

# Roman Saturnalia

The festival of Saturn: party time  
in Rome!



# The Festival of Saturn:

- Did you know that many of our Christmas traditions began in Ancient Rome?
- Lots of the traditions which we have to celebrate Christmas and the Birth of Jesus originated long before, in the Roman Empire.
- The Festival of Saturn, god of agriculture, took place in midwinter and the Romans really went to town with their parties!
- The Roman poet Catullus called the festival “The best of times”.





## The Celebrations:

- The celebrations for Saturnalia (as the Festival of Saturn was known) began on 17<sup>th</sup> December and lasted for a week.
- All of the usual business was suspended: offices, courts and schools were all closed, in order to allow people time to celebrate with their loved ones.
- Slaves didn't have to work either: in fact, it was traditional for masters to serve their slaves during the festivities!





# A Saturnalia Banquet:

- The Romans were real foodies! Their celebrations often involved feasts and banquets – and this was especially the case during Saturnalia.
- Traditional Roman foods included:
  - Breads
  - Cheeses
  - Meats
  - Dates, grapes and other fruits
  - Wine (and plenty of it!)
  - Peacock Brains and Stuffed Dormice!
- Wealthy Romans would lie on couches and *recline* to have their meals. They would spend a lot of time eating and conversing with friends and family.
- All of the food was placed on a low table in the middle of the room and guests helped themselves to whatever they fancied.



# Task One: Marzipan Dormice

- The Romans ate stuffed dormice – but you probably won't fancy those very much! Instead, why not make your own, using marzipan and chocolate?
- You will need:
  - A block of marzipan
  - A large bar of chocolate
  - Chocolate buttons
  - White chocolate or icing (for decoration)



# Making your “mice”:

- With the help of your mummy or daddy, cut the marzipan into slices (you will probably get 10 or so “mice” from one block);
- Roll the marzipan into balls and then flatten them slightly, so that they are in the shape of a mouse;
- Melt the large bar of chocolate slowly, over a bowl of hot water;
- Meanwhile, break some chocolate buttons in half to make “ears”;
- Dip each “mouse” into the chocolate, pop on the “ears” and allow them to cool;
- Once the chocolate has set, use either the melted white chocolate or the icing to paint “faces” onto your “mice”;
- Hey, Presto! You have your very own Roman “dormice”!







# Decorations:

- Many of our traditional Christmas decorations actually hail from Saturnalia.
- The Romans brought wreaths and greenery into their homes, much like the Christmas trees we have today.
- Everyone dressed in brightly coloured clothes (called *syntheses*) and partied for a whole week!





## Task Two: Roman Decorations

- For this task, you are going to go out for a walk!
- With your mummy and daddy, go to your nearest woods and collect some greenery, such as holly, pine cones, fern and fronds;
- You can also collect some berries for decoration – but you must have help with this because some berries are poisonous.





# Making your wreaths:

- As well as your greenery, you will need a base, made either of wire or wicker.
- Carefully place your greenery into the base, making sure that it is completely covered.
- Once your base is covered, add your decorations – your pine cones and berries.
- Make sure that the pieces are all secure on your base, then hang up your wreath in preparation for your banquet.

# Saturnalia Gifts:

- On the final day of the Saturnalia festival, the Romans gave one another presents.
- Traditionally, these were little terracotta figures called *sigillaria*, or wax candles called *cerei*.





# Task Three: Making *Sigillaria*

- You are now going to make some *sigillaria* of your own. To do this, you will need:
  - Plasticine
  - A clay modelling tool or a tapered stick
- With the help of your mummy or daddy, warm the plasticine in your hands and shape it into the form of a man or woman;
- Use the modelling tool or stick to carve a face into your figure, then carve in the shapes of the clothing – perhaps your figurine could be wearing a toga, like a real Roman?
- In the picture on the right, you can see an example of a Roman soldier.
- Give your *Sigillaria* as gifts to your family at your banquet!





## Task Four: Roman Costumes

- In the picture, you can see examples of typical Roman clothing.
- With the help of your mummy and daddy, why not try to replicate these costumes for your banquet?
- You can create your own *togae* using ordinary household items (a bedsheet makes an excellent toga!)
- You can wear these costumes for your Saturnalia party!



# Task Five: Your Saturnalia Banquet

- You are now ready to have your own Roman banquet.
- When you have your party, why not really get into the spirit? Put some cushions on the floor and your food in the middle... just like the Romans did!
- Invite your friends and family, put up your decorations, grab your gifts and prepare to party...

• ... *Io! Saturnalia!*

