

INTRODUCTION TO THE ROMAN WAY TO TELLING TIME

LATIN 215: The Crisis of the Roman Republic



The Roman calendar was originally a ten-month calendar of 304 days. Each year began on March 1st when the Vestal Virgins re-lit the sacred fire on Vesta's hearth, and fresh laurels were hung on public buildings. This explains why December, "the "10th month," is the twelfth month of a year that now begins in January.¹

The change to a 12-month calendar with 355 days (i.e. the Republican calendar) occurred sometime in the 6th century BCE. In 153 BCE, new magistrates began to enter office in January rather than in March and the New Year's festival may have been moved to January to synchronize the political and religious calendars. By 46 BCE, the maintenance required to keep the Republican calendar synchronized with the solar year had lapsed. Caesar extended that year to 445 days to bring the calendar back in line. He then defined the year as having 365 days and introduced the leap year concept by adding an extra day between Februarius 23 and 24 every three years (this was corrected to four in 8 BCE). Our modern calendar is essentially that devised by Caesar (with a few minor alterations by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582).

Reckoning Years

Romans commonly referred to specific years by the names of the Consuls who served for that year, usually by placing their names and title in an ablative absolute; e.g. *Cicerone et Antonio consulibus* ("when Cicero and Antonius were consuls" - i.e. 63 BCE). Alternatively the Romans numbered the years from the founding of Rome by Romulus. So, 1 AUC (*ab urbe condita*) is equivalent to 753 BCE in our system; e.g. Cicero's consulship occurred in 691 AUC (753 BCE – 63 BCE counting, as always, inclusively).

Months in the Year

Months	Named in Honor Of	Days in Month	
		Republican	Julian
Januarius	Janus, the god of gates and transitions	29	31
Februarius	Purifying or expiation rite (februa) celebrated on Feb. 15	28 (24) ²	28
Martius	Italian god, Mars, mostly for the beginning of the season for military campaigns	31	31
Aprilis	Etruscan fertility god Aprilis (from "aperire", to open, (?))	29	30
Maius	Goddess Maia, "Mother", who was sacrificed to on May 1	31	31
Junius	Goddess Juno	29	30
Julius (Quintilis before 44 BCE)	Julius Caesar	31	31
Augustus (Sextilis before 8 BCE)	Augustus Caesar	29	31
Septembre	Seventh Month	29	30
Octobre	Eight Month	31	31
Novembre	Ninth Month	29	30
Decembre	Tenth Month	29	31
		355	365

¹ Several countries, including Britain, Russia, and Turkey, refused for a time to accept Gregory's "Catholic" reform. January did not become the official start of the year in England until it adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752.

² The 27-day Intercalary month or Intercalaris (aka Mercedonius) was used to synchronize the Republican calendar with the solar year. Every other year, Februarius ended on the 23rd or the 24th and this intercalary month was supposed to be observed.

Days of the Month

In the Roman calendar, the days of the month weren't numbered sequentially. Instead, the months had three primary markers -- the **Kalendae**, the **Nonae** and the **Idus** and all days were designated by counting *backwards* from the *closest* of these markers.

- **Kalendae** (Kalends) = first day in the month.
- **Nonae** (Nones) = the 7th day in 31 day months and the 5th day in all other months
- **Idus** (Ides) = the 15th day in 31 day months and the 13th in all other months.

All the days after the Kalends (i.e. the 2nd through 4th or 6th days) were numbered by counting down to the Nones (e.g., the day after the Kalends of Martius was referred to as the fifth day before the Nones of Martius). All the days after the Nones were numbered by counting down to the Ides (e.g., two days before the Ides). All days after the Ides were numbered by counting down toward the Kalends of the next month (e.g., the day after the Ides of March was referred to as the sixteenth day before the Kalends of Aprilis).

Latin form: If the event happens before a day marker (Kalends, Nones, Ides), the phrase *ante diem* is followed by the # of days before the marker + the marker in the *accusative* + the month as an adjective agreeing with the marker (e.g. *ante diem v Kalendas Novembris*). **N.B.**: *Aprilis, Septembre, Octobre, Novembre, and Decembre* are third declension). If an event happens on one of the marker days, the marker is placed in the *ablative* (*Kalendis ipsis Novembris*).

As always the Romans counted inclusively, so “*ante diem* v Kalendas Novembris*” (5 days before the November Kalends) = October 28th (Counting Nov. 1, Oct. 31, 30, 29, 28)

Days of the Week

At first, the Romans used the ancient Etruscan Market Week, which consisted of a period of eight days, called the **Nundinae**, “The Nine Days” (remember the Romans counted inclusively). Every eighth day was a market day. The 7-day, or astrological or planetary (there were 7 visible planets), week originated in Persia and by the end of the first century CE was in wide use throughout the Mediterranean. The first public evidence of the seven-day week in Rome appears in a Sabine calendar from between 19 BCE and 14 CE. Augustus recognized the 7-day week but the Nundinal calendar continued to be used alongside it. Only in 321 CE did 7 days become the official length of the week.

Roman Days of the Week

Dies Solis	Dies Lunae	Dies Martis	Dies Mercurii	Dies Iovis	Dies Veneris	Dies Saturni
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday ³	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

Special Days: The Romans were concerned with what sort of activity could be undertaken on given days:

- **Fasti**: days when legal action is permitted (contracts, weddings, law suits etc.)
- **Nefasti**: no legal action or public voting could take place on these days.
- **Dies Comitiales**: days when committees of citizens could vote on political or criminal matters
- **Feriae** : Holidays - games, plays, banquets usually in honor of gods; no public business was allowed

Hours in the Day

Like us, the Romans divided each day into 24 hours, and they assigned 12 to the daytime and 12 to the night. Unlike us, their 24-hour period did not run from midnight to midnight, but from sunrise to sunrise. This effectively means that the length of the Roman hour varied according to the season, so that during the summer solstice_ around June 21st when the period of daylight is considerably longer than the night, the twelve hours assigned to the daytime would each have to be 1 hour and 16 minutes long, while conversely, during the short days of the winter solstice around December 21st, each daylight hour would be only 44 minutes long.

There were only two days during the entire year when the Roman day contained hours of exactly 60 minutes. These dates occurred during the *exuinoxes*, when the length of the day is exactly equal to that of the night; the *vernal equinox* occurred every year around March 21st, and the *autumnal equinox* about September 21st.

³ The days of the Week in English are, for the most part, the Anglo-Saxon equivalents of the gods honored in the Roman system: Sun, Moon, Tiw (war), Woden (messenger). Thor (thunder), Frigu (love).