

CLASSICAL FAX*: Festivals & Holidays

SATURNALIA

[December 17-23]

In Cicero's time, the Saturnalia, an ancient Roman agricultural festival, lasted seven days.

Augustus, however, limited the celebrations to three days so the civil courts would not have to be closed for an extended time.

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The celebration of the *Saturnalia* was extended with the *Sigillaria*, so named for the small earthenware figurines which were sold and given as gifts. [Macrobius I.10.24]

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After the Julian reform of the Calendar, the original first day of the *Saturnalia* was dedicated to *Ops* in the festival *Opalia*.

Ops, the consort of *Saturnus*, signified the abundance and fruits of the earth.

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In the Roman Calendar, the *Saturnalia* was designated a holy day, or holiday, on which religious rites were performed.

As an example, the woolen bonds, which fettered the feet of the ivory cult statue of *Saturnus*, were loosened to symbolize the liberation of the god.

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The origin of red & green
Christmas decorations -

During the *Saturnalia*, the
Romans decorated their homes
with evergreen wreaths (*serta*)
bearing red berries.

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The Roman god *Saturnus* was often identified with *Kronos* and was worshipped according to Greek ritual.

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The Temple of *Saturn*, the oldest temple recorded by the pontiffs, had been dedicated on the *Saturnalia*.

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After sacrifice in the Temple of Saturn,
the celebrants would enjoy a public
banquet, after which they would enter the
streets shouting “IO SATURNALIA.”
[Macrobius I.10.18]

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The *Saturnalia* was the most popular holiday of the Roman year. In poem XIV, Catullus describes the festival as “the best of days.”

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The *Saturnalia* was an occasion for celebration, visits to friends, and the presentation of gifts, particularly *cerei*, wax candles, and *sigillaria*, clay figurines.

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The exchange of wax candles called *cerei* is thought to have symbolized “*Sol Invictus*,” the unconquered sun, as part of the winter solstice tradition.

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During the *Saturnalia*, slaves were treated as equals by their masters, in memory of an early golden age thought to have been ushered in by the god *Saturnus*.

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The ancient Roman festival of *Saturnalia* recalled an age of general merriment and goodwill, ruled by *Saturnus*.

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By the second century A.D.,
Brumalia, the winter solstice
celebration, replaced the
Saturnalia.

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By the middle of the 4th century A.D., many customs of the *Saturnalia* were adapted to the celebration of Christmas.

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During the *Saturnalia*, Roman men replaced the *toga* with a loose-fitting garment called the *synthesis*.

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The ancient Romans honored *Saturnus*, the god of seed and sowing, with a festival after the autumn planting was completed.

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