

Finding the King

LUPINO, FAVA, AND THE RITUAL LOGIC OF BIRTHRIGHT IN EPIPHANY KINGSHIP

Carl Balowski | January 5th, 2025

Abstract

This paper presents a concise analysis of the medieval and early modern Epiphany ritual known as the King of the Bean, situating it within a symbolic continuum that links sovereignty, birthright, and recognition from Roman antiquity to Renaissance Florence. Rather than reading the rite as carnivalesque parody or social inversion, the analysis argues that it functioned as a compact exposition of how kingship was imagined to reproduce itself. Central to this logic is the fava bean and its botanical source, the *lupino* (lupin) plant, whose upright stalk, generative fruit, and etymological association with the wolf (*lupus*) encoded virility, appetite, and reproductive legitimacy. Together, lupino and fava articulate a vegetal grammar in which sovereignty is rooted in bodily generation and inherited continuity.

The ritual is traced in outline to Saturnalian practices of lot-chosen mock kingship, reconfigured within the Christian calendar through Epiphany. In this transformation, sovereignty is not seized but revealed, mirroring the arbitrariness of birth itself. Christian theology reframes the same logic through the Magi, whose recognition of Christ discloses kingship grounded in sonship and inheritance rather than election or conquest. Scriptural passages from Matthew, Romans, and Galatians are briefly examined to show how discovery confers participation, transforming finders into heirs.

The analysis concludes with Renaissance Florence, where the Medici—immersed in Epiphany ritual and vernacular burlesque culture—could read the Bean King as a naturalized emblem of dynastic legitimacy. In this light, the smallest object on the Epiphany table conveys a condensed grammar of sovereignty, lineage, and divine order.

At the center of the Epiphany feast across medieval and early modern Europe lies a deceptively small object: the fava bean. Hidden within a cake and discovered by chance, it conferred upon its finder the title of King of the Bean (*Re della Fava*, *Roi de la fève*, *Rey del haba*). Far from being an arbitrary token, the bean carried a dense symbolic charge inherited from agriculture, classical ritual, Christian theology, and vernacular burlesque.[1] The *fava* is the fruit of the *lupino* (lupin) plant—an upright, vigorous stalk long compared in Mediterranean symbolic language to the phallus (Figure 1). Its fruit, the bean, was analogized to the glans, the visible and generative tip of male potency, while the plant's distinctive whorled leaves, radiating outward at the base of the stalk, readily lent themselves to comparison with the testes, completing the anatomical metaphor in vegetal form. The term *lupino* itself resonates etymologically with *lupus*, the wolf, an animal associated in Roman and later Italian culture with voracious appetite, sexual desire, and generative aggression. From the outset, then, the bean encodes not merely chance, but a fully articulated symbolism of virility, lineage, and reproductive legitimacy, in which sovereignty is imagined as something rooted in bodily generation and inherited continuity rather than abstract right alone.



Figure 1

[1] Chiara Lastraioli, "*In extremis: la manière burlesque de Giovanni Francesco Ferrari*," *Italique: Poésie italienne de la Renaissance*, vol. XVII (2013), OpenEdition Journals, doi:10.4000/italique.364.

It appears increasingly likely then that the Epiphany bean feast descends, at least in part, from the Saturnalia, the great Roman festival of inversion celebrated in December. During Saturnalia, social hierarchies were temporarily suspended, masters served slaves, speech was loosened, and a mock king (*Saturnalicius princeps*) was sometimes chosen by lot to preside over feasting and license. This ruler of misrule did not govern through force or law, but through ritual recognition and chance selection—precisely the mechanism later preserved in the King of the Bean. While Christianity suppressed the pagan calendar, it did not erase its symbolic grammar. Instead, Saturnalian practices were displaced, domesticated, and re-anchored within the Christian liturgical year. Epiphany, positioned at the close of the Twelve Days of Christmas, became a natural vessel for this transformation: a feast already concerned with revelation, kingship, and recognition.

What Saturnalia articulated through inversion and excess, Epiphany reinterpreted through revelation and inheritance. The mock king chosen by lot of the Saturnalia becomes the Bean King of Epiphany; the temporary suspension of order becomes a ritual dramatization of how 'divine' order is transmitted. In both cases, kingship is not seized but *revealed* by lot. The transition from Saturn to Christ does not abolish the logic of ritual sovereignty; it baptizes it.

In hereditary societies, sovereignty depends upon generative continuity. Kings rule because they are born from kings; dynasties persist because virility is successfully transmitted from father to son. The fava, small and hidden yet charged with decisive fertility, becomes a compressed emblem of this logic. It stands for the chance seed that passes invisibly through generations, conferring legitimacy without deliberation, proof, or election. To "find the bean" by chance is therefore to be revealed as king—not by merit, conquest, or force, but by the same chance that governs our lot in life: the accident of birth that makes one man a serf and another a king. The ritual does not deny hierarchy; it renders visible the arbitrary yet binding mechanism by which sovereignty is inherited and maintained.

The Epiphany ritual of the King of the Bean, attested well before the fifteenth century and nearly ubiquitous across Europe, dramatizes this principle through festive enactment. On the eve or day commemorating the Magi's recognition of Christ—January 6th—a *fava*

bean was concealed within bread or cake; whoever discovered it was crowned king for the day. This kingship was temporary, but its symbolism was anything but trivial. The finder did not compete, persuade, or conquer. He inherited sovereignty through chance discovery. Chance here functions as a proxy for nature: it is chance that leads the discoverer to the bean, just as it is chance that determines birth. No one chooses his father, and no one chooses the bean. Kingship, in this ritual, is something into which one *falls* rather than something one seizes—a momentary revelation of the same arbitrary yet binding logic by which hereditary rule itself is established.

The brevity of the reign—often lasting only a single day—does not mock kingship but allegorizes and legitimizes it, for while a king's life is finite, the line endures. The single "day" of rule stands for the lifespan of a sovereign, and its annual repetition for dynastic succession, so that each Epiphany reenacts in miniature the mystery of inheritance: authority appears, rules, vanishes, and returns, unchanged in principle though embodied in different persons.

That this symbolism was widely understood is confirmed by early documentary evidence. One of the clearest attestations comes from Savoy, where court account books record that on 6 January 1391, Epiphany, the squire Gaigo Gerbais was designated *Re della Fava* (King of the Bean) and received a gift of sixty florins. This was not a symbolic token but a substantial sum, equivalent to years of wages. The Savoyard court treated the Bean King as a legitimate ritual sovereign whose elevation justified real economic transfer. Here, festive kingship intersects directly with patronage and material power. Chance, ritual, and legitimacy converge.

The bean's subtextual significance becomes especially clear when read alongside Renaissance burlesque literature. In the poetry and correspondence of figures such as Luigi Pulci, the *fava* is a well-understood euphemism for the glans (the tip of the phallus), while the *lupino* stalk evokes the phallus itself.[2] This is not crude obscenity, but symbolic

[2] The burlesque correspondence between **Luigi Pulci** and **Matteo Franco** is preserved in *Sonetti di Matteo Franco e di Luigi Pulci, assieme con la Confessione: Stanze in lode della Beca, ed altre rime del medesimo Pulci*, newly issued from the original manuscript of Carlo Dati and printed under the care of Marchese Filippo de' Rossi (Florence, 1749). Although published in the eighteenth century, the volume transmits a fifteenth-century Florentine burlesque exchange, including **Sonetti XXII, XXIII, XL, LXXVIII**, and related poems, in which botanical and culinary vocabulary functions as a shared erotic code. Rather than naming sexual organs

precision. In societies organized around lineage, virility is political. A king incapable of producing heirs threatens the stability of the realm. Thus, the bean signifies not raw sexuality, but reproductive legitimacy—sexual force disciplined into lawful succession. The *lupino* and its *fava*, "wolfish" in name and posture, therefore encodes appetite harnessed to lineage.

This botanical, or culinary, grammar of sovereignty provides the missing key to the Epiphany ritual's theological depth, for the feast commemorates the Magi's discovery of Christ, not his coronation. The Magi do not make Christ a king; they recognize him as such by virtue of birth. He is king because, as son of God, he is born a 'spiritual' king. Their journey therefore culminates not in enthronement but in *epiphaneia*—a finding, a manifestation, a eureka moment, a "look at what I've found!"

> Matthew 2:2 "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him… Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Crucially, the Magi—figures of the first Gentile believers—undergo a transformation of status rather than a loss of it. They arrive as kings, yet through their recognition of Christ they become something greater: the first Gentile kings within the Kingdom of God. Their earthly authority is neither denied nor discarded; it is transfigured by participation in a higher sovereignty. Revelation 1:6 gives doctrinal voice to this paradox:

---

directly, both poets exploit everyday foodstuffs as anatomically suggestive substitutes, relying on the audience's familiarity with vernacular double meanings. Pulci's use of *fava* ("bean") is marked. In burlesque Italian, *fava* frequently designates the glans, a meaning supported by its shape, texture, and by ritual associations with fertility and mock kingship. Pulci repeatedly couples *fava* with *zugo* ("juice") and verbs of flowing or gurgling, allowing sexual action to be conveyed through syntactic sequencing rather than explicit description. Franco's reply extends this system by invoking *lupino*, the plant that bears the bean. While *lupino* denotes the lupin legume, its etymological proximity to *lupo* ("wolf") lends it an aggressive, virile charge within burlesque discourse. Read together, the upright lupin stalk functions as a phallic figure, while its product—the *fava*—marks the terminal point of that structure. Franco further counters Pulci by introducing *fica* ("fig"), a conventional signifier of female genitalia, establishing a lexical opposition between *fava* and *fica* that mirrors sexual difference. Through these layered puns, the exchange demonstrates how Renaissance burlesque transforms language itself into a site of erotic and comic contest, where plants, foods, and bodies collapse into one another through wordplay.

> *To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.*

Recognition confers participation. To find Christ is to reign with Him. This is the theological logic that underwrites the King of the Bean. The person who discovers the bean in the bread becomes, symbolically, an heir of God alongside the Magi, who found Christ in Bethlehem. The fava hidden in the loaf thus functions as Christ hidden in Bethlehem—whose very name in Hebrew, *Beth-leḥem*, literally means "house of bread," a meaning well known to medieval commentators. To find the bean is therefore to reenact the Magi's act of recognition.

The finder becomes a Magus because he has discovered the Son of God; and having discovered the Son of God, he is himself declared a son of God. The bean silently announces what Scripture teaches openly: sons are inheritors of the Kingdom. As Paul writes in Romans 8:

> *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Galatians 3 expresses the same logic with equal clarity and emphasis:

> *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*

And again, in Galatians 4, Paul makes the consequence explicit:

> *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

This Christian transfiguration of Saturnalia explains why the adapted ritual belongs properly to Epiphany rather than to Carnival more broadly. It is not mere social inversion, as is sometimes proposed, but a recognition that precedes order. The world is not turned upside down; it is momentarily unveiled. The finder of the bean does not parody Christ's kingship. By chance—or more precisely, by providence—he participates in it, however briefly, as a symbolic Magus reigning at once in an earthly and a heavenly register.

Centuries later, when the bean was replaced in many regions by small figurines of the Christ Child, the logic of the ritual was not transformed but clarified. What had once operated implicitly was now made explicit: the finder quite literally "finds Christ." Yet the temporal, earthly structure of the rite remains unchanged as an imitation of the heavenly order. Discovery confers kingship; kingship is grounded in birth; and birth implies lineage, inheritance, and continuity—an entire logic already carried, in compressed symbolic form, by the fava itself, whose long-standing associations with generative potency and virility anchor the rite in the fundamental principle of begetting upon which both dynastic and divine inheritance depend.

This symbolic economy would have carried particular resonance in Florence, and above all for the Medici, whose identity was tightly bound to the celebration of Epiphany. From the 1430s onward, the family deliberately fashioned itself as the city's Magi.[3] The Epiphany procession—the *Cavalcata dei Magi*—lavishly sponsored by the Medici, was not merely an act of devotion but a form of political theology set in motion, a ritualized assertion of rightful recognition, inheritance, and rule.

Within the Magi Chapel of the Medici palace, the family inscribed itself directly into the Epiphany narrative, presenting its members as Magi renewed: wealthy, regal,

[3] Balowski, Carl. The Medici's Magi Chapel in Florence THE SACRA-POLITICAL INTENT OF ICONOGRAPHY. 2025.

cosmopolitan, and divinely appointed to recognize—and to safeguard—the true king, the infant Christ, whom John the Baptist designates at the altar as the one worthy of adoration (Figure 2). Yet this self-identification with the Magi operated on more than one register. Closely associated with the poet Luigi Pulci, the Medici would have been thoroughly conversant with the burlesque, double-edged euphemisms that clustered around the bean in popular and literary culture. The fava was never an innocent object. Its comic and sexual resonances—its long-standing association with virility, generation, and the transmission of seed—were widely understood, especially within Pulci's irreverent vernacular world.

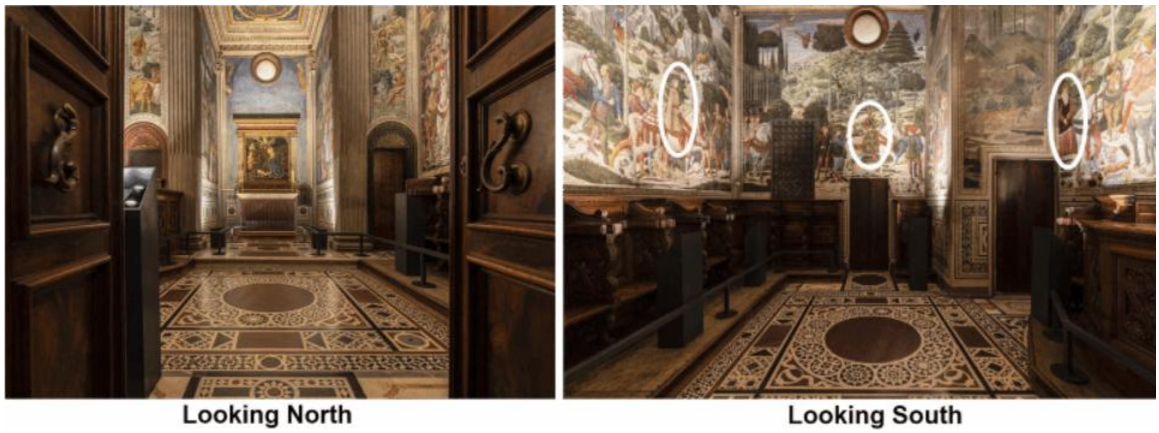


Figure 2

Seen in this light, the Medici appropriation of the Bean King tradition on Epiphany acquires an added layer of meaning. To imagine oneself as a Magus was not only to claim the wisdom to recognize the true king, but also to claim legitimate succession: to pass on one's "seed" as rightful inheritance. The bean hidden in the bread thus becomes a densely charged symbol, uniting divine election with dynastic continuity. In discovering the fava, the Medici could see reflected an image of themselves as lawful heirs of Florence, transmitting authority through lineage just as the Magi, through recognition, become heirs of a higher kingdom. The ritual did not merely celebrate Epiphany; it naturalized Medici rule by embedding it within a structure where kingship, birth, and inheritance were inseparable, and very Christian.

The King of the Bean (*fava*), then, is not a parody of kingship but its disclosure. He embodies, in miniature and under symbolic cover, the principles by which sovereignty

perpetuates itself: virility ordered into lineage, appetite disciplined into inheritance, and recognition transfigured into rule. The lupine stalk and its fava encode this logic botanically; the Magi enact it theologically; the Epiphany feast makes it ritually manifest. In crowning the finder of the bean, Epiphany does not invert the world. It renders its structure intelligible.

The smallest object on the table bears the greatest truth: kingship begins in birth, is revealed through recognition, and endures through lineage—on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.