

THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta
Classics
Association

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LETTER From the Editor

Χαίρετε!

All things come to an end eventually, but every end is also a new beginning. 2020 was a tough year, but 2021 has finally here and with it we can all have a fresh start.

It is also, unfortunately, my last issue as editor of the MCA newsletter. New opportunities and responsibilities call, but I leave you safely in the hands of our new editor Andrew Debono Cauchi, previously coordinator of “The Power of the Classical Word” on our social media and in the newsletter.

The last issue for 2020 (and the first issue for 2021) is sure to help start the year with a bang! We’ve included a fascinating article on the Saturnalia, a look at the sumptuous (and sometimes humorous) courses of a Roman feast, and an interview with a Gabriella Burnell, both a former Sanskrit student and a song writer. We also, of course, have our customary dose of etymology with the Power of the Classical Word, and we’ve brought back the crossword (and a prize for the first to send it back with the correct answers!).

So while I’m saying farewell, life (and the MCA newsletter) goes on. As always, if ever there is something you would like included in the newsletter, or if you have a project or event that we can share with the Classics community, just send us an email on info@classicsmalta.org or contact us on our Facebook page.

I wish you happy holidays (be it Christmas, Hanukkah or Saturnalia!), and hope you all have a fantastic new year!

Elizabeth Kemp

SATURNALIA

SAMUEL AZZOPARDI

Saturnalia
by Antoine Callet



In modern days, the month of December is associated with the feasts of Christmas and Hanukkah, and with the celebrations related to the changing of the year. Within the ancient Roman calendar, however, a quarter of the month was reserved for the celebration of the Saturnalia, a seven-day festival commencing on the 17th of December in honour of the god Saturn.

Despite being one of the most widely recognised festivals of the ancient world, surprisingly little is known about the feast itself, since no full description of the festivities survives in classical literature. Instead, classicists and historians have had to rely on brief descriptions of the ceremonies and traditions associated with the Saturnalia from a variety of works authored throughout the centuries. Macrobius' *Saturnalia* provides the most extensive description of the festival, yet even this work covers only two days of the festival in detail.

The festival of the Saturnalia commenced with an official state-sponsored sacrifice before the temple of Saturn in the Forum, in the shadow of the Capitoline Hill. The sacrifices would be followed by a massive public banquet in the presence of a statue of the god raised above a feasting couch. The first three days of the festival were public holidays on which no official business could be carried out. Consequently, gymnasia, public schools and the courts were closed to the public. Writing in the 3rd century, the Christian author Tertullian also suggests that the priests of Saturn practised ritual bathing and purification to mark the sacred days (Apology 42).

December 19th was associated with gift-giving. Antipater of Thessalonica, writing in the last century BC, suggests that wax candles were a popular Saturnalia gift (Greek Anthology 6.249) whereas Leonidas of Alexandria composed a distich for his friend Marcus (Greek Anthology 322). Archaeological evidence further suggests small figurines, either arising from a tradition of gifting toys to children or as simulacra replacing sacrifices. Martial, however, suggests that the selection of gifts exchanged during the Saturnalia could be extremely varied, ranging from items for everyday use, like stylus-cases and tablets, to more particular objects, like bookcases or finely made copper candelabra (Epigrams 14).

The festivities were also associated with a reversal or a cancellation of roles within Roman households, and Horace imagines a slave utilising this temporary breakdown in the enforcement of strict hierarchy to berate his master (Satire 2.7.4). The feasting of the period seems to have also caused quite a stir in Pliny the Younger's villa, but the good-natured author confides to his friend Gallus that he is more than happy to leave his household to celebrate as they will while he returns to his sitting-room, which is placed so that the noise does not disturb his studies (Letter 17).

The origins of the festival are indisputably ancient but no less shrouded in mystery. In book 43 of his *Philippic Histories*, Justinus writes that the festival takes its name not from the god but from the ancient Italic king Saturnus, whose

reign was so just and far that no one owned any slaves and there was no private property, and Justinus credits this golden age in Italy's distant past with the generation of the tradition that slaves were to be considered as equal to their masters and to dine with them on equal terms throughout the festivities.

Athenaeus confirms the Roman practice of feasting with their slaves as equals to mark the Saturnalia, but he disputes Justinus' claims on the Saturnalia's origin and rather explains that the tradition was lifted from a festival to Hermes celebrated on Crete, or from similar festivals celebrated throughout the Greek world (Deipnosophists 639). The 4th century Roman emperor Julian concurred with this theory and associated the Saturnalia with the Cronia, the Athenian festival in honour of Saturn's Greek counterpart (The Caesars 306).

Whatever its origin, the Saturnalia remained an enthusiastically celebrated festival in the Roman religious calendar, and although the empire's eventual conversion to Christianity spelt the end of the Saturnalia as an official pagan festival, many of its traditions survived in some form or other in the traditions associated with its Christian replacement.

A Roman FEAST

MARIA GIULIANA FENECH

What did the Romans eat? It is impossible to make an all-encompassing statement about food in the Roman world as this would have differed greatly according to time, place and social status. As a general rule, however, the main meal of the day was the evening meal (*cena*), while breakfast (*ientaculum*) and lunch (*prandium*) were light in comparison. Martial says that he just ate a little bread and cheese for breakfast, while lunch might also include cold meat, fruit or vegetables, perhaps left over from the previous night's dinner.

For the wealthy, a dinner could be a grand event with a number of courses. However, the majority of the population would have eaten far less impressively. A standard *cena* would have included at least three courses:

1. The **gustatio** (*hors d'oeuvre*), which consisted of light appetisers such as eggs, olives or salad-vegetables. This was followed by *mulsum*, wine sweetened with honey.
2. The **cena** proper; in simple meals this consisted of a single meat or fish dish (or vegetables). More expensive dinners might have a variety of courses at this stage, perhaps including different meats.
3. The **secundae mensae** (dessert), which often included fruits, nuts or simply sweet cakes

This December, Glen Galea, a hobbyist cook, set about preparing a Roman feast according to ancient recipes. He supplemented his reading with secondary sources and online videos.

Most of the recipes were adapted from writings in *De re coquinaria*, and *De Agri Cultura* by Cato the Censor. *De re coquinaria* is also known as

the *Apicius* because of the Roman gourmand Marcus Gavius Apicius, who lived during the reign of Tiberius. Cato is mostly remembered for his preoccupation with destroying Carthage; however, he also wrote a book, which includes quite a few recipes. As a general rule, the recipes were quite straightforward but exact quantities were often not given, so a lot of intuition and guesswork is needed.

Photos (next page):

1: Roman eggs, with honey, celery leaves, pepper and roasted pine nuts (adapted from Apicius).

2: Sourdough bread. Roman bakers would shape their wares into various forms, including human genitalia for good luck. Glen shaped his into a phallus (a short walk around Pompeii proves the Roman obsession with all things phallic) and 'a voluptuous set of mammaries, lopsided because of the unpredictability of yeast rising'. The bread was served with olives, olive oil, pork drippings and pork.

3: Parthian chicken with *garum* and *asafoetida* (adapted from Apicius).

4: Quail stuffed with prune and mint, then finished with honey and rose petals. The original recipe in Apicius called for nightingale, which is hard to come by. Glen used quail, the alternative suggested in the recipe itself.

5: Parsnip and kohlrabi cooked in *garum* and carrot and cucumber salad.

6: Cato's *Saturnalia Globi* (fried ricotta with honey and poppy seeds), seasonal fruit, mulled wine, and fig drenched in almond milk.

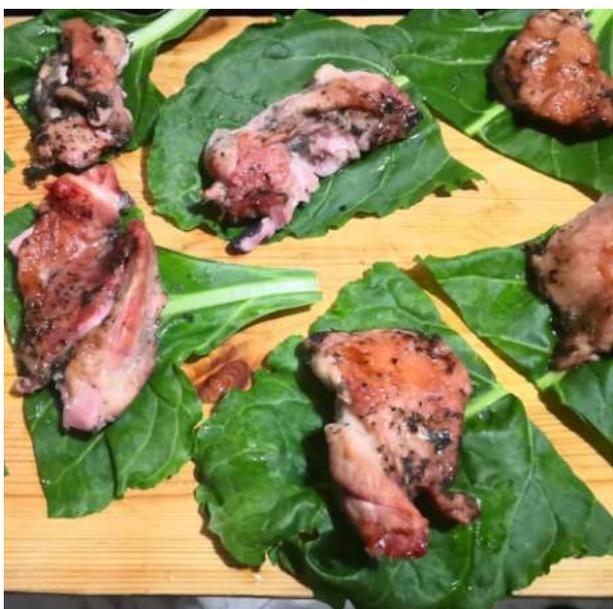
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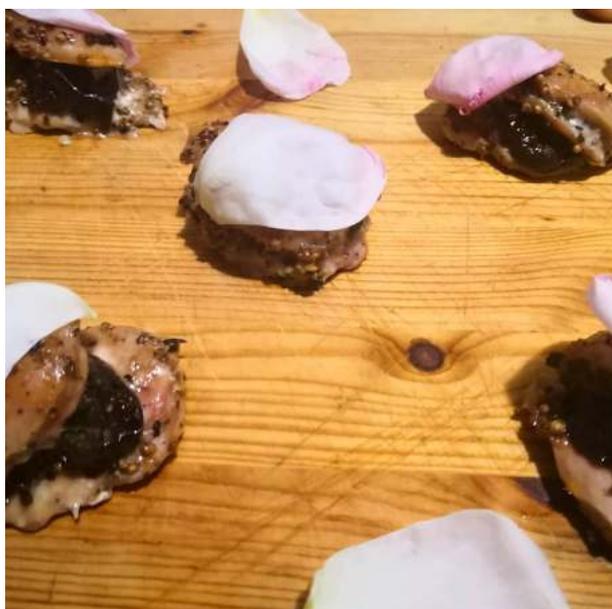
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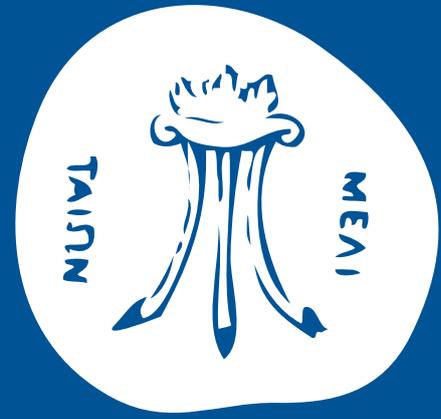
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6



the power of the **CLASSICAL** **WORD**



eidetic

adjective //

Used to describe mental images having great and intense detail as if events actually occurring.

From the Classical Greek εἰδητικός (eidetikos) meaning 'pertaining to images or forms'.

Nativity

noun //

Used to refer to the birth of a person, commonly used as an alternative term for Christmas.

From the Latin *nativus* meaning 'native', and from Late Latin *nativitas* meaning 'Christmas'.

inscription

noun //

Some form of written maxim/s or phrase/s, usually on a stone piece in some major position of a building.

From the Latin *in* meaning 'in' or 'into' and *scribo* meaning 'to write' or 'to compose'.

strategy

noun //

A pre-planned and usually carefully devised course of action to complete a mission or objective.

From the Classical Greek στρατηγία (strategia) meaning 'command' or 'strategy'.

epistle

noun //

A letter, particularly used to refer to books of the New Testament intended as letters by an Apostle.

From the Classical Greek ἐπιστολή (epistole) meaning 'letter', 'message' or 'order'.

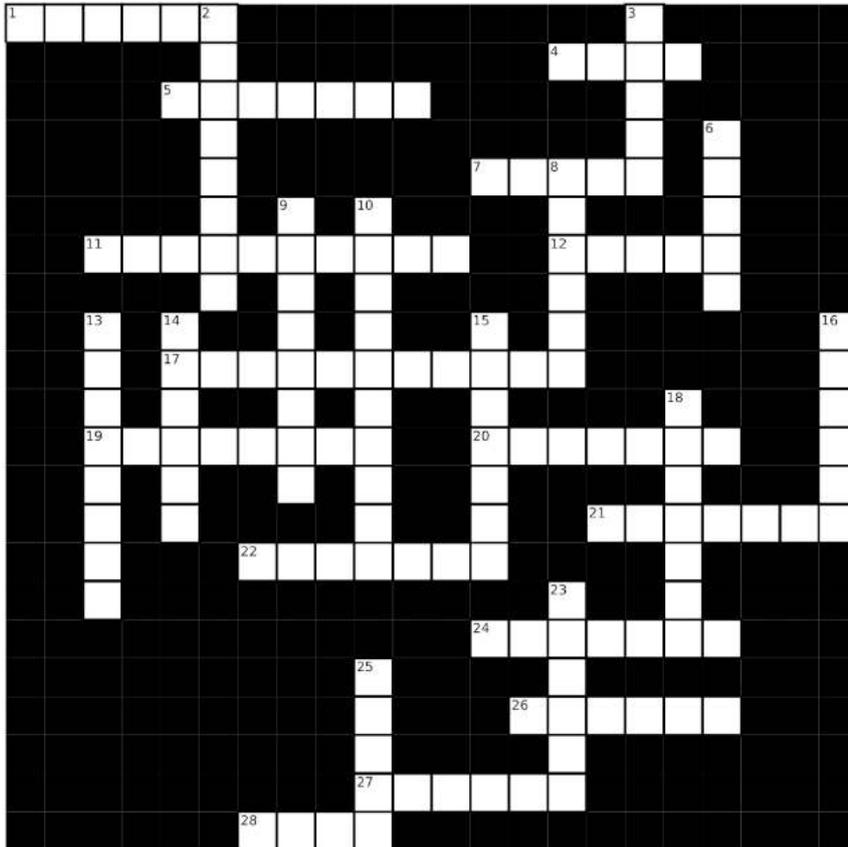
Christmas

noun //

The 25th of December in Western culture, held by Christians to remember the birth of Jesus Christ.

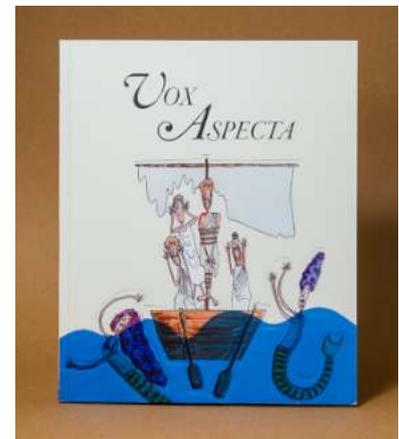
From the Classical words χριστός meaning 'anointed one' and *massa* meaning 'bulk' (Latin).

December/January CROSSWORD



The first person to send in their filled crossword (with the correct answers!) will win this month's prize: a copy of the MCA's *Vox Aspecta*. Send your entry via email to:

info@classicsmalta.org



ACROSS

- 1 Dangerous creatures with enchanting voices
- 4 Ancient Greek hero and household cleaner
- 5 Tireless dog, now the Canis Major constellation
- 7 According to Hesiod, the first wife of Zeus
- 11 He did to Troy what the Greeks could not do
- 12 Blood of the Greek gods
- 17 Persephone's favourite fruit?
- 19 Penthouse film about a Roman Emperor
- 20 First King of Athens
- 21 Achilles wasn't always called Achilles
- 22 Roman household deities
- 24 Tool used to scrape off oils off bodies
- 26 Author of 'A True Story' made up of lies
- 27 Lover of Catullus
- 28 Instrument traditionally made from a turtle shell

DOWN

- 2 He thrust his right hand into the fire, but he became known as left-handed
- 3 Ancient automaton and modern-day army exoskeleton
- 6 Gem allegedly swallowed by Cleopatra
- 8 Babylonian Juliet
- 9 Fluffy is to Hagrid as _____ is to Hades
- 10 The masters served on this special day
- 13 1970 film starring Schwarzenegger '_____ in New York'
- 14 Twin brother of Artemis
- 15 Alternative name of Dionysus
- 16 Roman name for Hephaestus
- 18 The descendants of the Seven Against Thebes
- 23 First wife of Aeneas
- 25 Bird associated with Zeus

Q & A

with Gabriella Burnell

Gabriella is an English friend who has studied Sanskrit at Oxford University and is now a successful song writer and teacher who has her own YouTube Channel. She has been to Malta in recent years to take some classes in Sanskrit.

What is your profession and what are your interests?

In my own eyes, have never had a profession, just a search for what I was 'meant' to be doing. Started out writing musicals and doing stand-up comedy, and singing songs that I wanted to write... now I sing songs that want to be written, sing and compose for commissions, run a YouTube Channel, record albums, perform, and teach Sanskrit and chanting in workshops and retreats, around the world. My interests are the power of sound vibrations to transform a life and enrich a life, and go direct to the parts of us which remain untouched in the realm of physicality. I love comedy, film, song and dance, study Vedas and Tantra and if time to walk, swim, rollerblade, and horse ride.

What was it like for you to come in touch with Sanskrit language and culture?

This is like being asked "what was it like for you to come in touch with your Mother"? It was a completely natural unfolding, a natural part of life interweaved in the education I was given from the age of 4 at St James Schools, London. I knew no different that the combination of Sanskrit language and culture with English language and culture. The Sanskrit language and culture gave a resounding depth and clarity and the vocabulary and terminology to speak of the inner workings of the human psyche that would normally be indescribable in the English language or take many words to describe.

Through the Sanskrit culture, I began to see that the great poets and writers of the British Isles were expressing the same thing, the same love and yearning for the Truth.

What in your view is the real significance of Sanskrit?

The significance of Sanskrit is that it has been there for thousands of years, like a natural diamond, glistening and shining. It is priceless, and available to everyone. From experience working with people from many cultures and backgrounds, when the sounds of Sanskrit are connected with in their purest and simplest form, it is similar to listening to a beautiful piece of music, or standing by a bubbling brook, or under a sky full of stars, the sounds go straight to the heart, by passing the mind and the thoughts and the judgements and have the capacity to unlock a treasure chest that has been hidden for years.

Is Sanskrit for everyone?

The sounds of Sanskrit are completely natural to all who have ears, inner or outer, to hear. It is like asking "is water for everyone"? Absolutely!



Here is a link to some online videos in the public domain:

<https://youtu.be/oHt1eBc3g8M>

https://youtu.be/KTxM_kvhhJk

iTunes edit available [here](#)

<https://linktr.ee/Gaiea>