

Augustus as Scrooge: Saturnalia and the Politics of Solstice

The long and encyclopedic *Saturnalia* by Macrobius begins with a long and encyclopedic preface on the origins of the festival for which the dialogue is titled, and it is here, uniquely, that we learn that Augustus shortened the celebration of the Saturnalia from seven days to three (1.10.4, with 1.10.23). Macrobius's speaker, Praetextatus, locates the reform in the context of 'judicial laws' (*in legibus iudicariis*), suggesting a utilitarian motivation having to do with efficiency in the then overloaded lawcourts: every day was needed to clear a logjam in the docket, and if it took curtailing a popular ritual to find the time, then so be it.

This paper argues that more was afoot in Augustus's bah-humbug, and that politics, rather than bureaucracy, provided his principal impetus. Taking a lead from scholars investigating the carnivalesque nature of the Saturnalia, with its bizarre world of role reversals in social structure, filial relationships, and gender (Sharland 2005; Dolansky 2011; Miller 2012), we find that the rites flew in the face of what Augustus was newly defining as traditional values and were seen as getting out of hand. What is more, given the nocturnal settings of subversive movements in the Late Republic (Mueller 2004; Allen 2024), both real and imagined, the long night of the winter solstice had become charged with a radical fervor that threatened, figuratively, to darken the Augustan sunrise. Similar maneuvers in Augustus's approach to time can be found in his reforms to the *Ludi Saeculares* and to policing by the *vigiles*. It is no coincidence, he perhaps implied, that he was born on an equinox (Wallace-Hadrill 1987).

We end by tracing an ebb and flow in imperial policies, populist and otherwise, with regard to the Saturnalia: Caligula and Claudius launched an outright assault on Augustus's restrictions by re-lengthening the ritual, only for Domitian to re-diminish the solstice's power,

which was darkness, by lighting it up, literally, with something famously akin to fireworks (Statius, *Silvae* 1.6.85-90; note Newlands 2003).

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