

Saturn presided over one of the best-loved holidays in the Roman calendar, the Saturnalia, or Brumalia (having to do with frost), which began on 17 December and extended a full seven days despite attempts by Augustus to legislate only three days of merriment. The Saturnalia was Christianized in due course and Saturnalia customs continued on under the new religion.

As a god, Saturn himself was a bit boring. There are no votives to him found at Rome; he was not one of the gods, apparently, who received prayers from people. Saturn was certainly an old agricultural god of the Italian people and is credited with teaching the early folk how to farm. He was also identified with the Greek Chronos, and as the story goes, was evicted from Olympus by Jupiter, came to Latium and established a fortified oppidum on the Capitoline Hill (known as Mons Saturnius back then), called Saturnia. There was a Golden Age while he ruled in Saturnia and all prospered.

His temple is one of the oldest in the Roman Forum, located at the foot of the Capitoline hill and is dated to the 490's BC, although it was rebuilt in 42 BC and again in the fourth century AD after a fire. An even older altar stood in front of it, believed by the Romans themselves to date to the Trojan War or to have been built by Hercules. Within the temple was a wooden statue of the god bound with wool and filled with olive oil. During the Saturnalia he was unbound. It is perhaps fitting that the temple of a somewhat boring god would house the state treasury and also the archives (laws and financial documents) before they were moved to the Tabellarium in 78 BC.

If Saturn himself was a boring old god, his festival on 17 December certainly made up for his lack of personality. The date coincides with the general time of the winter solstice and the end of the sowing season by Italian farmers who could now look to having a well-deserved holiday. Festivities on the 17th began with a sacrifice at the temple. Senators and Equites wore their togas for the occasion

but afterwards took them off for the huge public feast thereafter. Everyone was welcome and informality was the order of the day. Since Saturn had presided over a Golden Age when everyone was equal and there was plenty for all social distinctions during this holiday became blurred and people were very relaxed. Soft felt caps were worn by all (today we use paper) and at the end of the feast people would go off to home shouting IO SATURNALIA!

On the next two days festivities were held closer to home. Families enjoyed an early bath and sacrificed suckling pigs, and of course thereafter ate them. There was much visiting with friends, games and merriment. During the Saturnalia the prohibition against gambling was officially lifted (not that it had much force the rest of the year!) and gambling games were allowed in public. Each household appointed a special 'king' for the festivities and during this brief return to Saturn's Golden Age slaves were allowed much license, even being served by their masters at table. This 'turnabout' custom persists today in the Canadian Armed Forces: a special Christmas dinner is held for the soldiers, with officers waiting table, the origin of this practice unknown, I am sure, to diner and servant alike.

Gifts were exchanged during the Saturnalia. The practice of exchanging small wax candles has survived into later ages and in fact melded with similar practices at winter solstice festivals of other cultures and the later Christian religion: lights (today electric, candles earlier) on the Christmas tree; the Yule log; candlelight Christmas Eve Mass; Santa Lucia's Day in Scandinavia; and the practice of putting up Christmas lights on our houses. Many of us use candles in windows at this season of the year. This is particularly widespread in Scandinavia at this season, where the dark evening sparkles with many candles, usually in threes, set out in the windows of office buildings and private residences alike.

Sigillaria, or little images, were exchanged as gifts. These could be made out of fired clay or they could be made out of flour and baked: (Christmas) cookies. We are all familiar with the fancy sweet baked goods available at this season today. Were you to go to Rome you would also see many of the pottery figures. These are widely sold throughout the city today, but especially in the Piazza Navona which

is given over to booths and stalls of vendors of figures for Christmas crèches, or nativity scenes. The long-standing fondness for the little (formerly Saturnalia) figures lives on in the displays of nativity scenes (presepe) ranging from the very simple to extremely elaborate displays with whole cities and thousands of figures which are found in the city at this time of year. Plastic, plaster, and other fabrics have displaced the pottery ones somewhat but these may also still be found for sale and on display.

Gifts exchanged could be almost anything, and almost everyone exchanged them. Clients could normally expect to receive 5 or more pounds of silver plate. In cosmopolitan centres such as Rome silver tableware was quite common, although of course the poor used cheap pottery. The poet Martial describes a patron as miserly if he did not give a poor client at least three pounds of silver; and one patron was said to be so extremely miserly that he only required 8 slaves to haul around his Saturnalia gifts. It would appear that the Romans went all out on gift-giving!