

## **“IO, SATURNALIA: A Perennial Holiday Favorite in Main Line Schools”**

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As the legions of students studying Latin in schools throughout the Main Line well know, to the ancient Romans the period from December 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> marked the end of the harvest and the start of the celebration of agrarian prosperity and goodwill prevalent during the age of *Saturnus*, an ancient Italic king.

During the week following Hanukkah and preceding Christmas, in many secondary schools throughout the Main Line, students will be heard exclaiming the celebratory “*IO, SATURNALIA!*,” a herald of the centuries-old festival of the *Saturnalia*.

According to tradition, the ancient Romans honored *Saturnus*, the god of seed and sowing, after the autumn planting was completed. In Cicero’s time, the *Saturnalia* 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.

As part of the tradition, Roman men replaced the toga with a loose-fitting garment called a *synthesis* and slaves were treated as equals by their masters as a tribute to the supposed general merriment of the celebration.

Through the ages, the fabled festival in honor of *Saturnus* had acquired various customs and traditions, many of which were adopted by the early Christians and persist to the current day.

Our customary use in December of red and green, representing perennial foliage and berries, dates back to the Roman *Saturnalia*. During the festival, the Romans decorated their homes with evergreen wreaths, called *serta*, bearing red berries.

The exchange of gifts, the singing of songs, and the dedication of specific foods at meals, all characterized the holidays.

According to the early 5<sup>th</sup> century *Anno Domini* antiquarian Macrobius, the celebration of the *Saturnalia* was extended with the *Sigillaria*, so named for the small earthenware figurines which were sold in Roman shops and given as gifts to children.

The Temple of *Saturnus*, thought by many to be the oldest Roman temple recorded by the pontiffs, had been dedicated during the *Saturnalia*.

After sacrifice in the Temple of *Saturnus*, the celebrants would enjoy a public banquet, then go out to the streets shouting the holiday greeting “*IO, Saturnalia!*” for all to hear.

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

The ancient Romans also celebrated the *solstitium*, or winter solstice, at the approximate mid-way point between the Ides of December, the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month, and the Kalends, or 1<sup>st</sup>, of January, corresponding to our Winter Solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup>.

In fact, it is thought that the exchange, *permutatio*, of wax candles symbolized *Sol Invictus*, the unconquered sun, as part of the winter solstice tradition. It appears, however, that by the second century A.D., *Brumalia*, the winter solstice celebration, replaced the *Saturnalia*.

Hence, by the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., many customs of the old *Saturnalia* were adapted to the celebration of Christmas.

Nevertheless, the festival was the most popular holiday of the Roman year for centuries. In fact, during the time of Julius Caesar, the poet Catullus described the festival as “the best of days.”

The ancient *Saturnalia* and many of its customs survive to the present day both in Rome and in modern-day Latin classes. Students will often exchange candles as symbols of the season, and commemorate the ancient festival with special cakes and foods.

On December 13th, Latin students from the Main Line and Metropolitan Philadelphia will participate in the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Classical World Fashion and Design Show and *Saturnalia* Preview *convivium* to be held in Saint Joseph’s University’s Boland Hall, one of the grand mansions on Lapsley Lane and the home of the SJU Art Department.

The fashion and design show, sponsored by The Philadelphia Classical Society, is dedicated *in memoriam* to Professor Norma Wynick Goldman of Wayne State University, who championed the production of various costumes of antiquity as a way to understand an important aspect of ancient Roman life.

Since 2016, all proceeds from the fashion and design show have benefitted a scholarship award for a current graduate of Boys Latin in Philadelphia *in memoriam* Dr. Rudolph Masciantonio.

Dr. Rudy Masciantonio was in the vanguard of introducing Latin to non-traditional students in the Philadelphia School District in the 1970's through the Foreign Language in the Elementary School Program (FLES).

By creating an ancient festival atmosphere, the PCS Classical World fashion show and party convey the spirit of the *Saturnalia* through costumes, fun, and feasting for students and teachers.

So if you chance to hear an occasional “*IO, SATURNALIA!*” exclaimed by your favorite Latin student during the shortest days of winter, know that you are welcomed to commemorate the ancient Roman festival of peace, goodwill, and harmony.

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