

Io Saturnalia!

Saturnalia started around 217 BCE and was held on December 17th. However, due to its popularity it quickly grew into a weeklong celebration, running from December 17th to December 23rd. Both Roman rulers Augustus and Caligula attempted to shorten the holiday, but neither had any success. During the time of Saturnalia peace prevailed and all wars were temporarily stopped and courts were closed. Government offices, schools and some businesses were also closed.

Like most Pagan festivals, Saturnalia had an astronomical correspondence. It corresponded to the sun reaching its furthest point from the Earth and its renewed journey back. Saturnalia is a celebration of the sun's triumph over winter and the continuation of life. Today's winter Solstice is usually on December 21st, but in Ancient times, it fell on December 25th. The winter Solstice is the shortest day of the year and the longest night. Saturnalia is a time to join with family and friends to celebrate the Gods, the Sun and the coming of spring and life renewed.

The Saturnalia festivities began with a solemn Ritual in the Temple of Saturn. A hollow statue of the God was filled with olive oil as a symbol of his Deity role as an agriculture God. His feet, which were normally bound by woollen straps, were released to symbolize the freedom and liberation of the God during the Celebrations. The opening Ritual was followed by public and private feasts and celebrations, always with effigies of Saturn being the guest of honour. During the festivities, the God Bacchus was called on to lead the revelry.

"The Lord of Misrule" led private Saturnalia festivities. The honour of this job was given to someone in the household. During Saturnalia, rules and regulations were relaxed. Gambling which was normally only allowed in private was permitted in public and slaves were allowed to join in the fun. The social order was inverted, slaves were treated as equals and did not have to spend their days toiling away. During feasting, the masters waited on those who were normally subservient to them.

At Saturnalia, the serious and formal were not allowed. Togas were set aside for attire that was more casual and the pileus, a felt hat worn by freed slaves, was donned to symbolize the freedom of the holiday. Saturnalia was a time of unrestrained eating, drinking, gambling, naked carolling, pranks and tomfoolery.

Saturnalia decorations consisted of great swathes of evergreen and holly. Gold and silver star and sun symbols were hung throughout the house and used to decorate outdoor trees. Trees were never brought inside, they were decorated and honoured where they grew. New fires were always kindled at Saturnalia and candles were lit to honour the Sun god.

The traditional Saturnalia greeting was "Io, Saturnalia!" "Io" is pronounced "e-o" and the greeting translates to "praise Saturnalia". Gift giving was also a favoured part of Saturnalia. Wax candles, lamps, nuts and fruit, holly tied with sweet candies and earthen figures were all traditional gifts.

The biggest and best part of Saturnalia was the attitude. It was a time of joy, life and merriment. Once the first solemn Ritual was complete, the entire holiday was spent in continuous revelry; dancing, singing, drinking, feasting and fun. Io, Saturnalia!

