

The History of Christmas

NOTE: This was originally written for an SCA Yule class, meant to address the secular celebratory rituals of December 25th before the 5th century. It does not address any religious or sacred issues.

Many of the Yuletide traditions we observe actually date back to before Christmas. It's fascinating to me how many of our current traditions have persisted for two thousand years. Look for a future paper on the Roman origin of wedding rituals... The Empire may have fallen, but we are still enacting a surprising number of Roman memes.

WINTER SOLSTICE

When the nights stop getting longer, and start getting shorter, it's time to party! Celebrations occur in mid-winter in most cultures, as far back as we can see.

SATURNALIA

Saturnalia was the Roman winter solstice festival of Saturn. He was a god of agriculture and specifically grain: December 17th was typically right after the last wheat harvest (remember the climate is warmer in Rome). To celebrate, Romans took a day of rest and feasting on the Saturn-granted plenty.

Originally in the early Republic, Saturnalia was a single holy day on December 17th. The senators performed a mass animal sacrifice at the temple of Saturn, followed by a public feast. In the late Republic it had grown into three days of celebration. By the end of the 1st century CE, Saturnalia swelled into an officially observed week, through the 23rd. Realistically, it became a month-long party. As the secular parties and feasting expanded out of control, it threatened to grow further, much like Christmas ornaments appearing in stores before Halloween. "The season eventually became so overblown that conservatives complained about too much secularization, too much focus on material goods, and that a holy day had become an excuse to quit work and get drunk (Domin)."

“Who can sing of the spectacle, the unrestrained mirth, the banqueting, the unbought feast, the lavish streams of wine? Ah! now I faint, and drunken with thy liquor drag myself at last to sleep. For how many years shall this festival abide! Never shall age destroy so holy a day! While the hills of Latium remain and father Tiber, while thy Rome stands and the Capitol thou hast restored to the world, it shall continue.”

~**Publius Papinius Statius** (Silvae, I.6.98ff)

Julia Sempronia notes that “this was apparently written after Statius staggered home from the Emperor Domitian’s party.”

December used to be a month – now it’s a whole year.

~**Seneca** (Moral Letters to Lucillius)

Io Saturnalia! One of the few traditions that didn’t survive in the general culture* was the role-reversal of slaves and masters. For a few brief days, the nobility would allow the servants to speak and live in relative freedom. They could even eat in the dining room ... separately, of course, before the patricians had their own meal. In some cases the rich would serve the commoners, and allow practical jokes to be played on them. You could get away with a lot by shouting “Io Saturnalia!” (pronounced “EEEE-oh”) - the Roman equivalent of “Just kidding!” A servant or child would be selected as the *princeps*, Saturnalian King for the duration of the festivities, and could order everyone else to amuse him by singing, reciting poetry, or dancing. Everyone wore a *pillius*, a soft brimless hat also called a liberty cap, which was usually the mark of a freed slave, as a symbol of freedom of action during the festival.

“Io, Saturnalia” was also used as a seasonal greeting.

*I’ve been told that in some parts of the US military, officers still serve the enlisted on Christmas Day!



After the assassination of Julius Caesar, Marcus Iunius Brutus minted this coin, visually claiming that he had freed Rome from slavery to a tyrant.

Other celebratory traditions have carried through the centuries:

- 1) **Bringing evergreen boughs inside** and hanging them on the walls. Fir and holly branches were popular. I was unable to confirm mistletoe, but it was mentioned on some sketchy websites.
- 2) **Baked goods** (and lots of food in general): Saturn was an agricultural deity, and associated with grain. The bakeries went all out producing bread and sweet treats during Saturnalia. I've included two recipes at the end of this paper.
- 3) **Lighting of candles.** For most of the year, Romans burned olive oil in lamps. Wax candles were an expensive treat for the holiday.
- 4) **Gift giving:** Candles (for adults) and clay dolls and figurines (for children) gave way to silverware sets and clothing (the *toga* was a common gift from a patron to his client) as the centuries rolled on.
- 5) **Closing of businesses and schools**
- 6) **Bonuses** to employees and servants
- 7) **Groups of singers traveling in the streets:** They were called Mummers, and it evolved into caroling, although the Romans did it drunk. Some reports claim they were naked, while others mention costumes.
- 8) **Funny hats** are still a British tradition. Now they do paper crowns in their Christmas crackers. I wonder if the crowns are a direct evolution of the freedmans' caps?

9) **Special gaudy clothing** The *toga* was specially set aside. Instead, gentlemen wore a *pilleus* and *synthesis*. The *synthesis* was an outfit of matching tunic and mantle (a big rectangle worn similarly to a toga or palla – see my clothing papers). Most of the year it was reserved for informal dining at home, but during Saturnalia it was worn outside as well. I have not found any mentions of women wearing special clothing.

10) **General revelry** and relaxed rules. Gambling with dice, Odd or Even, and a sort of Backgammon were popular. Gambling was illegal the rest of the year. This translated into “a time of enjoyment, cheerfulness, and goodwill (Adkins, 287)” – ie the Christmas Spirit. Balsdon (124) notes that “sixteenth century statutes of [...] Oxford college [allowed students to] play cards in Hall for moderate stakes on here occasions: All Saint’s Day, Christmas Day, and the Purification of the Virgin.”

Not everyone enjoyed the madcap frolicking. The painfully serious Pliny the Younger built a soundproof room in his villa and hid away to work in silence while his household partied.

THE FEAST OF THE UNCONQUERED SUN (SOL INVICTUS)



Sol and Mithras (two sun gods)*
banqueting with Luna and the
twin divinities Cautes and
Cautopates, his attendants.
Marble, side B of a two-sided relief
from Fioro Romano, 2nd or 3rd
century AD. Note the rayed crown.

At the beginning of the third century, the various monotheistic sun gods (Mithras, Helios, Sol, etc) were growing in popularity. Obviously a winter solstice is a big deal for a solar deity: The “birthday of the sun” was Dec 25th, which was the winter solstice by the Julian calendar.** Sol was the

Syrian version of the sun god, and the Feast of Sol Invictus was introduced to the city of Rome by the Syrian-born Emperor Elagabalus in 218.

In 274, Emperor Aurelian made the Feast of Sol Invictus an empire-wide holiday.

It's difficult to find information on celebratory traditions surrounding the Feast of Sol Invictus, but I'm guessing many of the Saturnalia trappings continued, because they seem to have carried through to Christmas.

* The sun gods are supposed to be monotheistic, but apparently Mithras and Sol appear together in a common motif, pictured above. I do not understand this very complicated issue and hope to investigate further in the future.

**The Julian calendar was established in 45BCE. Pliny dated the winter solstice to 25 December in 79 CE (Pliny, *Natural History: (Book 18, LIX / LXVI / LXVIII / LXXIV)*).

We shifted to the Gregorian calendar in 1582.

CHRISTMAS

Early in his reign, Emperor Constantine venerated Sol and included his imagery in coins and the Arch of Constantine. He was sensitive to the immense popularity of monotheism, and played on that to build support, but often was unclear as to whether he was praising Sol or the Christian God. He moved the Sabbath from the Jewish Saturday (Saturn's Day) to SUNDAY. In 337, Emperor Constantine officially converted himself and the Empire to Christianity on his deathbed. For years, the Christian church tried to stamp out all pagan celebrations. Eventually they realized the populace was never going to give up their mid-winter party, so they rebranded the Feast of the Unconquered Sun as Christ's Mass. The first official connection between Christmas Day and December 25th started appearing between 330-350. Jesus was often represented during this period with a radiating sun ray crown to aid in merging him with the sun gods. Augustine (d. 430 CE) in a Christmas sermon said, "Let us celebrate this day as a feast not for the sake of this sun, [...] but for the sake of him who created the sun."

The Catholic Church claims that the date was picked independently to reflect Jesus' birthday, but most modern scholars reject this claim.

Saturnalia and the Feast of Sol Invictus survived here and there in the countryside until the 5th century, when paganism fell with the Empire, and Roman Catholicism dominated the social order.

RESOURCES

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Mithraic statue <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=main>

Sweets for Saturn (from website *Io, Saturnalia*)

~ *mustacei* (spice cookies) ~

4 cups (500g) flour
1 1/2 cups (300ml) grape juice or sweet wine
2 Tbsp anise seeds
2 Tbsp cumin seeds
1/2 cup (100g) lard, cubed
1/3 cup (50g) cheese, grated
about 20 bay leaves

Grind the anise and cumin. Mix the flour with the juice, then stir in the anise, cumin, lard, and cheese. (I'd recommend a little salt if your cheese is bland.) Shape into small balls and flatten by pressing a bay leaf into each. Arrange the cookies on a tray, bay leaf down, and bake at 350F (180C) for half an hour. Makes about 20 cookies. Yes, you can substitute shortening for the lard; and if you want to increase the spice content, try poppy seed, cinnamon, ginger, or black pepper.

~ *globi* (cheese balls) ~

Tiny deep-fried cheesecakes – a treat truly worthy of the gods! Combine equal parts flour and soft cheese. I use spelt flour, and I like to toast it for a little more flavor; for the cheese I recommend a good quality ricotta – cow, goat, or sheep, it's all good. (Again, if your cheese is bland, you'll want to add a pinch of salt and/or sugar.) Let the dough rest while you heat up a big pot of lard (OK fine, vegetable oil). Form the dough into small balls and deep-fry them, turning with chopsticks, until golden brown. Drain on paper towels. Drizzle honey over the *globi* and, if you're feeling frisky, sprinkle them with poppy seeds. Bask in the deliciousness.

Recipe modernizations are from *A Taste of Ancient Rome* by Ilaria Gozzini Giacosa based on texts from Apicius and Cato. If you're into primary sources (and who isn't?), I recommend Martial's *Epigram 14*, Seneca's *Epistle 18*, Horace's *Satire II*, Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, and Cato's *De Agri Cultura*.