



January



January is the first month in the modern, or Gregorian, calendar and consists of 31 days. The name (*Januarius* in Latin) is derived from the two-faced Roman god Janus. Some scholars have claimed that the derivation of the name Janus is from the Latin *ianua*, meaning “door.” Others have explained the name as the masculine form of Diana, which would be Dianus, or Ianus.

There are many conflicting theories about Janus and his role in the Roman religion. He apparently figured prominently as the god of all beginnings. As the god of spatial beginnings, he watched over gates and doorways, which were generally under his protection; as the god of temporal beginnings, he presided over the first hour of the day. The first day of the month and the first month of the year were also sacred to him. Of all the gods, including Jupiter, his name was invoked first at the start of important undertakings, perhaps with the idea that his intervention as the “janitor” of all avenues would speed prayers directly to the immortals. As the deity of all beginnings, Janus was also entitled *Consivius* or “sower,” in reference to his role as the beginner, or originator, of agriculture.

The worship of Janus existed as a local cult on the Janiculum Hill (variously interpreted as “door hill” or “city of Janus”) west of Rome, on the banks of the Tiber River. Traditionally, this cult went back to Romulus and the period even before the actual founding of Rome in 753 B.C. In addition, a festival in honor of Janus, called the *Agonalia*, was celebrated on January 9. The officiating priest, in this case the *rex sacrorum* who represented the ancient king in his role as head of the state religion, sacrificed a ram on the occasion. Later Romans, intrigued by the lofty character of this ceremony, proposed various additional interpretations about the possible nature of Janus: perhaps he was a

cosmic deity, sky god, or god of water crossings. Discovering in the name Janus the same Latin root as in the name of Diana, the moon goddess, they even imagined him to be a moon deity.

As the animistic spirit of doorways (*ianuae*) and arches (*iani*), Janus guarded the numerous ceremonial gateways in Rome. These freestanding structures were used especially for noteworthy entrances and exits on state occasions. Numa Pompilius, the legendary second king of Rome (roughly 715–672 B.C.) probably dedicated the famous *Ianus geminus*, the arcade or covered passage facing east and west which was located at the northeast end of the Roman Forum. A simple, rectangular, bronze edifice, it had double doors at each end that were traditionally opened in time of war and closed in peace. This highly symbolic arcade, sometimes described simply as an arch, was undoubtedly connected with a type of war magic, a superstitious belief that passage through it brought luck to outgoing and incoming armies. The Romans were so often at war, however, that it is said the doors of the structure were closed only twice during the seven centuries between the reigns of Numa and Augustus. Janus was also honored by a less well-known archway, located near the theater of Marcellus in the *forum holitorium* (where vegetables were sold). It was probably erected by the Roman general and consul Gaius Duilius, about 260 B.C., following his victory over the Carthaginian fleet off Mylae.

Janus was closely connected with early Roman coinage. He was represented as a deity with two faces on the ancient *as*, which often had on its reverse side a representation of a ship’s prow. An ancient source says that Roman boys liked to toss these coins and bet *capita aut navia* (“heads or ships”), in much the same way that today’s children play “heads or tails.”

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Although Janus was usually depicted with two bearded faces looking in opposite directions, representing the future and the past, the number of faces shown gradually increased to four. Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96), for example, dedicated a temple to *Janus Quadrifrons*, or “four-faced Janus.” In his role as porter, or doorkeeper, the god was sometimes pictured as holding a staff in his right hand and a key or keys in his left. As such, he was termed *Patulcius*, meaning “opener,” and *Clusius*, or “closer.” In the late Roman Empire, he was portrayed as both a bearded and unbearded figure; in place of the staff and keys, the fingers of his right hand sometimes showed the number CCC, or 300, and those of his left LXV, or 65, for the total 365 days of the year.

The earliest calendars, such as the Egyptian, Jewish, and Greek, did not place the beginning of the year in January. The early Romans originally began the calendar year with *Martius* (see March), and January did not even appear among their ten months. Numa Pompilius supposedly decreed that two new months should be added at the end of the ten previous ones. He called the first of these additions *Januarius* in honor of Janus, the cult god of the doorways. In 153 B.C., the Roman state proclaimed January 1 to be New Year’s Day, thus turning the 11th month of *Januarius* into the first month of the year. For a long time, however, older traditions prevailed and most Romans still considered the year to start in March. Moreover, by the end of the Roman republic, the entire calendar had become highly inaccurate and confused, since state officials were constantly making changes in it for political purposes. In 46 B.C., Julius Caesar instituted a much-needed calendar reform (see Appendix A: The Calendar). The resulting Julian calendar—now also known as the Old Style calendar—which became effective in 45 B.C., reinstated January as the first month and January 1 as the first day of the year. In later centuries, however, from the fall of the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages, there was widespread diversity as to the date on which the year began in different areas. Contributing to the diversity were political fragmentation, meager communications, and the hostility of the Catholic Church to pagan traditions. Experimentation with a return to the January 1 new year of ancient Roman times was attempted as early as the 13th century in present-day Germany, and continued sporadically throughout western Europe into the 16th century. The Gregorian, or New Style, calendar instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 also employed this innovation, decreeing January 1 as the beginning of the new year for all Catholic countries. By degrees Protestant countries fell into line as they adopted the new calendar over the next

170 years. Thus, at the brink of the modern era, January 1 reassumed its former place as the start of the new year.

Among non-Roman peoples, the names of the months often stemmed from a natural phenomenon or a seasonal occupation peculiar to the particular month. Such series of month-names have been found in all parts of the world with the exception of South America and Australia. In western Europe, for example, the Anglo-Saxons called January *Wulf-monath* in allusion to the hunger of the wolves, which made them bold enough at that time of year to leave the forests and enter the villages in search of food. The name *Aefter-Yule* was also used to designate the month after the great feast of Christmas. Charlemagne, the early medieval Frankish emperor, appropriately called January *Wintarmanoth*, or “Wintermonth.” In ancient and modern times, particular stones have been connected with the various months. The lucky gem or birthstone often associated with January is the garnet, which symbolizes constancy.

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New Year’s Day



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The Arch of Janus in the Foro Boario, Rome.

So fundamental to everyday life are ways of marking the passage of time that most people feel their own calendar customs have been virtually ordained by nature (see Appendix A: The Calendar). The Gregorian, or New Style, calendar now used throughout most of the world starts the year on January 1. Although that date has been recognized as New Year’s Day in more and more countries since the

“new” calendar was first introduced in 1582, it is actually a rather unnatural day for beginning the year, since it has no special place in the sun’s cycle. January 1 is connected with neither the winter nor the summer solstice, nor with the spring or autumn equinox—four dates that do relate to the change of the seasons and which historically related to significant festivities and religious rites. The ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Persians, for example, began their year with the autumn equinox (on or about September 21 in the Gregorian calendar), and the Greeks for many centuries used the winter solstice (December 21 or 22 in the Gregorian calendar). Other societies, such as the Chinese, base the new year on the lunar cycle rather than the solar cycle. Chinese New Year, for example, takes place any time between January 21 and February 19, inclusive, and always on the new moon.

The United States inherited January 1 as the beginning of the new year from the English and other European settlers, who themselves came to embrace that date over the course of roughly two thousand years. The ancient Romans, under a very old and inaccurate calendar, had originally taken March (*Martius*) (see March) as the first month of the year. But in 153 B.C., the Roman state declared January 1 thenceforth to be New Year’s Day, turning the 11th month, *Januarius* (see January), into a new first month. In a pattern that would often be repeated, however, the common people remembered their old traditions and for a long time still considered the year to end with the celebration of the *Terminalia* on February 23, after which intercalation (the insertion of a varying number of days) was made to offset errors in the calendar and so complete the year.

By the end of the Roman republic, the calendar was once more highly confused, since officials had tampered with it to cut short or extend magistrates’ terms of office. In 46 B.C., Julius Caesar, as *pontifex maximus* and dictator, instituted necessary reforms. Under his new calendar, subsequently named the Julian calendar (see Appendix A: The Calendar), January 1 was reinstated as New Year’s Day. The new calendar became effective the following year, 45 B.C.

The Romans traditionally celebrated the Feast of Janus, the god of doorways and of beginnings who is depicted as looking both forward to the future and backward to the past, on the first of January. This deity was certainly suitable to the New Year, and to begin the year auspiciously, the Romans offered sacrifices to him. They also exchanged greetings with kin and acquaintances and gave New Year’s gifts, called *strenae*, after *Strenia*, the goddess of strength. According to tradition, the custom of giving *strenae* originated in the eighth century B.C., when

the Romans presented the king of the Sabines with branches from the trees consecrated to *Strenia*, as tokens of good omen. *Strenae* also means “omens” in Latin, and this semantic link captures the superstition and expectancy with which most peoples have greeted the New Year. As with the Romans and Sabines, New Year’s festivities throughout the world still tend to be occasions for smoothing over quarrels and reaffirming human ties.

In time, the Romans replaced with more elaborate gifts the branches of bay and palm traditionally gathered on the first day of the year. During the days of the Roman Empire, courtiers and others gave the emperor New Year’s presents of great value, which enriched his personal coffers and became a source of political corruption. Aware of the burden that these traditional gifts placed on the people, the Emperor Claudius issued a decree limiting the amounts to be given. In addition, the New Year’s Feast of Janus was also marked by masquerades and public entertainments, not to mention the occasional Roman orgy.

After their conversion to Christianity in the fourth century, the Roman emperors continued for some time the pagan traditions of New Year’s. The young church, however, increasingly condemned these observances as scandalous and forbade Christians to participate. Much of the struggle between the growing faith and the old pagan culture centered around such public observances. As it gained strength, the church purposely planned Christian festivals in competition with pagan ones. It established Christmas on December 25 (then the winter solstice) in counterpoint to the Mithraic rites and the Roman *Saturnalia*, for example. Following the biblical account, the Feast of the Circumcision of the infant Jesus then fell eight days later, on January 1, competing conveniently with the Feast of Janus and New Year’s Day. Saint Ambrose declared, “We fast on this day [Circumcision] that the heathen may know we condemn their pleasures.” Even in modern times, some branches of the Christian church celebrate January 1 as the Feast of the Circumcision or as the Solemnity of Mary.

The church remained strongly hostile to the old pagan New Year throughout the Middle Ages. As a result, January 1 was weakened and its observance as New Year’s Day may have disappeared for some centuries in parts of Western Europe. Certainly, political fragmentation and poor communications after the collapse of Rome encouraged diversity concerning the beginning of the calendar year. Between the 9th and the late 11th centuries, Christmas gained wide acceptance as the date for changing the year. Gradually, December 25 thus replaced such earlier New Year dates as January 1, the Franks’ March 1, and the late Roman Empire’s