

Origin and meaning of FERRAGOSTO (Feriae Augusti)

Ferragosto, August 15, is one of the most important Catholic holidays, because it's the day that the Virgin Mary was transported directly to Heaven (*Assunta in Cielo*). As is the case with many other Christian holidays, Ferragosto goes back further and has Pagan origins, which in this case are multiple. On the one hand, in 18 BC the Roman Emperor Augustus declared that all of the month of August would be dedicated to the *Feriae Augusti*, a series of festivals and celebrations; the most important was held on the 13th, and was dedicated to Diana, the Goddess whose task it was to oversee the woods, the phases of the Moon, and Maternity. The services, which were celebrated in Diana's temple on the Aventine, was one of the few occasions in which Romans from all walks of life, masters and slaves alike, mingled freely, and the women, who made offerings to the Goddess throughout the year in the hope that their labor would be safe and happy, offered prayers to *Lucina*, the guise Diana assumed when she was acting as protectress of Labor.



In addition to Diana, the *Feriae Augusti* were an occasion to celebrate Vortumnus, God of the Seasons and therefore of the ripening of crops, Conso, the God of the Harvest, and Opeconsiva, who personified the abundant harvest. In short, **the *Feriae* were a celebration of fertility and maternity**; like many other Roman holidays they derived from the East, and in particular from the Syrian celebration of Atagartis, a Mother Goddess who oversaw both fertility and work in the fields. With the advent of Christianity people turned to the Virgin for help in these matters, and began celebrating Her in August in the church in Jerusalem that was said to be Her resting place; the custom spread through the rest of the Empire under Mauritius, in the late 500s.

It's important to note that this was just a celebration of Mary; the modern dogma that she was transported to Heaven on Ferragosto took hold in the 18th century, and was only formally proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950.