws a connection between Lucy-Eutychia and Persephone-Demeter as fatherless, women-led families.

comrades, and Lucy as syncretic saint-goddess whose midwinter descent is a harbinger of the returning warmth and all that it provides.

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In *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, Arthur Evans argues that one of the things we've lost to capitalism, the nation-state, and industrialized society is the long-held human ability to "create our own gods": to imbue the world around us with beliefs and rites tied to our own values and lifeways. For me, this includes the reclamation of sacred figures that have been appropriated by authoritarian institutions and that are much more complicated and transgressive than they first appear. As I tangle with what it means to have a reverence for St. Lucy despite my anti-clericalism and agnosticism, I've started to take the bits of her lore that speak to me most, and to try and make something meaningful out of them. To see if, through enacting these traditions, I can come to a greater understanding of my devotion to the saint.

This past December 10, I measured out two pounds of wheat berries for cuccia and covered them with water. For three days, I changed the water each

morning and night. As I did, I swirled my fingers through the soaking liquid and felt the grains between them, an act that was both impulse and a sort of prayer. The evening before St. Lucy's Day, I cooked the grains and, once cooled, mixed them with ricotta, minced pistachios, and chocolate chips. I lined up ten small mason jars and filled them with the pudding. Meanwhile, I typed eight-hundred messy words about Lucy and laid them out as a one-sheet zine. On the cover I put a statuary image of her, on the back a photograph of me, at age seven or eight, dressed up for St. Lucy's Day. The first five pages were history and folklore, but on the last I added a prose poem I wrote years before, in which I invoked Lucy as, "patron ... of those who slip through the dark with bags of grain, who are arrested for ladling out soup in city parks, who welcome rebels and outlaws into their kitchens at so much risk." I printed the zines on marian-blue paper and folded them at my kitchen table.

On St. Lucy's Day, I woke up early and loaded bags filled with the *cuccia* and zines into my car. As I crossed Tucson on my way to work, I stopped at friends' houses who had requested a delivery. I didn't wear my crown of candles, or sing "Santa Lucia," but rather quietly left the pudding and zine on

their doorsteps. I was on a schedule, yes, but I also felt awkward about the whole thing. Unlike the weekly community dinners I sometimes help procure food and cook for, this wasn't an act of radical meal sharing. It wasn't something practical, or immediately revolutionary. It was, instead, an attempt to reimagine the traditions I grew up with so that they fit with my understanding of myself as an anarchist, an adopted person of southern Italian descent, and someone who retains, in a defiant form, the chaotic spiritual longing of my childhood. To invite people I've chosen to care for and struggle alongside to participate in those traditions, just as many of them have shared their own sacred rituals with me. The saint herself is portrayed, sometimes literally, as unmovable in her perspective and ideals. Unsure of how the ritual would be received, I was instead an apprehensive Lucy who strove to come and go unseen.

While a couple recipients caught me—opening the door to say good morning and, in one case, inviting me in for coffee—I texted the rest of them from my car, adding a candle emoji to the message, to let them know their package had arrived. They all responded warmly and, in the months that followed, I

noticed the zines perched around their houses. I also dropped off several copies at BCC Tucson, the autonomous social center where I spend much of my time. They were all gone within two or three days.

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In the chapel next to the catacombs in Syracuse, I flipped through a guest book filled with thanks and prayers in Spanish, English, and Italian, written by visitors from as far away as Venezuela and Australia. Most of the messages were scribbled in indecipherable cursive, but the ones I could make out were standard Catholic fare: *Grazie. St. Lucy, Pray for Us*, with the name of the country, city, or parish the supplicant came from recorded next to the message. I couldn't help myself. I needed to reclaim her, in some small way, as a comrade to those who run disaster relief and encampment kitchens, deliver free groceries to the homebound, and hand out coffee and cigarettes to folks as they're released from jail.

I picked up a pen and wrote: *For mutual aid, for light, for freedom to live as one chooses*. And, in an act of earnest cheesiness, I added a circle-A.

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