

Did you know an artificial spider and web are often included in the decorations on Ukrainian Christmas trees? A spider web found on Christmas morning is believed to bring good luck.

### The Kind and Plentiful

On this day in December, the pagani, the country people and farmers, called upon Faunus, beneficial Spirit of the Wild, the Kindly One, to bless the countryside and farms. On this joyful holiday, worshipers offered wine and sacrifice on smoking altars of earth throughout the countryside and danced wildly in the fields that they at other times worked so hard.

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### December 5, Faunus - Hymn To Faunus

O Faunus, you who love to chase the fleet-footed nymphs,  
With kind intentions, may you walk the boundaries of my farm and cross over my sunny meadows.  
Guarantee me a fertile and bountiful year, and I will not fail in pouring a libation of wine to you.  
You, O friend of Venus, Goddess of the Garden, may the ancient altars  
smoke with incense in your honor.  
The flocks roam the grassy fields when December 5 comes around.  
The country people put on their festive clothes to celebrate your holiday. The wolf walks among the lambs that are not afraid.  
In your honor, Faunus, the forest sheds its foliage.  
The valley resonates with the beat of music and dancing feet in your honor.

December rituals celebrated the plentiful bounty, with Consus, the God of the Store Bin, and Ops, the Goddess of Plenty, honored this month. The "good life,"

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Although many believe the Friday after Thanksgiving is the busiest shopping day of the year, it is not. It is the fifth to tenth busiest day. The Friday and Saturday before Christmas are the two busiest shopping days of the year.

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the life of plenty, when the wolf walks among the lambs that are not fearful- these ideal qualities are honored by ritual in December.

### **December 13, Tellus And Ceres**

The temple to Tellus was dedicated on the Ides of December. The Senate met here on occasion and a large map of Italy was painted on its walls. Ceres was also honored on these Ides with a banquet.

### **December 15, Consus**

December 15 marks another festival to Consus, together with chariot races and games.

### **December 19, Opalia**

The goddess Ops was honored in the midst of the Saturnalia.

"The Best of Days, To Saturnalia!"

December is a cold dark month; its short period of daylight is overshadowed by the many hours of relentless dark. December is the month of the winter solstice and of transition, for the solstice marks a turning point in the course of the sun. In

December, the sun reverses its course and the solar journey starts afresh toward longer hours of sunlight and decreasing hours of night. December is a pivotal month, marking the distinction between two very different solar paths. Different worlds and different paths is a theme of the December rituals to Saturn.

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### **December 17-23, Saturn Alia**

The Saturnalia festivities opened at the temple of Saturn with a sacrifice to the god, followed by a lavish banquet. At the sacrifice and offering, the Romans wore their best clothes (togas required), yet they changed for the banquet into more casual, comfortable clothes and soft woolen caps. The banquet ended with a communal shout of "10 Saturnalia." Then came a week or more of parties, dinners, and social events. Shops were closed, official business stopped, and everyone celebrated the Saturnalia. Public gambling, drinking, and partying were condoned. The Roman author Pliny complained of the noise and shut himself up in a soundproof room while the rest of the household celebrated.

Yet for one ancient author and for most Romans, "It was the best of days." This was a special time in the home when roles were reversed and masters waited upon their slaves. A "king of Saturnalia" was chosen in the household, and gifts were exchanged, including the traditional ceramic doll figures for children and wax candles for friends. Extra wine and food were set out for slave and master each night. The Saturnalia itself was celebrated into the fifth century c.t.

The weeklong Saturnalia, the ritual to Saturn, highlights differences and opposites, focusing on the master and the slave, the bound and unbound, the corrupt and the innocent, the bad and the good, the Age of Iron that we live in and the Age of Gold ruled by Saturn.

### **December 21, Divalia**

The Divalia in honor of Angerona was a secret ritual, and another mystery ritethe statue even had her mouth bound shut. This goddess was associated with the disease of angina.

The most famous of Roman holidays, the Saturnalia shares a certain reputation for rowdiness and debauchery. It did have a serious component, not unlike our holiday season in December. We can understand the festive December season, when we put aside our normal daily routine of work and school is suspended. After all, this is the time of year to shop and exchange presents, to buy new holiday outfits, to plan special feasts and gatherings with friends and family, to drink, eat, and make merry. Underneath all the revelry, however, are the very solemn and joyous religious events of Christmas and Hanukkah. The ancient Romans did exactly the same thing in mid-December over two thousand years ago when they celebrated the Saturnalia.

The temple of Saturn was located at the base of the Capitol and dedicated on December 17. Standing inside was a statue of the god that was filled with oil and also bound with woolen binds. During his December ritual these were undone, and Saturn was freed. One ancient author suggests that this was similar to the seed or the human embryo, bound in the mother's womb and bursting free in the tenth month. Thus, December would be the month the babe was born. Recall that the most ancient calendars began in March, hence December was, as the name states, the tenth month originally.

### **December 23, Larentina**

This ritual involved the performance of funeral rites before the tomb of the goddess Larentina. Here priests made offering to the Di Manes. Larentina may have been the mother of the Lares, the protective deities of Rome, yet her background is uncertain.

### **December 25, Sol Invictus - Bruma**

This day was made sacred to Sol Invictus in 273 CE., though before that it had little significance. The ancient Romans called it Bruma, or winter solstice, the time when the year passed the shortest day.

A closer look at the Saturnalia suggests a nature-driven theme, when things are turned upside down and worlds are reversed for just a few days; for this is when the sun reverses its course and, having passed the shortest day, now begins to move toward the longest. In December it is appropriate to ritually switch things around a

little bit. The Saturnalia represents in one respect an "inversion ritual." For a limited time and within the context of a controlled religious rite, reality is altered and roles are reversed. The slave sat at the table and was waited on by the master, gambling was permitted in public when it was forbidden throughout the year, and informal clothes were worn for dinner instead of the formal toga. The hat of freedom, a felt cap called a pilleus worn by freed slaves, was worn by all people; a "Lord of Misrule" was chosen within each household to rule over the festivities; and slaves would wear their masters' clothes.

This ritualized role reversal served a deeper purpose in breaking up, for just a few days, the established hierarchy and exposing the artificiality of customary fixed roles within a household-roles defined by societal expectation. The Saturnalia ritual, performed with mockery and jest, in fact provided a chance for greater compassion and empathy between master and slave. The ritual itself could lead to a loosening of expectations and perhaps an increased tolerance of those living under the same-roofed atrium.

Compassion and tolerance for other family members are qualities we all can strive for, especially during this holiday season. How easy it is to become locked into demanding and fixed roles within a household. "Mom, make me a sandwich!" "Is my new shirt clean for school?" "Pick me up at the station tonight." "I need some money." Cook, cleaner, chauffeur, nurturer, and general all-around provider is a role that falls to many women. Yet roles and expectations between family members can become unflinching and oppressive for everyone, eventually becoming a source of great anger. This month, we need to become conscious of those roles within our own family or among our friends. We need to determine what is expected of each person and whether we are comfortable with it or would prefer a change. Perhaps a change is due. December is the month for reversal.