

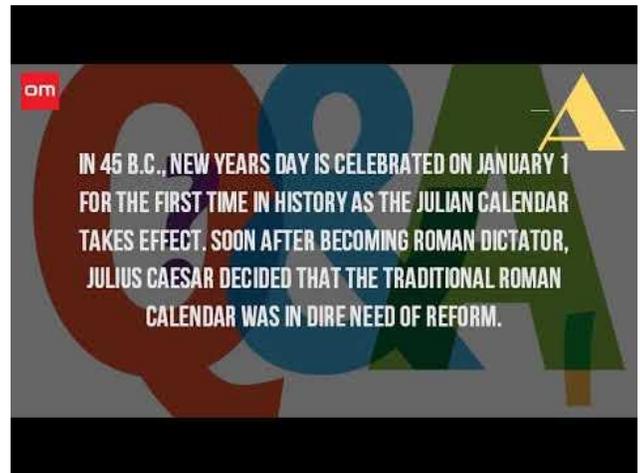
EARLY NEW YEAR'S CELEBRATIONS

The earliest recorded festivities in honor of a new year's arrival date back some 4,000 years to ancient Babylon. For the Babylonians, the first new moon following the vernal equinox—the day in late March with an equal amount of sunlight and darkness—heralded the start of a new year. They marked the occasion with a massive religious festival called Akitu (derived from the Sumerian word for barley, which was cut in the spring) that involved a different ritual on each of its 11 days. In addition to the new year, Akitu celebrated the mythical victory of the Babylonian sky god Marduk over the evil sea goddess Tiamat and served an important political purpose: It was during this time that a new king was crowned or that the current ruler's divine mandate was symbolically renewed.

Did You Know?

In order to realign the Roman calendar with the sun, Julius Caesar had to add 90 extra days to the year 46 B.C. when he introduced his new Julian calendar.

Throughout antiquity, civilizations around the world developed increasingly sophisticated calendars, typically pinning the first day of the year to an agricultural or astronomical event. In Egypt, for instance, the year began with the annual flooding of the Nile, which coincided with the rising of the star Sirius. The first day of the Chinese new year, meanwhile, occurred with the second new moon after the winter solstice.



JANUARY 1 BECOMES NEW YEAR'S DAY

The early Roman calendar consisted of 10 months and 304 days, with each new year beginning at the vernal equinox; according to tradition, it was created by Romulus, the founder of Rome, in the eighth century B.C. A later king, Numa Pompilius, is credited with adding the months of Januarius and Februarius. Over the centuries, the calendar fell out of sync with the sun, and in 46 B.C. the emperor Julius Caesar decided to solve the problem by consulting with the most prominent astronomers and mathematicians of his time. He introduced the Julian calendar, which closely resembles the more modern Gregorian calendar that most countries around the world use today.

As part of his reform, Caesar instituted January 1 as the first day of the year, partly to honor the month's namesake: Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces allowed him to look back into the past and forward into the future. Romans celebrated by offering sacrifices to Janus, exchanging gifts with one another, decorating their homes with laurel branches and attending raucous parties. In medieval Europe, Christian leaders temporarily replaced January 1 as the first of the year with days carrying more religious significance, such as December 25 (the anniversary of Jesus' birth) and March 25 (the Feast of the Annunciation); Pope Gregory XIII reestablished January 1 as New Year's Day in 1582.

Today, the Date is the Same, but The Times have Changed

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