

History of Friday the 13th

(Article from About.com)

Paraskevidekatriaphobia: Fear of Friday the 13th

I just finished reading the abstract of a study published in the British Medical Journal in 1993 entitled "Is Friday the 13th Bad for Your Health?" With the aim of mapping "the relation between health, behaviour, and superstition surrounding Friday 13th in the United Kingdom," its authors compared the ratio of traffic volume to the number of automobile accidents on two different days, Friday the 6th and Friday the 13th, over a period of years.

Incredibly, they found that in the region sampled, while consistently fewer people chose to drive their cars on Friday the 13th, the number of hospital admissions due to vehicular accidents was significantly higher than on "normal" Fridays.

Their conclusion:

"Friday 13th is unlucky for some. The risk of hospital admission as a result of a transport accident may be increased by as much as 52 percent. Staying at home is recommended."

Paraskevidekatriaphobics — people afflicted with a morbid, irrational fear of Friday the 13th — must be pricking up their ears just now, buoyed by seeming evidence that their terror may not be so irrational after all. But it's unwise to take solace in a single scientific study — the only one of its kind, so far as I know — especially one so peculiar. I suspect these statistics have more to teach us about human psychology than the ill-fatedness of any particular date on the calendar.

Friday the 13th - The Most Widespread Superstition?

The sixth day of the week and the number 13 both have foreboding reputations said to date from ancient times, and their inevitable conjunction from one to three times a year portends more misfortune than some credulous minds can bear. Some sources say it may be the most widespread superstition in the United States. Some people won't go to work on Friday the 13th; some won't eat in restaurants; many wouldn't think of setting a wedding on the date.

Just how many Americans at the turn of the millennium still suffer from this condition? According to Dr. Donald Dossey, a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of phobias (and coiner of the term "paraskevidekatriaphobia"), the figure may be as high as 21 million. If he's right, eight percent of Americans are still in the grips of a very old superstition.

Exactly how old is difficult to say, because determining the origins of superstitions is an imprecise science, at best. In fact, it's mostly guesswork.

13: The Devil's Dozen

It is said: If 13 people sit down to dinner together, all will die within the year. The Turks so disliked the number 13 that it was practically expunged from their vocabulary (Brewer, 1894). Many cities do not have a 13th Street or a 13th Avenue. Many buildings don't have a 13th floor. If you have 13 letters in your name, you will have the devil's luck (Jack the Ripper, Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Theodore Bundy and Albert De Salvo all have 13 letters in their names). There are 13 witches in a coven.

Though no one can say for sure when and why human beings first associated the number 13 with misfortune, the belief is assumed to be quite old, and there exist any number of theories — all of which have been called into question at one time or another, I should point out — purporting to trace its origins to antiquity and beyond.

It has been proposed, for example, that fears surrounding the number 13 are as ancient as the act of counting. Primitive man had only his 10 fingers and two feet to represent units, this explanation goes, so he could count no higher than 12. What lay beyond that — 13 — was an impenetrable mystery to our prehistoric forebears, hence an object of superstition.

Which has an edifying ring to it, but one is left wondering — did primitive man not have toes?

Despite whatever terrors the numerical unknown held for their hunter-gatherer ancestors, ancient civilizations weren't unanimous in their dread of 13. The Chinese regarded the number as lucky, some commentators note, as did the Egyptians in the time of the pharaohs.

To the ancient Egyptians, these sources tell us, life was a quest for spiritual ascension which unfolded in stages — 12 in this life and a 13th beyond, thought to be the eternal afterlife. The number 13 therefore symbolized death — not in terms of dust and decay, but as a glorious and desirable transformation. Though Egyptian civilization perished, the symbolism conferred on the number 13 by its priesthood survived, only to be corrupted by subsequent cultures who came to associate 13 with a fear of death instead of a reverence for the afterlife.

Anathema

Other sources speculate that the number 13 may have been purposely vilified by the founders of patriarchal religions in the early days of western civilization because it represented femininity. Thirteen had been revered in prehistoric goddess-worshiping cultures, we are told, because it corresponded to the number of lunar (menstrual) cycles in a year ($13 \times 28 = 364$ days). The "Earth Mother of Laussel," for example — a 27,000-year-old carving found near the Lascaux caves in France often cited as an icon of matriarchal spirituality — depicts a female figure holding a crescent-shaped horn bearing

13 notches. As the solar calendar triumphed over the lunar with the rise of male-dominated civilization, it is surmised, so did the number 12 over the number 13, thereafter considered anathema.

On the other hand, one of the earliest concrete taboos associated with the number 13 — a taboo still observed by some superstitious folks today, evidently — is said to have originated in the East with the Hindus, who believed, for reasons I haven't been able to ascertain, that it is always unlucky for 13 people to gather in one place — say, at dinner. Interestingly enough, precisely the same superstition has been attributed to the ancient Vikings (though I have also been told, for what it's worth, that this and the accompanying mythographical explanation are apocryphal). The story has been laid down as follows:

Loki, the Evil One

Twelve gods were invited to a banquet at Valhalla. Loki, the Evil One, god of mischief, had been left off the guest list but crashed the party, bringing the total number of attendees to 13. True to character, Loki raised hell by inciting Hod, the blind god of winter, to attack Balder the Good, who was a favorite of the gods. Hod took a spear of mistletoe offered by Loki and obediently hurled it at Balder, killing him instantly. All Valhalla grieved. And although one might take the moral of this story to be "Beware of uninvited guests bearing mistletoe," the Norse themselves apparently concluded that 13 people at a dinner party is just plain bad luck.

As if to prove the point, the Bible tells us there were exactly 13 present at the Last Supper. One of the dinner guests — er, disciples — betrayed Jesus Christ, setting the stage for the Crucifixion.

Did I mention the Crucifixion took place on a Friday?

Bad Friday

It is said: Never change your bed on Friday; it will bring bad dreams. Don't start a trip on Friday or you will have misfortune. If you cut your nails on Friday, you cut them for sorrow. Ships that set sail on a Friday will have bad luck — as in the tale of H.M.S. Friday ... One hundred years ago, the British government sought to quell once and for all the widespread superstition among seamen that setting sail on Fridays was unlucky. A special ship was commissioned, named "H.M.S. Friday." They laid her keel on a Friday, launched her on a Friday, selected her crew on a Friday and hired a man named Jim Friday to be her captain. To top it off, H.M.S. Friday embarked on her maiden voyage on a Friday, and was never seen or heard from again.

Some say Friday's bad reputation goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. It was on a Friday, supposedly, that Eve tempted Adam with the forbidden fruit. Adam bit, as we all learned in Sunday School, and they were both ejected from Paradise. Tradition also holds that the Great Flood began on a Friday; God tongue-tied the builders of the Tower of Babel on a Friday; the Temple of Solomon was destroyed on a Friday;

and, of course, Friday was the day of the week on which Christ was crucified. It is therefore a day of penance for Christians.

In pagan Rome, Friday was execution day (later Hangman's Day in Britain), but in other pre-Christian cultures it was the sabbath, a day of worship, so those who indulged in secular or self-interested activities on that day could not expect to receive blessings from the gods — which may explain the lingering taboo on embarking on journeys or starting important projects on Fridays.

To complicate matters, these pagan associations were not lost on the early Church, which went to great lengths to suppress them. If Friday was a holy day for heathens, the Church fathers felt, it must not be so for Christians — thus it became known in the Middle Ages as the "Witches' Sabbath," and thereby hangs another tale.

The Witch-Goddess

The name "Friday" was derived from a Norse deity worshipped on the sixth day, known either as Frigg (goddess of marriage and fertility), or Freya (goddess of sex and fertility), or both, the two figures having become intertwined in the handing-down of myths over time (the etymology of "Friday" has been given both ways). Frigg/Freya corresponded to Venus, the goddess of love of the Romans, who named the sixth day of the week in her honor "dies Veneris."

Friday was actually considered quite lucky by pre-Christian Teutonic peoples, we are told — especially as a day to get married — because of its traditional association with love and fertility. All that changed when Christianity came along. The goddess of the sixth day — most likely Freya in this context, given that the cat was her sacred animal — was recast in post-pagan folklore as a witch, and her day became associated with evil doings.

Various legends developed in that vein, but one is of particular interest: As the story goes, the witches of the north used to observe their sabbath by gathering in a cemetery in the dark of the moon. On one such occasion the Friday goddess, Freya herself, came down from her sanctuary in the mountaintops and appeared before the group, who numbered only 12 at the time, and gave them one of her cats, after which the witches' coven — and, by tradition, every properly-formed coven since — comprised exactly 13.

The Unluckiest Day of All

The astute reader will have observed that while we have thus far insinuated any number of intriguing connections between events, practices and beliefs attributed to ancient cultures and the superstitious fear of Fridays and the number 13, we have yet to happen upon an explanation of how, why or when these separate strands of folklore converged — if that is indeed what happened — to mark Friday the 13th as the unluckiest day of all.

There's a very simple reason for that — nobody really knows, though various explanations have been proposed.

The Knights Templar

One theory, recently offered up as historical fact in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, holds that it came about not as the result of a convergence, but a catastrophe, a single historical event that happened nearly 700 years ago.

The catastrophe was the decimation of the Knights Templar, the legendary order of "warrior monks" formed during the Christian Crusades to combat Islam. Renowned as a fighting force for 200 years, by the 1300s the order had grown so pervasive and powerful it was perceived as a political threat by kings and popes alike and brought down by a church-state conspiracy, as recounted by Katharine Kurtz in *Tales of the Knights Templar* (Warner Books: 1995):

"On October 13, 1307, a day so infamous that Friday the 13th would become a synonym for ill fortune, officers of King Philip IV of France carried out mass arrests in a well-coordinated dawn raid that left several thousand Templars — knights, sergeants, priests, and serving brethren — in chains, charged with heresy, blasphemy, various obscenities, and homosexual practices. None of these charges was ever proven, even in France — and the Order was found innocent elsewhere — but in the seven years following the arrests, hundreds of Templars suffered excruciating tortures intended to force 'confessions,' and more than a hundred died under torture or were executed by burning at the stake."

A Thoroughly Modern Phenomenon

There are drawbacks to the "day so infamous" thesis, not the least of which is that it attributes enormous cultural significance to a relatively obscure historical event. Even more problematic, for this or any other theory positing premodern origins for Friday the 13th superstitions, is the fact that no one has been able to document the existence of such beliefs prior to the 19th century. If people who lived before the late 1800s perceived Friday the 13th as a day of special misfortune, no evidence has been found to prove it. As a result, some scholars are now convinced the stigma is a thoroughly modern phenomenon exacerbated by 20th-century media hype.

Going back a hundred years, Friday the 13th doesn't even merit a mention in E. Cobham Brewer's voluminous 1898 edition of the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, though one does find entries for "Friday, an Unlucky Day" and "Thirteen Unlucky." When the date of ill fate finally does make an appearance in later editions of the text, it is without extravagant claims as to the superstition's historicity or longevity. The very brevity of the entry is instructive: "A particularly unlucky Friday. See Thirteen" — implying that the extra dollop of misfortune attributed to Friday the 13th can be accounted for in terms of an accrual, so to speak, of bad omens:

Unlucky Friday + Unlucky 13 = Unluckier Friday.

If that's the case, we are guilty of perpetuating a misnomer by labeling Friday the 13th "the unluckiest day of all," a designation perhaps better reserved for, say, a Friday the

13th on which one breaks a mirror, walks under a ladder, spills the salt, and spies a black cat crossing one's path — a day, if there ever was one, best spent in the safety of one's own home with doors locked, shutters closed and fingers crossed.

Trivia

- Legendary heavy metal band Black Sabbath's first, self-titled album was released in the UK on Friday, February 13, 1970.
- Novelist Daniel Handler, also known as Lemony Snicket, released the 13th book of the Series of Unfortunate Events on Friday, October 13, 2006.
- January 13, 2006, and October 13, 2006, were not only Fridays, but the digits in the month, day, and year of each date add up to 13. This last occurred on October 13, 1520, and will next occur on May 13, 2011.
- There is an almost uncanny occurrence (at least in recent years) of the full moon falling on or very close to a Friday the 13th. July 13th, 1984, February 13th, 1987, March 13th, 1998, October 13th, 2000 were all full moons. June 13th, 2003 and January 13th, 2006 were the days before a full moon, and June 13th, 2014 and January 13th, 2017 occur slightly after the full moon. Friday, September 13th, 2019 will be the next year to contain a full moon on a Friday the 13th.
- The asteroid 99942 Apophis will make its close encounter on Friday, April 13, 2029.
- The Harry Potter Movie: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix will be released on Friday, July 13, 2007.