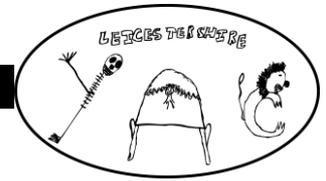


THE SATURNALIA



WHAT IS THE SATURNALIA?

Every December, Romans across the Empire took time off work and gathered to celebrate the Saturnalia. A festival in honour of the god Saturn.

Saturn (left) is an agricultural deity representing plenty, wealth and time. His festival started on 17 December and was a time of feasting, role reversals, free speech, gift-giving and revelry. Slaves would be treated like freemen, gambling was allowed and people would discard formal clothes (e.g. togas) for brightly coloured casual wear.

The festival was very popular because it emphasised family celebration over formal worship. This meant that people could celebrate all over the Empire even if they were not close to a temple of Saturn.

In Rome, the holiday began with priests marking the dedication anniversary of the Temple of Saturn in the Forum. Officially it lasted 5 days, but private festivities usually continued until 23 December.

'Io, Saturnalia!' (pronounced 'eo' or 'yo') was the traditional exclamation of the festival. In some ways it was similar to wishing people Merry Christmas or Happy New Year today.

Private festivities included:

- Decorating the home with greenery.
- Lighting candles
- Giving friends and family gifts (traditionally at the end of Saturnalia on 23 December)
- Feasting
- Wearing a conical felt hat called a *pilleus* (a symbol of equality and freedom)
- Played games

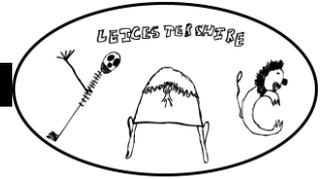
Does any of this sound familiar?

During the late Roman Empire, on 25 December, the Romans celebrated *Dies Natalis Solis Invictis*, the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun.'



Dice players in a wall painting from Pompeii.

SATURNALIA QUIZ



Would it surprise you to learn that many of the customs we observe at Christmas go back to Roman times and have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus? Here is a quiz for you to test your knowledge of the Roman SATURNALIA and its influences on modern Christmas.

1. During the Roman Empire, some celebrated the birth of which famous person on 25 December?

- a) Julius Caesar
- b) Sol Invictus (Unconquered Sun), the Roman sun god
- c) Jesus Christ
- d) Asterix

2. What event occurs three days before 25 December?

- a) Summer Solstice
- b) Summer Equinox
- c) Winter Solstice
- d) Winter Equinox

3. Many scholars believe Jesus was actually born in:

- a) late December, of course!
- b) late September/early October
- c) mid January
- d) Leicester

4. The Romans celebrated a mid-winter festival called the Saturnalia. It was named after:

- a) The planet Saturn
- b) The god Saturn
- c) Saturday
- d) Satyrs

5. In the first century AD how many days did the Romans set aside to celebrate the Saturnalia?

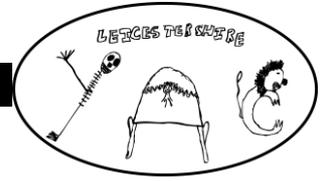
- a) one
- b) five
- c) twelve
- d) thirty

6. The Romans gave gifts on the Saturnalia. Which of the following did they NOT give?

- a) chocolate
- b) silver objects
- c) preserved fruit
- d) small clay or wooden figurines

7. The mottoes and riddles in Christmas crackers might well go back to the Roman practice of:

- a) hiring comic actors to deliver gifts
- b) writing a two-line epigram to accompany a Saturnalia gift
- c) Roman singing telegrams (in dactylic pentameter)
- d) memorizing and reciting lines from Virgil's *Aeneid* as a Saturnalia party trick



8. Which ONE of the following Christmas customs did NOT originate in the Saturnalia:

- a) feasting
- b) putting up lights
- c) putting up greenery
- d) Santa and his reindeer
- e) giving gifts
- f) taking time off work

9. In first century Rome, which illegal practice was permitted during the Saturnalia?

- a) murder
- b) theft
- c) witchcraft
- d) gambling

10. The paper crown in our Christmas cracker reminds us of the Roman custom of:

- a) choosing a 'King' of the Saturnalia
- b) Caesar legitimizing festivities
- c) the Etruscan king Tarquin
- d) It has nothing to do with any Roman custom

11. Santa's red conical hat might well be traced back to hats worn during Saturnalia by:

- a) Trojans
- b) Greeks
- c) Persians
- d) Smurfs
- e) freedmen

12. During Saturnalia, Romans festooned their houses with many green plants, but probably NOT:

- a) mistletoe
- b) pine boughs
- c) wreaths
- d) garlands
- e) seaweed

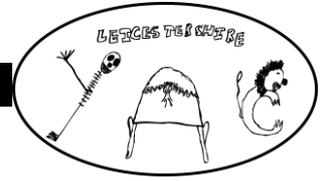
13. Here are some more Christmas customs which might go back to the Saturnalia. Which one is bogus?

- a) mulled wine
- b) Christmas stockings
- c) singing songs
- d) pantomime

14. Which of the following foods was certainly NOT part of the Saturnalia feast?

- a) roast pork
- b) honey-glazed ham
- c) turkey and mashed potato
- d) roast goose

SATURNALIA QUIZ ANSWERS



- 1. During the Roman Empire, some celebrated the birth of which famous person on 25 December?**
b) Sol Invictus (Unconquered Sun), the Roman sun god

Sol Invictus was the official sun god of the later Roman Empire and a patron of soldiers. Some scholars believe that the date of 25 December for Christmas was chosen in order to correspond with the Roman festival of Dies Natalis Solis Invictis or the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun'. Other scholars dispute this, however.

- 2. What event occurs three days before 25 December?**
c) Winter Solstice

The Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, is also known as Midwinter, Yule and the Longest Night. It has a long history of cultural significance which can be traced back to the Neolithic. Prehistoric monuments such as Stonehenge are carefully aligned towards the winter solstice sunset.

- 3. Many scholars believe Jesus was actually born in:**
b) late September/early October

Careful study of the Bible shows that 25 December could not be the date of Jesus's birth. Shepherds would not be watching their flocks in fields at night in December, it would be too cold and wet and the sheep would have been moved into shelter. For similar reasons, the Roman census which led to Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem would not have been conducted in December. Historical calculations show that John the Apostle was born in March, six months before Jesus, so Jesus must have been born in late September or early October when the weather was still good and the shepherd's would have been in the fields.

- 4. The Romans celebrated a mid-winter festival called the Saturnalia. It was named after:**
b) The god Saturn

In Roman mythology, Saturn is an agricultural deity representing plenty, wealth and time. The Temple of Saturn in the Forum in Rome housed the State Treasury. His festival, the Saturnalia began on 17 December and was a time of feasting, role reversals, free speech, gift-giving and revelry. Saturday is named after him.

- 5. In the first century AD how many days did the Romans set aside to celebrate the Saturnalia?**
b) five

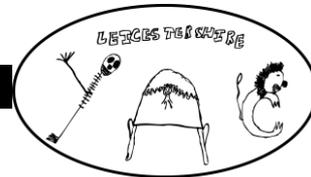
The Saturnalia officially began on 17 December, a legal holiday marking the dedication anniversary of the Temple of Saturn in Rome. By the 1st century AD, official observance had expanded to cover five days, with private festivities continuing until 23 December.

- 6. The Romans gave gifts on the Saturnalia. Which of the following did they NOT give?**
a) chocolate

Chocolate comes from Cacao, a plant cultivated in Mexico and Central America. It did not reach Europe until the 16th century, over a 1,000 years after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

- 7. The mottoes and riddles in Christmas crackers might well go back to the Roman practice of:**
b) writing a two-line epigram to accompany a Saturnalia gift

December 23, known as the Sigillaria, was a day of gift-giving. These were often pottery or wax figurines, candles, gag gifts and toys. Short poems were often attached to the gifts, a practice comparable to writing Christmas cards today. Gift-giving is thought to symbolize a mythical Golden Age of prosperity and peace over which Saturn ruled.



8. Which ONE of the following Christmas customs did NOT originate in the Saturnalia:

d) Santa and his reindeer

The original 'Santa Claus' was St Nicholas of Myra (an area in modern Turkey), a 4th century Roman bishop. The Feast of St Nicholas was celebrated on 6 December and was marked by gift-giving and charity. St Nicholas is said to have ridden a noble white horse. Our image of Santa today comes from the early 19th century poem The Night Before Christmas. This is also the earliest known association between Santa and reindeer.

9. In first century Rome, which illegal practice was permitted during the Saturnalia?

d) gambling

The Saturnalia had a carnival atmosphere that overturned Roman social norms. Slaves would be permitted the pretense of being equal with their masters and would go unpunished; togas would be put aside and cloths normally considered in poor taste for daytime wear would be worn; and gambling and dice-playing, normally prohibited or at least frowned upon, were permitted for all.

10. The paper crown in our Christmas cracker reminds us of the Roman custom of:

a) choosing a 'King' of the Saturnalia

Imperial Roman sources often refer to a 'king' of Saturnalia who ruled as master of ceremonies for the proceedings. He would issue silly commands which had to be obeyed by the other guests, thereby creating a chaotic and absurd world.

11. Santa's red conical hat might well be traced back to hats worn during Saturnalia by:

e) freedmen

In Ancient Rome, the pilleus, a brimless, conical felt cap, was especially associated with the manumission of slaves, who wore it on their liberation. During the Saturnalia, Roman citizens and slaves who ordinarily were not entitled to wear it, wore the pilleus as a symbol of equality. Traditional nightcaps and Phrygian caps are also of similar design and Santa's costume is largely an American creation of the 19th and 20th centuries.

12. During Saturnalia, Romans festooned their houses with many green plants, but probably NOT:

e) seaweed

Seaweed decorations, that's crazy! Think of the smell! Many cultures which celebrate the winter solstice have traditions involving decorating the home with greenery. This is because the colour green is seen to represent eternal life (plants that are green in winter will remain green throughout the year).

13. Here are some more Christmas customs which might go back to the Saturnalia. Which one is bogus?

b) Christmas stockings

Christmas stockings link to the gift-giving traditions associated with both the Saturnalia and the legend of St Nicholas, who gave gold to the poor. In truth, the origin of the custom is hazy and there is no firm evidence for it before the 19th century.

14. Which of the following foods was certainly NOT part of the Saturnalia feast?

c) turkey and mashed potato

The turkey is a bird native to North and Central America and was not introduced to Europe until the mid-16th century. Similarly, the potato is indigenous throughout the Americas and did not arrive in Europe until the late 16th century.