

## Christmas



Christmas and its fellow midwinter holidays are too important to be excluded because of prejudice against religion. Most ancient societies had a festival built around the winter solstice—the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of December. (Yuletide is an example). These festivals in all cultures tend to emphasize light, as the winter solstice is the time in the Northern Hemisphere when the days are shortest and the sun's power is less evident. This was also often a time of need, so sharing is as much part of the various celebrations as feasting is.

## Saturnalia

The Roman festival, the Saturnalia, was named for Saturn and recalled his rule in the Golden Age. Romans evidently originally celebrated it on December 17, but it spread to several days in December.

The halls were decked with boughs of laurel and green trees as well as a number of candles and lamps. These symbols of life and light were probably meant to dispel the darkness. Friends exchanged gifts and even carried small gifts with them in case they met a friend or acquaintance in the streets or in the Forum. Originally the gifts were symbolic candles and clay dolls – *sigillaria* – purchased at a colonnaded market called *Sigillaria* which was located in the Colonnade of the Argonauts, later in one of the Colonnades of Trajan's Baths. Something similar is still practiced in Rome's Piazza Navona today. Gifts could also include food items such as pickled fish, sausages, beans, olives, figs, prunes, nuts and cheap wine as well as small amounts of money. They grew to be more extravagant over time with small silver objects becoming typical. Seneca complains, as moderns do, about the shopping season: "Decembris used to be a month; now it's a whole year." Yet Martial may have been the first sage to remark "The only wealth you keep forever is that which you give away." The poet Statius (*Silvae* 1.6) begs the gods inspiring poetry to go away at this time so he can play, and Martial in several Epigrams comments on the gift exchange and the equality of all men that are part of the season.

A cry of *Io Saturnalia!* and a sacrifice of young pigs at the temple of Saturn inaugurated the festival. These were served up the next day when masters gave their slaves—who were temporarily immune from all punishments—a day off and waited on them at dinner. Dice were used to choose one person at the dinner, who might even be a slave, as Saturnalia King and everyone was forced to obey his absurd commands to sing, dance or blacken their faces and be thrown into cold water and the like for the entire period.

Seneca sees special significance of the Saturnalia customs as evidence of the ancient Roman attitudes.

## ON SLAVES

**Nē illud quidem vidētis, quam omnem invidiam maiōrēs nostrī dominīs, omnem contumēliam servīs dētrāxerint? Dominum patrem familiae appellāvērunt, servōs, quod etiam adhūc dūrat, familiārēs. Īstituērunt diem fēstum, nōn quō solō cum servīs dominī vēscerentur, sed quō utique. (Epistulae Morales 47)**

*Indeed do you not see that our ancestors removed all spite from the masters, all insults from the slaves? They called the master "father of the family," the slaves, which (custom) endures up to this day "family members." They established a festal day (the Saturnalia) when slaves might eat with their masters, not (on that) only, but on that one especially*

Here Gellius, who was away from home at the festival, celebrates it in a foreign land.

**Saturnalia Athenis hilare tamen modeste agebamus. Conveniebamus ad cenam multi Romani qui in Graeciam erant. In ordine cenam dabamus (evidently for several days) et post cenam praemium solvendae quaestionis ponebamus. Praemium erat librum scriptoris vel Latinum vel Graecum et coronam e lauro plexam. Totidem res (puzzles or questions) hospes quaerebat quot homines eramus. Rem et locum dicere sors dabat. Quaestiones igitur solutae (personification?) coronam et praemium recipiebant. (Noctes Atticae 13.17)**

Note: This resembles the Christmas feast of Scrooge's nephew in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Ask your students what similarities they see.