

The Romans had no 'weekends' - but the year was marked by religious festivals that would mean a public holiday - the **feriae**. The historian Varro called the *feriae* "*dies deorum causa instituti*": days instituted for the sake of the gods. A major feature of the religious festivals were the **Iudi**; the Games.

Cicero writes that on a Roman festival all lawsuits and arguments should stop and even slaves should have some time off. Some agricultural work continued but generally it was a day off for all Romans. Most state holidays were publicly funded so for both the rich and poor they were a reason to celebrate.



Days on which festivals were held were public holidays when no business could be conducted. In the imperial era it is thought there were about 135 days a year dedicated to Games. How does this compare to our days off a year?

*The fasti (public calendar) as imaged in the tv series Rome.*

### The Iudi

The entire population was welcome to come and watch the Games when they were on. As religious festivals, they started with a procession, including priests carrying statues of the gods, and religious rites including sacrifices marked the start of the games. The main event however, would be horse races, wild animal hunts or theatrical performances, and perhaps also gladiatorial fights. Under the empire, games were usually paid for by the munificence of the emperor.

The satirist Juvenal famously wrote that all the people wanted was *panem et circenses* - bread and games in the circus.

Why would the Games be important to the people?

What about to the emperor?

## The Saturnalia

The Saturnalia was public festival held in honour of Saturn. It is probably now the most well-known of all the Roman festivals. It was held on the 17th December but the festivities reached to the 23rd December.

The holiday started with a sacrifice at the Temple of Saturn in the Roman Forum. There followed a public banquet, a **convivium publicum**. This was followed by gift-giving, partying in the streets and at home. At the Saturnalia all social norms were overturned: masters would serve their slaves at the table, gambling was permitted and a level of drunkenness and licentiousness was expected from everyone.

Catullus called the Saturnalia the '**optimo dierum**' - *the best of days*. It would have been a huge public celebration largely funded by the state which would have filled the streets of Rome with singing and laughter.



*Painting by Thomas Couture (1847) depicting Romans celebrating the Saturnalia.*

Not everyone could keep up with the party. Pliny sees the Saturnalia as a reason to absent himself.

Pliny the Younger *Letters* 2.17.24

*Pliny is describing a secluded part of his house:*

"[I use these rooms] especially during the Saturnalia when the rest of the house is noisy with the licence of the holiday and festive cries. This way I don't hamper the games of my people and they don't hinder my work or studies."

Everyone would have looked forward to the Games and the Saturnalia, but how much do you think it was thought of as a religious festival rather than just a big party?

Are there public holidays today that survive but have lost (some of) their religious significance?

*Further reading:*

On the calendar and nature of religious festivals, on the Games, on the Saturnalia.