

Holidays for Latin Class (2016 rev.)

by Rose Williams

A few modest suggestions for holiday study which can brighten the Latin class while deepening the students' understanding of cultures and encouraging research on ancient customs.

Hallowe'en



This holiday is usually considered Celtic in origin. It marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the winter season Samhain, or the “darker half” of the year. One of the four Gaelic seasonal festivals, which include Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasadh, it was celebrated about halfway between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice, from sunset on October 31 to sunset on November 1. All Hallows Even, or Hallowe'en, was the Eve of the first day of Samhain and the night of a feast before November 1, All Hallows' Day or All Saint's Day. This is the Day of the Dead in many cultures, with a celebration of ancestors resembling the Roman Parentalia, which was celebrated in February. On November 1 in Rome there was a harvest festival, the Pomonia, celebrating Pomona, the goddess who cared for fruits. Thanks were rendered for the harvest, and the winter store of nuts and apples was opened. The horses, released from toil for the festival, contended in races.

Classical festivals concerning the spirits of the dead centered largely not in the autumn, but early in the year. During the Lemuria, which fell on May 9, 11 and 13, the ghosts of the dead roamed about and Romans placated them by walking barefoot and throwing black beans over their shoulders at night. The head of each household had to do this nine times at midnight. The rest of the household would clash metal pots and tell the ghosts of the ancestors to go away. The writer Ovid contended that this began as a result of guilt for Romulus and what he had done to his brother Remus and was once called the Remuria.

Although the Romans held the Lemuria in May, our students are likely to be interested in such research in October. Pliny's ghost story given in simplified form here reflects the Roman tradition that the dead do not rest unless they receive some form of burial. Pliny's original wording is used except for certain difficult phrases. Like many Romans he had a rather Cavalier attitude toward parallel tenses. He started this letter in imperfect but used the historical present for the philosopher's experiences.

PLINY'S HAUNTED HOUSE

Erat Athenis spatiosa et magna domus, sed infamis et pestilens. Per silentium noctis sonus ferri et strepitus vinculorum procul, tum e proximo auditi sunt. Mox apparebat senex macie et squalore confectus, qui barbam magnam et capillos villosos habebat; pedibus et manibus catenas habebat.

Inhabitantes domus noctes diras et non somnum habebant. Morbus et etiam mors ex timore veniebant. Deserta et damna casa in silentio remanebat. Titulum positum est, sed nemo casam desideravit.

Venit Athenas philosophus Athenodorus. Legit titulum, et pretio audito, multa rogat. Omnia audit, sed tamen casam capit.

Vespera, Athenodorus lumen, stilum, et pugillares in prima parte casae posuit; tum omnes servos dimittit. Animum, oculos, et manum cum pugillaribus occupat, quod vacua mens multos timores fingit.

Primo silentium est. Tum vincula procul audiuntur. Philosophus oculos non movet; stilo scribit. Soni in casa, tum in camera sunt. Athenodorus spectat; figuram videt. Senex stat et digito vocat. Athenodorus stilum iterum capit. Vincula audiuntur super caput.

Nunc philosophus lumen capit. Senex tarde ad ianuam ambulat, et Athenodorus etiam ambulat post senem. In area casae senex philosophum deserit. Desertus philosophus in loco herbas ponit.

Postero die magistratum vocat et magistratus locum effodit. Ossa inserta in vinculis invenit, et, collecta, publice sepeliuntur. Numquam iterum senex videbatur.

(*Libri Epistularum VII.27*)



Thanksgiving

The Roman thanksgiving, called *Supplicatio*, a period of adoration of gods after a great triumph (or disaster), was decreed by the Senate on special occasions. Their harvest festivals, such as the Pomonia on November 1, where thanks was rendered for the harvest, and the winter store of nuts and apples was opened, was probably closer to our Thanksgiving. A *cornucopia*, or horn of plenty, long associated with abundance and with harvest, was used for such festivals and is an excellent decoration for Thanksgiving, the great American harvest festival.



Christmas

Christmas and its fellow midwinter holidays are too important to be excluded because of prejudice against religion. Most ancient societies had a festival built around the winter solstice—the 21st or 22nd of December. (Yuletide is an example). These festivals in all cultures tend to emphasize light, as the winter solstice is the time in the Northern Hemisphere when the days are shortest and the sun's power is less evident. This was also often a time of need, so sharing is as much part of the various celebrations as feasting.

SATURNALIA

The Roman festival, the Saturnalia, was named for Saturn and recalled his rule in the Golden Age. Romans evidently originally celebrated it on December 17, but it spread to several days in December

The halls were decked with boughs of laurel and green trees as well as a number of candles and lamps. These symbols of life and light were probably meant to dispel the darkness. Friends exchanged gifts and even carried small gifts with them in case they met a friend or acquaintance in the streets or in the Forum. Originally the gifts were symbolic candles and clay dolls – sigillaria – purchased at a colonnaded market called Sigillaria which was located in the Colonnade of the Argonauts, later in one of the Colonnades of Trajan's Baths. Something similar is still practiced in Rome's Piazza Navona today. Gifts could also include food items such as pickled fish, sausages, beans, olives, figs, prunes, nuts and cheap wine as well as small amounts of money. They grew to be more extravagant over time with small silver objects becoming typical. Seneca complains, as moderns do, about the shopping season: "Decembris used to be a month; now it's a whole year." Yet Martial may have been the first sage to remark "The only wealth you keep forever is that which you give away." The poet Statius (Silvae 1.6) begs the gods inspiring poetry to go away at this time so he can play, and Martial in several Epigrams comments on the gift exchange and the equality of all men that are part of the season.

A cry of Io Saturnalia! and a sacrifice of young pigs at the temple of Saturn inaugurated the festival. These were served up the next day when masters gave their slaves – who were temporarily immune from all punishments – a day off and waited on them at dinner. Dice were used to choose one person at the dinner, who might even be a slave, as Saturnalia King and everyone was forced to obey his absurd commands to sing, dance or blacken their faces and be thrown into cold water and the like for the entire period.

Seneca sees special significance of the Saturnalia customs as evidence of the ancient Roman attitudes.

ON SLAVES

Nē illud quidem vidētis, quam omnem invidiam maiōrēs nostrī dominīs, omnem contumēliam servīs dētrāxerint? Dominum patrem familiae appellāvērunt, servōs, quod etiam adhūc dūrat, familiārēs. Īstituērunt diem fēstum, nōn quō solō cum servīs dominī vēscerentur, sed quō utique.

(*Epistulae Morales*. 47)

Indeed do you not see that our ancestors removed all spite from the masters, all insults from the slaves? They called the master "father of the family," the slaves, which (custom) endures up to this day "family members." They established a festal day (the Saturnalia) when slaves might eat with their masters, not (on that) only, but on that one especially

Here Gellius, who was away from home at the festival, celebrates it in a foreign land.

Saturnalia Athenis hilare tamen modeste agebamus. Conveniebamus ad cenam multi Romani qui in Graeciam erant. In ordine cenam dabamus (evidently for several days) et post cenam praemium solvendae quaestionis ponebamus. Praemium

erat librum scriptoris vel Latinum vel Graecum et coronam e lauro plexam. Totidem res (puzzles or questions) hospes quaerebat quot homines eramus. Rem et locum dicere sors dabat. Quaestiones igitur solutae (personification?) coronam et praemium recipiebant.

(*Noctes Atticae* XIII.17)

Note: This resembles the Christmas feast of Scrooge's nephew in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

SANTA CLAUS

The real Santa Claus, Bishop Nicholas or Saint Nicholas of Myra lived in the Roman Empire. His habit of giving gifts to children at this time is probably influenced by the Saturnalia. As the holiday and his fame spread across the Western world, he was known as Saint Nicholas. The North American form Santa Claus started life as a mispronunciation of the Dutch Sinterklaas, a common contraction of Sint Nicolaas. He originally wore the robes and mitre appropriate for a bishop in the early Christian church. Apparently when festivals associated with Catholicism were out of favor in England, the saint became Father Christmas. The name Kris Kringle, sometimes applied to him, appears to have developed from the Christkind (Christ Child) brought to the fore by Martin Luther to replace the figure of Saint Nicholas, seen as a Catholic image. The Christkind is usually depicted with blond hair and angelic wings, and may represent either the infant Jesus bringing gifts or the child in a myth of ancient Alsace who brings gifts to the baby Jesus. The old man dear to American tradition, dressed in a red pant suit with white trim and black belt, appears to have developed slowly from Clement Moore's poem "The Night Before Christmas," Thomas Nast's drawings, and other less famous sources. In song and story he was located at the North Pole, and in modern films and stories has acquired a wife, a strange accoutrement for an Early Christian Bishop. Any of the above names, as well as Yuletide, Winter Solstice, Midwinter Festival, Old Christmas Day, and Epiphany will serve as a starting point for research into mid-winter folklore and cultural literature.

NĪCOLĀUS DĒ MYRĀ C. 270 AD TO C. 345 AD

Adapted from Symeon Metaphrastes' *Stories of Christianity*

Nicolāus dē Myrā erat Episcopus Ecclesiae Christianae urbis Myrae in Āsiā Minōre. Persecutiōnem Rōmāni Imperātōris Diocletīāni Nicolāus tulit. Quandō Cōstantīnus factus est primus Christiānus Imperātor Rōmānōrum, Nicolāus liberātus est et iterum Christiānōs in Myrā cūrāvit. Mortuus est sextō diē Decembris.

Nicolāus hominēs dilēxit. Praecipuē liberōs amāvit. Fābulae dē eō multae sunt. Divitiās dē patre habuit, et dōna, praecipuē in nātālī Iēsū, liberis dedit. Post mortem Nicolāi, hominēs dōna dedērunt in nātālī Iēsū et dixerunt, "Sunt dōna Sāncti Nicolāi."

In multās terrās fābulae Sāncti Nicolāi portātae sunt. Fōrmae nōminis eius sunt Sinterklaus et Santa Claus.

From A Beginning Latin Christian Reader – used by permission.

Christmas carols, though sung in Latin, are recognizable by their tunes. My students enjoyed making simple Teddy bears by the pattern given below and distributing them to children in the hospital at Christmas while singing Christmas carols in Latin. After the delivery was a meeting at someone's home for chocolate and cookies.

If the Scrooges of a local community forbid Christmas carols, here are two that might pass muster.

GOOD KING WENCESLAUS CELEBRATED THE FEAST OF STEPHEN (December 26)

This story of the saintly king of Bohemia who went out into the freezing night with his page boy to give food to a starving peasant is a Winter Solstice Good Deed song that need not directly relate to Christmas.

It is especially effective if the boys in the class sing the king, the girls sing the page boy, and all sing the beginning and the end.

Good King Wenceslaus

All:

Sanctus Venceslaus Rex
Stephani ad festum
Agrum videt, nivibus
Gelidis congestum.
Videt pauperem sibi
Ligna colligentem,
Qui sub luna splendida
Sensit se frigentem

Boys:

“Huc, o puer, siste huc
Dicens si cognoris
Qui sit ubi habitat
Pauper iste foris?”

Girls:

“Ere, procul habitat
Subter illum montem,
Silvas iuxta limitem
Ad Agnetis fontem.”

Boys:

“Affer carnem, vinum fer,
Lignum afferamus,
Ut nos illi pauperi
Cenam praebeamus.”

All:

Rex et puer prodibant
Animo aequali,
vento flante acriter
Tempore brumali.

Girls:

“Ere, non fit atrior,
Ventus vi augetur;
Plus non possum, nescio cur
Valde cor terretur.”

Boys:

“Puer mi, vestigis tu
Sequere libenter;
Hiems saeva laedet te
Minus violenter.”

All:

Puer regem sequitur
Unde nix discessit;
Fervor glaebis inerat,
Ubi sanctus pressit.
Hoc sciote, divites;
Christum qui amatis,
Vos beati eritis,
Si quem vos beatis.

SANTA LUCIA CELEBRATED ON DECEMBER 13



St. Lucia, whose name means “light,” is honored at the darkest time of the year. In Italy, Sicily and Dalmatia, the feast is dedicated to Santa Lucia of Syracuse (d. 304 AD). Under the Julian calendar, her feast once coincided with the Winter Solstice. Throughout northern Europe, this special day marks the beginning of Christmas celebrations, feasting, and merriment. Traditionally, the oldest daughter of the family, wearing a coronet of pine sprigs decorated with five lighted candles, wakened her parents with a breakfast of saffron buns (*Saffronsbrod*) and coffee. The golden saffron was symbolic of sunshine and light.

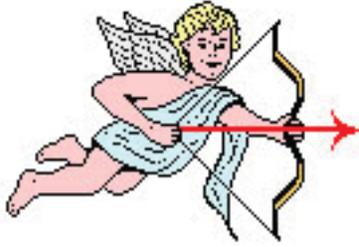
Traditional Song

(tune may be found on Youtube-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoLebK9XL38>)

**Santa Lucia, lux tua crescit,
Per nocte brumae, solacium dat.
Somnia in nocte,
Mox venit lux mane
Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia**

Translation

Santa Lucia, thy light is glowing
Through darkest winter night, comfort bestowing.
Dreams float on dreams tonight,
Comes then the morning light,
Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.



Valentine

The ancient festival of the Lupercalia, which was held on February 15 and involved rites supposed to make barren women able to bear children, may have been Christianized in the February 14 feast of St. Valentine, a priest who was martyred in 270 AD. Various tales are told of him; a popular one in the Middle Ages linked him with lovers united under conditions of duress, and he became the patron saint of lovers.

This earnest Christian priest might have been less than thrilled to be closely linked with one of the pagan gods eternally known and loved, the laughing Roman love god Cupid. Cupid, indeed multiple Cupids, are often depicted in Pompeii; the merry little winged creatures, attired mainly in a ribbon, are thought to have inspired the Renaissance cherubs.

The other image of Cupid is that of a beautiful young winged adult god. This ancient incarnation is depicted in the story of Cupid and Psyche from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*.

The dove, bird of Venus, has remained as constant a part of Valentine as Venus's son. The heart however came later. In the classical world the liver, not the heart, was considered the seat of the emotions. My students are always fascinated by what this could have done, not only to Valentine cards, but to the language of Romance: broken livers, my liver cries for you; sweet livers—myriad examples come to mind.

This spring song of love, whose tune was appropriated for **Good King Wenceslaus** in the mid-nineteenth century, goes well with Valentine's Day.

**Tempus adest floridum, surgunt namque flores.
Vernales mox in omnibus iam mutantur mores.
Hoc quod frigus laeserat, reparant calores,
Cernimus hoc fieri per multos colores.**

**Stant prata plena floribus in quibus nos ludamus,
Virgines cum clericis simul procedamus,
Per amorem Veneris ludum faciamus,
Ceteris virginibus ut haec referamus..**

**O dilecta domina, cur sic alienaris?
An nescis, o carissima, quid sic adamaris?
Si tu esses Helena, vellem esse Paris,
Tamen potest fieri noster amor talis.**

In Poem 51, Catullus, who surely counts as an expert on the subject, describes the sensations of love.

**Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos
qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit
dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi**

**lingua set torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suo
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.**



Parilia

April 21- The Parilia, festival of the goddess Pales, guardian of flocks, herds and shepherds. Originally this was a purification when beasts and stalls were washed and decked with branches and wreaths. Perhaps because Romulus was reared on the Palatine Hill which was sacred to these gods, and established his first city there, the Parilia was considered the anniversary of the founding of Rome. Bringing wreaths of leaves and flowers and sharing honey cakes are suitable activities for this day.