

Livy: *From the Founding of the City.*

Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things.*

Macrobius: *Saturnalia.*

Martial: *Epigrams.*

Petronius: *Satyricon.*

Pliny the Elder: *Natural History.*

Plutarch: *Life of: Cicero; Fabius Maximus; Sertorius.*

Seneca: *Natural Questions.*

Suetonius: *Life of: Augustus; Nero.*

Tacitus: *Dialogue on Oratory.*

Varro: *On Agriculture.*

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# Holidays and Leisure Activities

### ROMAN FESTIVALS

The ancient Romans enjoyed many of the same kinds of leisure activities that attract devotees in modern cultures: fishing, swimming, various games played with balls, board and dice games, running, or perhaps simply going for walks. But in addition to these somewhat informal activities, a number of organized public festivals, or *feriae*, dotted the Roman calendar. These *feriae* were originally intended to honor the gods, but many (if not most) took on a singularly secular character.

One of the most famous *feriae* was the Saturnalian festival, celebrated annually from December 17 to December 23, in honor of the god Saturn. The Saturnalia was one of the oldest (founded in the early fifth century B.C., according to Livy [*From the Founding of the City* 2.21]) and most popular Roman festivals; that it was held around the time of the winter solstice was probably not a coincidence.

It was a time of general merrymaking in which children were freed from their studies; and business, commerce, and the legal machinery of the city ground to a halt.

During the Saturnalia—and particularly on the first day—revelers would shout the exclamation "*Io Saturnalia!*" in the course of their partying. In a poem published during the Saturnalia of A.D. 96, Martial gleefully writes that the stern and somber strictures of overly serious figures must be gone during the festival: *Ite foras!* ("Get out of

here!"). Let the celebration begin... *Io Saturnalia!* (Martial *Epigrams* 11.2).

Cicero offers an account of Julius Caesar's observance of the Saturnalian festival for 45 B.C. On December 19, according to Cicero, Caesar arrived at the seacoast town of Puteoli. He went for a short walk along the seashore, following that with a bath and a massage. Then he appeared at dinner, where he ate and drank with unbounded joy. Many partygoers were present, including Cicero himself; he describes the evening as one of pleasant camaraderie, with no "shoptalk" (probably a reference to the current political climate) but with much discussion of literary topics (Cicero *Letters to Atticus* 13.52).

Even the habitually frugal Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.) recognized that the Saturnalian festival was special: he prescribed for his farmhands an additional  $3\frac{1}{2}$  *congi* (about 20 pints) of wine per man during the festal period (Cato the Elder *On Agriculture* 57).

Seneca (4 B.C.–A.D. 65) grumpily remarks that the whole citizenry sweats in December. How is this possible, in such a chilly month? Because everyone is either preparing to celebrate or actually celebrating the Saturnalia—and doing so with great gusto. Seneca seemed to dislike this and other holidays, not so much because of the festivities but because of the excesses in which many of his fellow Romans indulged: "It shows much more courage to remain dry and sober when the mob is drunk and vomiting"; a person should be able to celebrate holidays without going overboard (Seneca *Moral Epistles* 18; tr. Richard Gummere LCL).

When Pliny the younger (A.D. 62–112) visited his Laurentian villa in December, he preferred to study, not party. But scholarly pursuits were impossible because of the noise produced by his celebrating household. So, to escape the cacophony, Pliny customarily secluded himself in a wing of the house called the *diaeta*, a sort of annex separated from the main part of the house by a wall and a garden. Here, in his quasi-soundproofed retreat, the studious Pliny could read and write to his heart's content and not be bothered by the party animals in the other parts of the house (Pliny the Younger *Natural History* 2.17).

**Gladiatorial Shows.** Statius poetically described how the Saturnalia was celebrated in conjunction with a gladiatorial show sometime during the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96). All sorts of edible goodies were distributed to the spectators: biscuits, pastries, cakes, dates, and assorted fruits. Some attendees brought their own food and wine, carry-in style, in picnic baskets. Statius alluded to the egalitarian nature of the festival when he mentioned that members of every social class rubbed elbows at the Saturnalian games: *libertas reverentiam remisit*, "the freedom [afforded by the Saturnalia] has sent class distinctions packing." Even

the poorest of the poor could, on this one occasion, claim to be the personal guests of the emperor.

Strange sights were also seen on the arena floor: women gladiators battling each other, and then a company of dwarfs who fought as fiercely as the most aggressive professional gladiators.

The fun had hardly begun when night began to fall; the darkness ushered in music, applause, and exotic dancing girls. At about the same time, a flock of flamingos and pheasants descended on the arena. And after that? "Who can sing of the spectacle, the unrestrained mirth, the banqueting, the unbought feast [i.e., provided at no charge], the lavish streams of wine? . . . For how many years shall this festival abide? Never shall age destroy so holy a day!" (Statius *Forests* 1.6; tr. J. H. Mozley LCL).

The Lupercalian festival, a fertility rite, held annually on February 15, was reminiscent of modern winter carnivals often celebrated in January or February in northern cities. The festival featured partying, drinking, and—its most bizarre aspect—young men running about the Palatine Hill clad only in leather loincloths and brandishing whips. These Luperci, as they were called, lashed any women they encountered, supposedly to ensure fertility. Perhaps the most (in)famous of these Luperci was Mark Antony.

During the Lupercalian festival for 44 B.C., a well-sloshed Mark Antony—presumably after completing a lap or two around the Hill—approached Julius Caesar and attempted to place a crown on the latter's head. Or, as Cicero deftly worded it, "you ought not to have thought Marcus Antonius a consul after the Lupercalia. . . . Before the eyes of the Roman people, he harangued while naked, anointed, and drunk, and aimed at placing a diadem on his colleague's [Caesar's] head." Caesar, not wishing to convey even the appearance of aspiring to royalty, refused to accept Antony's "gift," but many observers nonetheless reached that conclusion; this "crowning" incident was likely a factor in Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March, a mere one month after the Antonian frolic (Cicero *Philippics* 3.12; tr. Walter C. A. Ker LCL; Suetonius *Life of Julius Caesar* 79).

The Romans observed April 21 as the date of their city's founding (in the year 753 B.C.) and celebrated it in a festival called the Parilia. (The Parilia was originally an agrarian festival that eventually merged into the founding day observance.) Propertius (ca. 50–ca. 16 B.C.) noted that the day was celebrated with feasting, partying, and this odd twist: the burning of hay bales, which the drunken revelers tried to leap over without getting scorched (Propertius *Elegies* 4.4).

#### The Lupercalian Festival

#### The Parilia (Founding Day)

Some annual festivals emphasized chariot and horse races; the most famous of these was probably the **The Ludi Romani (Roman Games)** Ludi Romani, or Roman Games, celebrated each year from September 4 to 19. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (late first century B.C.) provides the details. The games were preceded, he says, by a huge parade whose route stretched from the Capitoline Hill, through the forum, all the way to the Circus Maximus. The parade participants included (in the order indicated):

1. young Roman men on horseback, men who came from distinguished families and had almost attained the age of manhood
2. young Roman men on foot, from less notable households
3. charioteers, some driving four-horse chariots, others driving two-horse chariots, still others riding unyoked horses
4. athletes who would compete in what Dionysius calls "the light and heavy games," probably footraces and combat events (boxing, wrestling), respectively
5. numerous groups of armed dancers composed of men, teenagers, and young boys, along with flutists and lyre players; the dancers wore plumed helmets and carried swords and spears
6. men dressed like satyrs (woodland deities), wearing shaggy clothing made of animal skins and decked out with a variety of garden flowers
7. a second group of flutists and lyre players, followed by incense bearers and men carrying various kinds of jugs made of gold or silver
8. the last parade members: images of the gods (several dozen were represented) carried by men on their shoulders

After the parade the consuls and select priests conducted animal sacrifices (oxen); then, finally, the games themselves unfolded: horse races and several kinds of chariot races, including contests involving two-, three-, and four-horse chariots. Next came footraces and boxing and wrestling matches (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Roman Antiquities* 7.72).

**Too Hot.** In *Letters to His Brother Quintus* (3.1), Cicero mentions that he skipped the Ludi Romani for 54 B.C.; the September heat was too stifling, so Cicero instead went home to Arpinum, where, he said, he whiled away the hours enjoying the view, and especially the Fibrenus River.

**A Hefty Price Tag.** The Ludi Romani of 217 B.C. cost a whopping 333,333 1/3 bronze *asses*, not to mention the sacrifice of 300 oxen to Jupiter, as well as similar sacrifices to a number of other gods (Livy *From the Founding of the City* 22.10).

In the days of Camillus (early fourth century B.C.), the Romans often found themselves threatened by neighboring tribes. One of these, the Latins, sent a messenger to Rome demanding free-born young women for them to marry. The Roman authorities did not quite know how to interpret this ultimatum. On the one hand, they thought that perhaps the Latins made the demand in order to establish marriage ties between themselves and the Romans. It seemed more likely, however, that the women, if handed over, would be used as little more than hostages. And if the Romans refused to comply, war would be the likely consequence.

**The Capratine Nones Honor the "Night Light"**

In the midst of this uncertainty, a young servant woman named Tutula stepped forward. She had a plan. She suggested to the Roman magistrates that they send her, along with a contingent of the most attractive maidservants, to the Latin camp; they would all be dressed and made up to appear to be free-born women. Then, after an evening of partying and drinking, and after the Latin soldiers had drifted off to sleep, the women would remove and hide all the soldiers' weaponry, and the Romans could then launch a night assault on the Latin encampment. The magistrates gave their approval to Tutula's scheme.

It worked perfectly. The unsuspecting Latins accepted the women, the evening's activities unfolded as planned, and the swords and other weapons were whisked away from the slumbering soldiers. At that point Tutula climbed to the top of a tall fig tree and lit a torch that was visible in Rome; this was the signal that the coast was clear. The Roman soldiers advanced and easily captured the camp.

The Romans subsequently held an annual festival to commemorate this event (on the Nones of July, or July 5, a festival quite similar to modern re-enactments of famous historical battles). The men would run forth from the city gates calling loudly to each other, as though they were soldiers rushing to battle. The women then would join in, joking with and taunting the men as they ran. After a mock battle between the men and the women, they would all retire to the shade of nearby trees to enjoy a picnic lunch.

The festal day was subsequently called the Capratine Nones, from *caprificus*, the Latin word for wild fig tree, the kind of tree Tutula had climbed to display her "night light" signal (Plutarch *Life of Camillus* 33).

## BIRTHDAYS

A Roman birthday celebration was surprisingly similar to its modern counterpart. The big day featured gatherings of family members and friends, with gift giving and banqueting forming a major part of the