

Roman 'Christmases' were similar to ours

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When opening your presents or enjoying a night out this Christmas spare a quick thought for the Romans. We owe much of our festive fun to them.

The Romans celebrated the winter festival of Sigillaria on 23rd of December, part of their Saturnalia festivities. Just like on Christmas Day, Sigillaria saw presents exchanged.

Saturnalia began in the very early history of Rome. It was a festival devoted to the god Saturn and seems from its earliest origins to have been associated with 'liberation', which found expression in the holiday's inversion of social norms, so masters served their slaves - gambling and

dice playing was permitted.

The popularity of Saturnalia continued into the 3rd and 4th centuries until it was supplanted by the Christian festival of Christmas.

So how does Sigillaria compare to a modern day Christmas? And can we say that the Roman's invented Christmas?

Dr Matthew Nicholls, a senior lecturer of classics at the University of Reading, has explored the work of Martial and Seneca, writers of the time, and found striking similarities including gifts of ugly but warm 'jumpers', 'Kindlesque' portable storage for books and even a Roman bah-humbug!

Dr Nicholls is the creator of Virtual Rome, an ambitious digital model of the entire ancient city of Rome.

That's just what I always wanted

"The poet Martial's work indicates that gift recipients would have faced similar 'reaction' issues to our own. Quality of presents varied enormously. The traditional present for the Saturnalia was some nuts - not unlike old fashioned handful of walnuts in a Christmas stocking. Martial mentions 'gifts given and received' some of which sound rather familiar.

"Fish-sauce, jars of honey, bottles of wine, toothpicks, a pencil case, perfume, a flask encased in wicker-work and clothing - even an item that sounds like an ugly but warm Christmas sweater...a 'shaggy nursling of a weaver on the Seine, a barbarian garment ... a thing uncouth but not to be despised in cold December ... that searching cold may not pass into your limbs ... you will laugh at rain and winds, clothed in this gift'. (Ep. 4.19)

The Roman Kindle that could store the entire Iliad

"Many of us will be hoping for or a Kindle or similar come Christmas Day. Well carrying large amounts of literature was also an issue for the Romans. A scholar would have wished for a Kindle equivalent...which was available!

"Roman books were traditionally scrolls of papyrus - fragile, bulky, and not very practical for travellers. Martial sings the praises of a novel form of book, the sewn-leaf codex, made of tough parchment (ancestor of all of today's books), and ideal for someone who wants to carry a lot of literature around in a small volume.

"He boasts that a single codex can hold the entire Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, or the whole of Livy's multi-volume history 'which my whole library does not contain'. These Roman 'Kindles' were ideal for taking on journeys - 'this parchment shall be your travelling companion. Imagine you are taking a journey with Cicero because they are light, tough, and pack a lot in'."

It was still the thought that counted

"It's warming to hear that the festive spirit was alive 2000 years ago. Martial tells us that the quality of a friendship can't be measured by the value of the gifts, and even tells recipients of his cheap presents that he's been 'mean' to save them the expense of buying something expensive in return (Ep. 5.59: 'people who give much, want to receive much in return'). Simple presents were a token of friendship.

Did the Romans get into the party spirit early too?

"Just like our festive season, it seems that the whole of Rome geared up

early for Sigillaria. Seneca noted: 'It is now the month of December, when the greatest part of the city is in a bustle. Loose reins are given to public dissipation; everywhere you may hear the sound of great preparations'. (Ep. 18.1)."

What tippie might they have enjoyed on the 23rd?

"There was no 'set' seasonal beverage. Wine was very much to the fore. Martial tells of 'raisin wine, wine flavoured with pitch, honeyed wine, a not very good wine for serving to one's freedmen. Even a special wine for loosening the bowels'..."

A Roman Scrooge....

"Of course not everyone embraced the Christmas sprit. As today, some people found it all a bit too bit much. The elder Pliny, the bah-humbug of his time, even had a special set of rooms in his house he could retreat to in order to hide from the festivities! (Ep.2.17.24).

And did the Romans invent Christmas?

"The works of Martial and his contemporaries tell us that Roman festive celebrations were in some ways not that different to what we enjoy today. Indeed many of those traditions can be traced back to that period. We know that during the conversion to Christianity the Romans weren't keen to end the fun and tradition enjoyed during their annual pagan festival, so traces of Saturnalia celebration may survive in the Christian celebration of Christmas - and many cultures celebrate a winter festival at this darkest, coldest time of the year.

"It's hard to say definitively who invented Christmas but how about raising a glass to the Romans this year. We can be sure our Christmases

would be very different if it wasn't for them."

Provided by University of Reading

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