



## *To all WARG Members*

*'Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry feast.'*

*William Shakespeare "The Comedy of Errors", Act 3 scene 1*

*As we approach the end of this confusing year, we are now faced with how to celebrate the 'cut down' Festive Season.*

*Christmas is especially challenging for multicultural and multifaith families, and needs some careful planning to include all beliefs and traditions. But is Christmas a purely Christian celebration?*

*The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was 336CE, during the time of the first Roman Emperor, Constantine.*

*At that time, the two most notable pagan winter holidays were the Germanic Yule and Roman Saturnalia. Christian missionaries gave these holidays a makeover and they became known to us as Christmas. Saturnalia, held in mid-December, is an ancient Roman pagan festival and the source of many of the traditions we now associate with Christmas.*

*The celebration of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and time, began as a single day, but by the late Republic (133-31 B.C.) it had expanded to a weeklong expanded festival beginning on December 17<sup>th</sup>.*

*(On the Julian calendar, which the Romans used at the time, the winter solstice fell on December 25.)*

*Saturnalia, was the most popular holiday of the ancient Roman calendar, derived from older farming-related rituals of midwinter and the winter solstice, especially the practice of offering gifts or sacrifices to the gods*

during the winter sowing season. During Saturnalia, work and business came to a halt. Schools and courts of law closed, and the normal social patterns were suspended. People decorated their homes with wreaths and other greenery, and shed their traditional togas in favour of colourful clothes known as synthesis. Even slaves did not have to work during Saturnalia, but were allowed to participate in the festivities; in some cases, they sat at the head of the table while their masters served them. Instead of working, Romans spent Saturnalia singing, playing music, feasting, socializing and giving each other gifts, (does this sound familiar?). Wax taper candles called cerei were common gifts during Saturnalia, to signify light returning after the solstice. On the last day of Saturnalia many Romans gave their friends and loved ones small terracotta figurines known as signillaria.

Saturnalia was by far the jolliest Roman holiday; the Roman poet Catullus famously described it as “the best of times.” So riotous were the festivities that the Roman author Pliny the younger reportedly built a soundproof room to which he retired so that he could work during the raucous celebrations.

In many Roman households, a mock king was chosen: the Saturnalicus princeps, or “leader of Saturnalia,” sometimes also called the “Lord of Misrule”, another

*custom we adopted in the Middle Ages. Usually, a lowlier member of the household, this figure was responsible for making mischief during the celebrations - insulting guests, wearing crazy clothing, chasing women and girls, etc. The idea was that he ruled over chaos, rather than the normal Roman order. The common holiday custom of hiding coins or other small objects in cakes is one of many dating back to Saturnalia, as this was a method of choosing the mock king.*

*The tradition of eating 'Plum porridge' began in the Middle ages, although the recipe does not sound tempting. It included beef or veal mixed with dried fruit sugar and spices with lemon juice and claret. We still mix a 'Christmas pudding' on 'stir up Sunday' - the Sunday before Advent and make a wish, whilst possibly still stirring in coins or tokens, a ring to predict a marriage a horseshoe for good luck and a thimble for blessings. Or maybe in the interest of health and safety, just slipping a coin under the served helping on Christmas Day.*

*Thanks to the Roman Empire's conquests in Britain and the rest of Europe from the second century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E. - and their suppression of older seasonal rites practiced by the Celts and other groups such as the Druids - today's Western cultures derive many of their traditional celebrations of midwinter from Saturnalia.*

*The Bible does not give a date for Jesus' birth; in fact, some theologians have concluded he was probably born in spring, as suggested by references to shepherds and sheep in the Nativity story, but by the fourth century C.E., Western Christian churches settled on celebrating Christmas on December 25, which allowed them to incorporate the holiday with Saturnalia and other popular pagan midwinter traditions.*

*Before the end of the fourth century, many of the traditions of Saturnalia—including giving gifts, singing, lighting candles, feasting and merrymaking—had become absorbed by the traditions of Christmas as many of us know them today.*

*So – Maybe there is something for all to celebrate. For Pagans there is the celebration of the Winter Solstice with holly and Ivy.*

*For Hindus, Sikhs and Jains we have a Festival of Light,*

*For Buddhists, Christ's teachings not only compliment those of Buddha, but Jesus is a "Bodhisattva", which is one who forgoes their own benefit to help others and has compassion, kindness and love for all beings. Buddhists celebrate the birth of Jesus as a man and teacher, but not as the Messiah.*

*Last but by no means least there is Islam. Whilst Muslims do not celebrate the birth of Christ, significantly, the story of the Nativity of Jesus is related in the Qur'an, in Sura 19:16-35. Some of the details are the same, the virgin Mary is told by an*

*angel that she will give birth to a "pure" son, "as a sign unto men and a mercy from Us." When her people chide her, supposing she has been unchaste, Jesus speaks up from the cradle in her defence, announcing himself to be a prophet, but not the Messiah.*

*Perhaps, wherever we may be and with whom we may share the day, the main message of Christmas is for Peace and Good Will.*

*So, do raise your tea cup or your wine glass to those present, and absent friends wherever you, or they, may find themselves.*

*Sources*

*History.com online 15/12/20*

*John Matthews, The Winter Solstice: The Sacred Traditions of Christmas (Godsfield Press, 1998).*

*Saturnalia, Ancient History Encyclopaedia.*

*Did the Romans invent Christmas? BBC News.*



*Saturnalia (1909) by Ernesto Biondi, in the Buenos Aires Botanical Gardens*