

The Saturnalia



The **Saturnalia** was the most festive and merry of the Roman holidays. This festival in honor of Saturnus was originally held for one day on **December 17th**, 14 days before the Kalends of January, but was so popular that it increased to seven days by the end of the Republic. During the Empire, when the emperors tried to limit the length of the festival to three and then five days, Romans still insisted on celebrating for the full seven. Saturnus was an Italian god of seed and sowing (“*sator*” – planter). By the 3rd century B.C., Saturnus became associated with the Greek god Kronos, the god of the golden age, when life was so wonderful, there were no laws, no need to work and no wars. Life was free from all burdens.



The Temple of Saturn

This theme of freedom was translated into the customs of the Saturnalia. In the Temple of Saturn, the oldest temple recorded by the *pontifices*, the statue of Kronos, whose head was covered all the rest of the year, was uncovered. His feet, which were bound with woolen cloth, were unbound.

As with our national holidays, all public and most private business was suspended. The courts, schools and government were closed. No punishments were carried out. Gambling was allowed in public. Wars were postponed. There was an inversion of class roles. Slaves were freed from their normal tasks and given great latitude in their interaction with their masters. They were treated as equals and were allowed to wear their master's clothes. Often the master would serve his slaves at the dinner table. The *pileus*, a conical felt hat that was usually worn by freedmen to signify their manumission from slavery, was worn by everyone (like contemporary party hats). Roman citizens were not required to wear the toga in public, as customary, but wore casual clothing instead.



Slaves receiving the cap of freedom (*pileus*)

During the Saturnalia, Romans exchanged a variety of gifts. These gifts were of two types: *xenia* and *apophoreta*. The *xenia* were gifts sent to someone's home and were expected to be substantial and costly. The *apophoreta* were smaller less expensive gifts brought by guests to a dinner party. They included wax candles (*cerei*)

and lamps decorated with holly, to signify the returning of the light after the winter solstice. Bags of nuts were given to children to play a game similar to marbles. Children were also given little clay figurines called *sigillaria*. The poet Martial wrote two books of Xenia and Apophoreta greetings that were to be attached to the gifts like a modern day Christmas card.

Boleti

*Argentum atque aurum facile est laenamque
togamque mittere: boletos mittere difficile est.*

Mushrooms

It is easy to send silver and gold and a cloak and a gown, but sending mushrooms is difficult.

Porcus

*Iste tibi faciet bona Saturnalia porcus,
inter spumantes ilice pastus apros.*

Pig

This pig will make you a good Saturnalia; he fed on acorns among the foaming boards.

Lucerna polymyxos

*Illustrem cum tota meis convivium flammis
totque geram myxo, una lucerna vocor.*

Lamp with many wicks

Although I light up whole dinner parties with my flames and bear so many wicks, I am called one lamp.

Auriscalpium

*Si tibi morosa prurigne verminat auris,
arma damnus tantis apta libidinibus.*

Earpick

If your ear is plagued by a capricious itch, I give you a weapon apt to such urges.

Xenia and Apophoreta from Book 13 and 14 of Martial's Epigrams

Throughout the days of the festival, Romans visited friends and family, and engaged in drinking, eating, playing games, and general merry-making. A minor member of the family was chosen as a "god of misrule" (*Saturnalicus princeps*) and charged with conducting the proceedings of the celebration. Cicero called it "the best of days" (*optimus dierum*) and Seneca complained that the "whole mob has let itself go in pleasures". Pliny the Younger said that he retired to his bedroom while the rest of the household celebrated.

On the last day of the holiday, a ceremony was held at the Temple of Saturn. After many animal sacrifices, there was a great public feast (*convivium publicum*) at which a statue of Saturnus was seated as if he were a guest (*lectisternium*). After the banquet everyone yelled "*Io Saturnalia*".

Food for the Saturnalia celebration.

Breads

Cheese

Carrots

Grapes

Apples

Deviled eggs

Dates

Figs

Celery

Nuts

Fruit

Pastry

Vegetable Dip

Grape juice

Soda

Olives