

### What prompted the very first Saturnalia festival?

The very first Saturnalia was in 497 BC on the 17th of December. However pagan religion was established long before this. So I ask the question, why did the Saturnalia start then? Why not before and why not after?

The Saturnalia festival was dedicated to Saturn, however I do not believe that the entire festival was created for religious reasons. This is because, whilst there was a sacrifice on the first day of the festival, the other two days (of the original 3 day long festival) did not have any religious aspects besides feasting. Past the first day, the festival would quickly spiral into a large sinful party, which some people would wish to avoid. Such as Pliny the younger who wrote that he would remain in the quieter rooms of the house until the festival was over.

Another reason for holding a festival like Saturnalia, would be to create large feasts and parties for those of wealth to enjoy. How this seems unlikely as the slaves in saturnalia were made equal to those of the upper class. This would have caused embarrassment and upset to the upper class as seen when Augustus tried to ban the festival during his reign from 27BC to 14AD (he was able to suppress the length of the festival but not ban it completely). So the upper class might not have been in favour of the festival. However, as Roman culture was based on slaves, having a period of time when they were not forced to work and allowed to party would have encouraged slaves to remain loyal. This would have given the upper class more control over their slaves, and therefore more power. So whilst they might have been embarrassed by their slaves at the festival, Saturnalia allowed the upper class to gain more control and power.

The timing of the festival was during the winter solstice at the end of the sowing season. At the time there was very little trade and so Rome was completely dependent on farming for food. However at then of the ploughing season there would often be a period of time for rest and recovery. This may have resulted in a winter celebration even before the time of Saturnalia, and so this existing celebration may have been adapted to suit the religion of the time.

In my opinion, I believe that Saturnalia started because of a mixture of reasons. I suggest that there was an existing celebration, on a much smaller scale, to celebrate the end of the sowing season. This was then manipulated by the upper class to control the lower classes and slaves via the introduction of a pagan god, Saturn.

**An excellent mini-essay of reasoned argument, James.**