



HAL
open science

Varro's Roman Seasons

Amelia Carolina Sparavigna

► **To cite this version:**

| Amelia Carolina Sparavigna. Varro's Roman Seasons. 2019. hal-02387848

HAL Id: hal-02387848

<https://hal.science/hal-02387848>

Preprint submitted on 30 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Varro's Roman Seasons

A. C. Sparavigna¹

¹ Dipartimento di Scienza Applicata e Tecnologia, Politecnico di Torino, Torino, Italy

The four seasons of the Roman calendar, as described by Marcus Terentius Varro, are different from our seasons, in the sense that they start on days which differ from those that we are using today. In his Books on Agriculture, Varro shows that the Roman seasons started on the Cross Quarter-days instead than on the Quarter-days of the year as it happens today. Besides the classic subdivision in four parts, in the Books on Agriculture we can also find the year divided into eight parts, that is eight seasons having quite different lengths. In our discussion of Varro's seasons we will compare the days he mentions for the separation of seasons to the Cross Quarter- and Quarter-days that we find in Celtic calendars.

Keywords: Chronology, Roman Chronology, Julian Calendar, Celtic festivals.

Marcus Terentius Varro (116 - 27 BC) was a Roman scholar and writer. In his political career, he became tribune of the people, quaestor and curule aedile. Supporting Pompey, Varro reached the office of praetor [1,2]. He was also one of the members of the commission that carried out the agrarian plan of Julius Caesar for the resettlement of Capua and Campania (59 BC) [2]. During the civil war, Varro commanded one of Pompey's armies in Spain. After the battle of Pharsalus, he reconciled with Julius Caesar, and Caesar appointed him to oversee the public library of Rome [1]. After Caesar's death, Mark Antony proscribed him. The result was that Varro lost much of his property, including his library [1].

Varro proved to be a highly productive writer and turned out more than 74 Latin works on a variety of topics. As told in [1], Saint Jerome composed a catalogue of Varro's works that he claimed to have interrupted about halfway. Nevertheless, the catalogue listed 39 titles, one of which refers to ten monographs (*libri singulares*); then the total number of works listed by St. Jerome was of 48;

adding other quotations, Friedrich Ritschl came to list 74 works in about 620 books [3].

Varro is also known for his compilation of the Roman chronology, an attempt to determine an exact year-by-year timeline of Roman history up to his time. Varro's chronology is based on the traditional sequence of consuls of the Roman Republic.

Called "the most learned of the Romans" by Quintilian [4], Varro was seen as an important source to be referred to by many ancient authors. His only complete work extant, the *Rerum rusticarum libri tres* (the Three Books on Agriculture), has been described as "the well digested system of an experienced and successful farmer who has seen and practised all that he records"[5]. As stressed in [5], during his whole life, Varro "amused the leisure snatched from his studies with intelligent supervision of the farming of his several estates". Let us also remember that Varro wrote his treatise on *Rerum Rusticarum* in his eightieth year.

In [5], we find the description given by Varro of the seasons as seen by Romans. Varro uses the Julian Calendar, the calendar of Julius Caesar that reformed the Republican Roman Calendar. As we will see, the four seasons start on days which differ from those that we use today. Moreover, we can find an interesting subdivision of the year in eight seasons.

Here are Varro's words [5].

XXVII. We have two standards of time, the first that of the revolution of the year, because in it the sun completes his circuit, the other the measure of the month, because it includes the waxing and the waning of the moon.

Of the solar measure of the year: First I will speak of the sun, whose recurring journey is divided with reference to the pursuits of agriculture into four seasons of three months each, or more accurately into eight seasons of a month and a half each. The four seasons are Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. In Spring certain crops are sown and the sod fields are broken up, [82] so that the weeds in them may be destroyed before they have seeded themselves again, and the clods, by drying out in the sun, may become more accessible to the rain and when broken down by its action easier to cultivate. Such land should be ploughed not less than twice, but three times is better [83]. The Summer is the season of the grain harvest; the Autumn, when the weather is dry, that of the vintage: and it is also the fit time for thinning out the woods, when the trees to be removed should be cut down close to the ground and the roots should be dug up before the first rains to prevent

them from stooling. In Winter the trees may be pruned, provided this is done at a time when the bark is free from frost and rain and ice.

XXVIII. Spring begins when the sun is in Aquarius, Summer when it is in Taurus, Autumn when it is in Leo, and Winter when it is in Scorpio. Since the beginning of each of the four seasons is the twenty-third day after the entrance of the sun in these signs respectively, it follows that Spring has ninety-one days, Summer ninety-four, Autumn ninety-one and Winter eighty-nine: which, reduced to the dates of our present official calendar,[84] makes the beginning of Spring on the seventh day before the Ides of February (February 7), of Summer on the seventh day before the Ides of May (May 9), of Autumn on the third day before the Ides of August (August 11), and of Winter on the fourth day before the Ides of November (November 10).

By a more exact definition of the seasons, the year is divided into eight parts, the first of forty-five days from the date of the rising of the west wind (February 7) to the date of the vernal equinox (March 24), the second of the ensuing forty-four days to the rising of the Pleiades (May 7), the third of forty-eight days to the summer solstice (June 24), the fourth of twenty-seven days to the rising of the Dog Star (July 21), the fifth of sixty-seven days to the Autumn equinox (September 26), the sixth of thirty-two days to the setting of the Pleiades (October 28), the seventh of fifty-seven days to the winter solstice (December 24), and the eighth of forty-five days to the beginning of the first.[85].

In Latin [6]: Dies primus est veris in Aquario, aestatis in Tauro, autumni in Leone, hiernis in Scorpione. ... Quae redacta ad dies civiles nostros, qui nunc sunt primi verni temporis ex a. d. VII Id. Feb. aestivi ex a. d. IV Idib. Maii, autumnalex ax. a. d. VII Idib. Sext. hiberni ex a. d. IV Id. Novemb. Subtilius discretis temporibus observanda quaedam sunt, ea quae in partes VIII dividuntur. Primum a favonio ad aequinoctium vernum dies XL. hinc ad Vergiliarum exortum dies XLIV. ab hoc ad solstitium dies XLIX. inde ad Caniculae signum dies XXIX. dein ad aequinoctium autumnale dies LXVII. exin ad Vergiliarum occasum dies XXXII, ad hoc ad brumam dies LVII. inde ad favovium dies XLV.

.... Of the influence of the moon on agriculture. XXXVII. The lunar seasons also must be considered. They are divided into two terms, that from the new moon to the full, and that from the full moon to the next moon, or until that day which we call intermenstruus, or the last and the first

of a moon, whence at Athens this day is called [Greek: hēnē kai nea] (the old and the new), though the other Greeks call it [Greek: triakas] the thirtieth day. Some agricultural operations may be undertaken with more advantage during the increase of the moon, others during the decrease, [88] as, for example, the harvest or cutting of wood."

Of footnotes in [5] here we report about two. Footnote 84 stresses that the Julian calendar had been in use only eight years when Varro was writing and Footnote 85 tells that some scholars have attempted to emend the enumeration of the days in this succession of seasons, but Harrison Fairfax follows the advise made by Heinrich Keil: "As we do not know what principle Varro followed in establishing these divisions of the year, it is safer to set them down as they are written in the codex than to be tempted by uncertain emendation."

Further observations on the problems concerning the enumeration of the days are given in [6].

Varro's Seasons The year when Varro wrote the book was about 37 or 36 BC. At the time the Romans were using the Julian Calendar, which was running erroneously because the leap year was applied on a cycle of three years, instead of four. A correction was ordered by Augustus only in 8 BC. If we consider that the Julian Calendar began on 2 January 45 BC (astronomical Julian day) [7], in 37 or 36 BC there was a difference of a day with respect to the astronomical dates. That is, the days of the Julian Calendar were one day away with respect to the astronomical Julian counting of them.

As told by Varro, the year was subdivided into four seasons, beginning as follow: Spring on the seventh day before the Ides of February, Summer on the seventh day before the Ides of May, Autumn on the third day before the Ides of August, and Winter on the fourth day before the Ides of November. Using the table in [7], we can easily understand the inclusive manner the Romans used to count the days. So, the starting days of seasons are given in modern terms as:

Spring, February 7, sun in Aquarius	Summer, May 9, sun in Taurus
Autumn, August 11, sun in Leo	Winter, November 10, sun in Scorpio

Martinmas In this table we can immediately note a very interesting day. It is November 10, the

day before our St. Martin's Day, November 11. Saint Martin's day, also known as Martinstag or Martinmas, as well as Old Halloween and Old Hallowmas Eve, [8] is the Funeral day of Saint Martin of Tours. On this day, many hiring fairs were held during which the farm labourers would seek new posts. "Fare San Martino" is an expression used in the Pianura Padana, meaning "change jobs" or "move house". It is possible that November 10, the beginning of winter in the Roman calendar, was also the conventional date for the end of farming agreements in the Roman world, and that this date evolved into the traditional date of the Martinmas.

As explained by the item on St. Martin day in Wikipedia, like the word "Christmas", the term Martinmas has the meaning of "Mass of Martin", that is of the day when the Saint is honoured in the Mass. "Martinmas, as a date on the calendar, has two meanings: in the agricultural calendar it marks the beginning of the natural winter, but in the economic calendar it is seen as the end of autumn. The feast coincides not only with the end of the Octave of All Saints, but also with harvest-time, the time when newly produced wine is ready for drinking".

Cross Quarter-days As we have seen, Varro's Roman seasons are different from our seasons, in the sense that they start on days different from those that we are using today. Varro's seasons were starting on those that we can consider the four Cross Quarter-days of the year according to the Roman tradition.

Who knows the Celtic calendar and its holidays is not surprised by this fact. In particular, the Martinmas is not new for sure. In [9], Martinmas is told to be one of the Cross Quarter-days of the year. Whitsuntide was formerly the first of these cross-quarters, Lammas the second, Martinmas the next and Candlemass the last. The Quarter-days of the year are equinoxes and solstices. In England, they are March 25 (Lady Day), June 24 (Midsummer Day), September 29 (Michaelmas Day), and December 25 (Christmas Day) [10]. June 24 is the Christian feast day celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. This day is also know colloquially as Johnmas or (in German) Johannistag.

We have noted previously that Martinmas was the end of farming agreements. Here, for what concerns Johnmas, let us stress that, in Piedmont, the mountain farming and the vertical transhumance (alpeggio, in Italian) starts from Johnmas and ends at Michaelmas, that is, "da San Giovanni a San Michele".

Let us note that local variations of the dates of the Cross Quarter-days exist.

The Encyclopedia Britannica explains that the Cross Quarter-days are the days on which it is usually contracted that rents should be paid and houses or lands entered upon or quitted. In Scotland there are two legal terms, May 15 (Whitsunday) and November 11 (Martinmas), and these, with the two conventional terms, February 2 (Candlemas) and August 1 (Lammas), make up the Scottish quarter days. Therefore, as previously told, people familiar with Celtic traditions are not surprised by Varro's seasons starting on Cross Quarter-days. The fact that the days are slightly different is obviously due to the different climatic conditions linked to the different geographic areas.

In Gaelic Ireland, the four seasonal festivals linked to the Cross Quarter-day are [11]: Samhain (~1 November), the name of the festival marking the beginning of winter, Imbolc (~1 February), Bealtaine (~1 May) and Lughnasadh or Lammas (~1 August). As told in [11], Samhain and Bealtaine, "at opposite sides of the year, are thought to have been the most important. Sir James George Frazer wrote in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* that 1 May and 1 November are of little importance to European crop-growers, but of great importance to herdsmen. It is at the beginning of summer that cattle are driven to the upland summer pastures and the beginning of winter that they are led back. Thus, Frazer suggests that halving the year at 1 May and 1 November dates from a time when the Celts were mainly a pastoral people, dependent on their herds" [11,12]. As we have previously seen, the Cross Quarter-days of May and November were important to Romans too, because they had a society based on agriculture and the breeding of animals.

Candlemas Roman and Celtic calendars used Cross Quarter-days, but it seems that evidences exist favouring the use of intermediate calendrical dates also in prehistoric times [13]. "They are preserved in traditional holidays still observed in Britain": Candlemas, May Day, Lammas and Martinmas. "All of these derive from an earlier Celtic tradition and marked the beginning of each season. For example, what is called the first day of summer in the United States, the summer solstice, is considered to be midsummer in Britain."

In Christian societies, we have the festivals linked to the winter solstice, Christmas, and the spring equinox, the Easter. As we have seen, we have Johnmas and Michaelmas too for the summer solstice and the autumn equinox. However, we have also other festivals that happen close to the

Cross Quarter-days subdividing the year into four seasons. On February 2 we have the Candlemas (also spelled Candlemass), Candelora in Italian, also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus Christ and the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the Temple. About Martinmas we have already discussed. However, what happened in ancient Rome? Had the Romans some specific festival close to the Quarter- and the Cross Quarter-days of the year?

Roman festivals Varro is the source of information about the Roman festivals too [14]. Let us consider the dates given in the Table of Page 4 and see if we have some holidays close to them. February 7 is the beginning of Roman spring. It is between the Februalia and the Lupercalia. The Februalia were the Calends of February, February 1, the Roman Festival of Purification [14], today the Candlemas. The Lupercalia were on the Ides of February, 13-15 February. The Nones were on February 5 (see [7] for the Roman calendar).

About the Spring equinox, we can find the Tubilustrum (March 23), which involved a series of rites to cleanse and favour trumpets. This festival was inaugurating the season of wars. Hilaria (March 25) was the festival in honour of Cybele.

According to Varro, May 9 was the beginning of summer. In [14], we find that in the Julian calendar the days of 9, 11, and 13 May were the feast of Lemuria. The origin of this ancient festival is, according to Ovid, in the Remuria, a festival instituted by Romulus to appease the spirit of Remus. The Lemuria then was a feast during which the Romans performed rites to exorcise the ghosts or the restless spirits, the lemures or larvae, from their homes.

About the summer solstice, we find the festival of Fors Fortuna (June 24). The autumn starts on August 11, with sun in Leo, between the Opalia (August 10) and the Vertumnalia (August 13). The equinox is close to Venus Genitrix Populi Romani (September 26). The winter starts on November 10, sun in Scorpio. About the winter solstice, we find the Saturnalia (December 17-21).

Halloween It seems that the term Halloween is first attested from the sixteenth century, and represents a Scottish manner to indicate the eve, that is the night, before the Feast of All the Saints (in archaic English All Hallows Day). The feast is a solemnity that celebrates the glory and honour of the canonized and non-canonized Saints. Today, the Catholic feast, Festabant Omnium

Sanctorum, falls on 1 November.

In [15] it is told that this festival has a "mobile" history linked to the celebrations of the martyrs of the Church. The commemoration of the martyrs began to be celebrated as early as in the fourth century. The first traces of a general celebration are attested in Antioch, and refer to the Sunday following Pentecost. This custom is also mentioned by John Chrysostom and is preserved until today by the Eastern churches. Ephrem the Syrian also speaks of this feast, and places it on May 13th [15]. A confirmation of this date can be seen in the Roman festival of the *dedicatio Sanctae Mariae ad Martyres*, that is, the anniversary of the dedication of the Pantheon to the Blessed Virgin and to all the martyrs. The Pantheon was dedicated on 13 May 609 by Pope Boniface IV.

As we have previously seen, the date of May 13 is one of those of the Roman festival of Lemuria. So, it seems that the festival of the martyrs had replaced the Roman festival of restless spirits of the dead.

The transfer of the date from 13 May to 1 November was motivated by some scholars, such as James Frazer, as a choice by the Church to create a Christian continuity with Samhain, the ancient Celtic festival of the new year, following the requests in this sense from the Irish monastic world [15]. These scholars maintained that, according to Celtic beliefs, during the Samhain festival the dead could return to the places they frequented when they were alive, and that this day was requiring for joyful celebrations to be held in their honour. This aspect of the feast was not eradicated by the advent of Christianity and the dead are celebrated on November 2.

"That night [between the first and the second day of November] the dead return home to quench their thirst and eat, to drive away the wickedness or to play cards, to attend Mass or to pray the Rosary along the streets of the village. There are many beliefs in different areas of Italy. All of them, however, have a basic inspiration: to feel always close to the world of the dead." [16] In Piedmont, on the evening of All Saints' Day, that is on the eve of the day of the dead, after the dinner, the table is not spawnd: it remains laid down with some food so that the dead will come and eat it.

However, as told in [15], there is no total agreement about the explanation given above, of Halloween as the Christian version of Samhain. The historian Ronald Hutton, for example, has questioned the thesis, observing how Ognissanti was celebrated for several centuries (before being a feast of precept), in discordant dates in various countries: for the church of Rome it was May 13, in

Ireland (country of Celtic culture) was April 20, while November 1 was a widespread date in England and Germany (countries of Germanic culture) [15,17].

"It is commonly asserted" - tells Hutton [17] - "that the feast was the pagan festival of the dead. In reality feasts to commemorate the dead, where they can be found in ancient Europe, were celebrated by both pagans and early Christians, between March and May, as part of a spring cleaning to close off grieving and go forth into the new summer. On the other hand, the medieval Catholic church did gradually institute a mighty festival of the dead at this time of year, designating 1 November as the feast of All Saints or All Hallows, initially in honour of the early Christian martyrs, and 2 November as All Souls, on which people could pray for their dead friends and relatives. This was associated with the new doctrine of purgatory, by which most people went not straight to hell or heaven but a place of suffering between, where their sins were purged to fit them for heaven. ... The two new Christian feasts were, however, only developed between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, and started in Germanic not Celtic lands."

What is interesting is a fact stressed by Hutton in ending his article [17]: "On the whole, though, the ancient feast of Winter's Eve has regained its ancient character, as a dual time of fun and festivity, and of confrontation of the fears and discomforts inherent in life, and embodied especially in northern latitudes by the season of cold and dark."

It is interesting that Hutton defines the beginning of November as the Winter's Eve. If we consider the different latitude, November 10 was representing the eve of the Winter for Romans.

Eight seasons According to Varro, a more exact definition of the seasons exists, which requires the year to be divided into eight parts. The first season lasts forty-five days from the date of the rising of the west wind (February 7) to the date of the vernal equinox (March 24). The second season lasts forty-four days from the vernal equinox to the rising of the Pleiades (May 7). The third season lasts forty-eight days to the summer solstice (June 24), the fourth lasts twenty-seven days to the rising of the Dog Star (July 21), the fifth sixty-seven days to the Autumn equinox (September 26), the sixth thirty-two days to the setting of the Pleiades (October 28), the seventh fifty-seven days to the winter solstice (December 24), and the eighth forty-five days to the beginning of the first.

As we can see this is a subdivision strongly linked to astronomy, in particular to the rising and setting of the Pleiades, the Vergiliae in Latin. Moreover, another interesting fact can be observed,

that the end of the autumn and the beginning of the winter is closer to the date of the Celtic calendar, that is to Samhain. In the following Table, the starting days of the eight seasons are listed.

I, February 7 (45 days) - II, March 25 (44 days)
III, May 7 (48 days) - IV, June 25 (27 days)
V, July 22 (67 days) - VI, September 27 (32 days)
VII, October 29 (57 days) - VIII, December 25 (45 days)

It seems difficult to imagine a calendar composed by eight seasons. However, such a kind of calendars probably existed in very ancient time. Again, we find a link to ancient people in Britain: Sir Norman Lockyer, at the beginning of XIX century, suggested the existence of a widespread calendrical practice in Neolithic and Bronze Age, that required the division of the year into eight equal parts [18] (let us stress that in the case of Varro's calendar, the length of the seasons is different). If we assume the year was divided by the Quarter- and the Cross Quarter-days of the year, the echoes of this original calendar, which are commonly devised in the Celtic calendar, can also be found in the Varro's books, and in the Roman calendrical practice.

References

- [1] Fraccaro, P. (1937). Varrone, Marco Terenzio. Enciclopedia Italiana.
- [2] Baynes, T. S. (1891). The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature. C. Scribner's sons.
- [3] Ritschl, F. (1877). Die Schriftstellerei des M. T. V., in *Opuscula Philologica*, III, Lipsia 1877, p. 419.
- [4] Quintilian. Chapter 1. *Institutio Oratoria*. Book X. Verse 95.
- [5] Harrison, Fairfax (1918). *Roman farm management; the treatises of Cato and Varro done into English, with notes of modern instances by a Virginia farmer*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- [6] *Rustici Latini Volgarizzati*. Marco Terenzio Varrone Dell'agricoltura con note. Tomo II Traduzione di Giangirolamo Pagani. Venezia Tipografia Pepoliana, presso Antonio Curti q. Giacomo, 1795

- [7] Sparavigna, Amelia Carolina, The First Calends of the Julian Calendar (May 16, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3389310> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3389310>
- [8] Lizanne Henderson, Edward J. Cowan, Scottish Fairy Belief: A History. Dundurn, 2001
- [9] The Christian's monthly magazine and universal review, Volume 2. 1844. Page 265.
- [10] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quarter-Day>
- [11] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samhain>
- [12] Frazer, Sir James George. The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion. Forgotten Books, 2008. p. 644
- [13] E. C. Krupp. Echoes of the Ancient Skies: The Astronomy of Lost Civilizations. Courier Corporation, Mar 15, 2012.
- [14] Peter Y.L. Warne (2016). Le feste tradizionali dell'anno romano. *Vrbis et Orbis*.
- [15] La Storia Viva, <https://lastoriaviva.it/il-31-ottobre-festeggiate-pure-ma-almeno-sappiate-cose/>
- [16] Mucci, U. Italian Traditions: Halloween in Italy. *WTI MAGAZINE #96 OCT 14, 2017*. Available at <https://www.wetheitalians.com/web-magazine/italian-traditions-halloween-italy>
- [17] Ronald Hutton, Halloween? It's more than trick or treat, 28 Oct 2014, *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/28/halloween-more-than-trick-or-treat-origins>
- [18] Plunket, E. Stonehenge and the Hyperboreans. *The Nineteenth Century and After*. XIX-XX. A Monthly Review. Vol. LXIX. London, 1911.