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Don't Fear the Reaper: The Purpose of Religious Festivals in Ancient Rome

Abstract

This paper discusses the way the political leaders of Rome during the periods of the late Republic and early Empire used religious festivals as a way of gaining and maintaining power among the citizens.

Don't Fear the Reaper: The Purpose of Ancestor Worship in Ancient Rome

Emily Susina

The ancient Roman practice of ancestor worship served as a way to “ensure, through the medium of devout attention to their mortal relics in the tomb, comfort, refreshment, and perennial renewal of life to [the] immortal spirits.”¹¹ The Romans believed that the spirit could live on after death, and it needed to be nourished just as it would were it still in a body. Through the practices and festivals associated with ancestor worship during the late Republic and early Empire, the leaders of Rome were able to take advantage of citizens’ fears of invoking the wrath of the city’s *Lares* to ensure that the citizens complied with the laws and traditions of the city. Such practices also allowed various leaders of Rome to push their agendas. Furthermore, the practice of sacrificing to the spirits was not only for the benefit of the dead; it also allowed ideas to be passed down through generations so that none of the experiences or knowledge of the ancestors would ever truly be lost. In believing that ancestors could communicate from beyond the grave, Roman citizens were able to continue to gain insight to situations from the city’s elders long after they had left their mortal bodies. Leaders also likely used this concept in order to ensure compliance with traditional notions of Roman values and duties. Therefore, ancestor worship and its associated beliefs and festivals played an important cultural, social, and political role in ancient Rome and also allowed Roman leaders to exert a certain degree of control over citizens.

In the ancient Roman belief system, the *Lar* is “the single deified founder of a family.”²² The Romans did not believe that the founders of their families should merely be respected or honored; instead, they thought that these ancestors should be literally worshipped as gods. Each family was responsible for worshipping and appeasing its own *Lares* in order to prevent hardship within the family. The title “*Lares*” separated these spirits from the rest of the ancestors, referred to as the *di parentes*, which reminded citizens that the *Lares* were held in a higher regard than the rest of the dead. Each household would have had its own personal *Lares*, which would have been honored in a sacred part of the house known as the *lararium*.³³ In addition to maintaining the *lararium* and paying homage to their own *Lares*, all Roman citizens were also responsible for worshipping and honoring the city’s *Lares*, known as the *Lares Praestites*. The *Lares Praestites* were usually depicted as young twin men, and they were often shown with a dog standing between them. In some cases, “the *Lares* themselves [were] dressed in dog-skins.”⁴ This portrayal of the *Lares* with a dog represented their roles as guardians of the city. The *Lares* were responsible for keeping the citizens safe and could be considered the cause of any hardship the city underwent. The citizens had to make sure to constantly appease the *Lares* to ensure that they would not turn on the city. If the *Lares* were angered, they could let harm come to both the citizens and the city itself.

In addition to protecting the city, the *Lares* were also thought to be important for its success and well-being. On occasion, the Romans would ask the *Lares* to bless the fields before planting because they assumed “if [the *Lares*] represent the souls of deified ancestors, they

¹ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), 62.

² Margaret C. Waites, “The Nature of the *Lares* and their Representation in Roman Art,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 24.3 (1920): 245.

³ Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1994), 274.

⁴ Waites, “Nature of the *Lares*,” 250.

were... able, like other chthonic deities, to bring increase to the crops.”⁵ The *Lares* played an especially important role in major events such as wars, but they were also thought to be necessary in everyday events. For this reason, the Romans had to be sure to appease the spirits of the ancestors not only in trying times, but also in daily life. Just as failing to honor the *Lares* during war could cause devastation and destruction, neglecting the *Lares* in times of peace could cause a bad harvest or a drought.

These important spirits were typically honored through “libations regularly poured out... at Roman banquets... and offering to the *Lares* any food accidentally dropped at the table.”⁶ Citizens would make small sacrifices to the city’s *Lares* at every official Roman banquet. In addition to these frequent, minor sacrifices, the *Lares* were worshipped and celebrated at festivals throughout the year. There was a festival dedicated specifically to the *Lares* each year in December, as well as festivals dedicated to all of the spirits and ancestors at several different times each year. The most important festival for the worship of the *Lares* was the *Parentalia*, which was “the feast... of parents and other kinsfolk of individual families.”⁷ The festival was a time to celebrate and worship one’s ancestors as the protectors of the family. The last day of this festival, the *Feralia*, was the “best known of these days, and the only one which was a public festival.”⁸ The *Feralia* may have been the most important day of the *Parentalia*, but the festival actually lasted for more than a week each year, from February 13 to February 21. During this time, life within the city was dedicated almost completely to the celebration of the festival and the worship of the ancestors. For the duration of the *Parentalia*, “all temples were closed, marriages were forbidden, and magistrates appeared without their insignia.”⁹

⁵ Ibid., 244.

⁶ Lily Ross Taylor, "The Mother of the *Lares*," *American Journal of Archaeology* 29.3 (1925): 30.1

⁷ Toynbee, *Death and Burial*, 64.

⁸ Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, 306.

⁹ Ibid., 308.

Daily life as the Romans knew it ceased for the festival; it was more important to maintain a good relationship with the spirits of the ancestors than it was to continue with the typical types of worship and commonplace legal activities. The one similarity between all these celebrations is that they were all state-sponsored. In this way, the Roman leaders were able to control the citizens' actions and mandate the types of things that they must do for the ancestral spirits. Through these festivals, the leaders taught Roman citizens how to properly sacrifice to the spirits of the city. This compliance would likely have carried over from following rituals related to the *Lares* to following the laws and traditions of the city in general, which thus ensured that citizens would continue to follow the regulations of the city. Because there was no separation between church and state in ancient Rome, the political leaders were thus able to use religious beliefs and festivals to regulate the behaviors of Roman citizens.

In his *Fasti*, Ovid also elaborates on the Roman reasons for ancestor worship and the various festivals associated with such worship. According to Ovid, failing to honor the dead could cause "ancestral spirits [to come] moaning from their tombs in the dead of night."¹⁰ Appeasing the ancestors was the only way to ensure that they would not return to wreak havoc on the city and cause major hardships. At the *Feralia*, the citizens would "bear/ Offerings to the dead... to propitiate the shades."¹¹ On this day, the Romans would offer sacrifices in honor of the ancestors to satisfy the demands of the ancestral spirits. This practice could be used to assuage both personal *Lares*, and the city's *Lares*. Although the *Parentalia* focused more on personal *Lares* than on the city *Lares*, the citizens would still have learned the proper rituals for sacrifice and worship so they could apply them to the city *Lares* as well. Ovid also points out in this work that the sacrifices that were given were also believed to have originated at the foundation of the city by writing that "this custom was brought to your lands, just Latinus,/ By Aeneas."¹² This legitimizes the necessity of worshipping the *Lares* by reminding the Roman citizens both about the foundation of the city and that ancestor worship was not a new idea – the tradition was brought to Italy by Aeneas when he brought his family's *Lares* with him as he fled from Troy.

In reading Ovid's works, it is important to consider not only the content of the writing, but also the social context of his situation. Ovid originally dedicated *Fasti* to Augustus, so everything he wrote in that work would have been in an attempt to win Augustus' approval. Writing for Augustus could have caused Ovid to have been more concerned with following the letter of the law rather than his own personal opinions. It could also indicate that Augustus wanted the citizens to follow the law more closely. Ovid would essentially have been relaying Augustus' message to the people of Rome, so it is entirely possible that it was Augustus who wanted to remind the citizens that when the earlier Romans had "neglected the Parentalia, Festival of the Dead, such deeds did not go unpunished."¹³ In this way, Augustus could have used Ovid's works as a tool to spread messages warning the Romans of the consequences of disobeying the laws and traditions of the city. After all, if the ancestors were not treated properly, they could quickly turn on the city and it was not until "neglected honour was paid to the tombs/ [that] there was an end to the portents."¹⁴ Once the Roman citizens gave the appropriate sacrifices to the ancestors, the spirits would stop tormenting the city. As the example

¹⁰ Ovid, *Fasti*, 2.551-552.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.569-570.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.534-

¹³ Ovid, *Fasti*, 2.548-549.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.555-556.

of Augustus shows, Roman leaders could easily take advantage of this willingness to follow directions in order to convince citizens to obey whatever laws the leaders chose.

Considering the important role that the *Lares* played in daily life, a Roman citizen interacting with the dead was not socially unacceptable or even uncommon. Instead, the living were expected to praise and honor the dead, and it was believed that spirits could speak from beyond the grave. Cicero relates the story of a dream Scipio had in which his dead father spoke to him. At the end of this dream, Scipio's father tells him, "[one] must use [his] best efforts...and be sure that it is not [he] who [is] mortal, but only [his] body."¹⁵ The Roman people believed that the spirit of a person should live on after death and continue to provide guidance and knowledge to other generations from the afterlife. Even more than just allowing a person to live on after death, the Romans believed that "[one's] spirit is [his] true self, not that bodily form that can be pointed out with the finger."¹⁶ Thus, whether or not a person was dead depended entirely on his or her spirit rather than on the presence of a physical body. This view of the spirit explains why it was so important to the Romans to worship ancestors who had died – the spirits of the ancestors would continue to live on as long as they were remembered and had a connection back to the earth. Therefore, keeping in touch with the spirits of those who had died meant that the Romans could continue to learn from the experienced, knowledgeable ancestors long after they were physically gone.

As Cicero tells it, Scipio asks his father, "[W]hy must I live a dying life on earth?"¹⁷ Scipio wanted only to join his father in the afterlife because he believed that death would be better than the suffering that he endured during his lifetime. His father, however, reminds him of the Roman view:

[One] must leave the soul in custody of the body, and must not quit the life on Earth unless [one is] summoned by the one who gave it to [him]; otherwise [one] will be seen to shirk the duty assigned by God to man.¹⁸

Although the Romans believed that it was important to honor and respect their ancestors to gain knowledge that only the ancestors could know, they still understood the sacredness of life and the duties of humans on Earth. Scipio's dream, then, acts as a reminder to the citizens that the gods demand that humans live their lives fully and fulfill the duties assigned to them, which the leaders of ancient Rome would have supported. Some of these duties include making sure that one acts with certain traits. He specifically mentions justice and piety, which "are of great importance in relation to parents and kindred but even more in relation to one's country."¹⁹ Ancient Romans thought it necessary to act with justice and piety in personal matters, but it was even more important that they act according to those principles in relation to the city as a whole. Cicero's work highlights the importance of fulfilling one's duties within society and informs the readers about what they must do if they want to be ideal Romans.

It is helpful to remember the context of Cicero's works when considering his writing, for it provides insights as to how Roman leaders further used ancestor worship to regulate citizens. Cicero attempted to write an exact dialogue that occurred in a dream Scipio was believed to have had about 75 years earlier. It would have been extremely difficult for Cicero to have known

¹⁵ Cicero, *On the Republic*, VI.26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VI.15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cicero, *On the Republic*, VI.16.

exactly what was said in the original dialogue, so he could easily have taken some liberties when writing it. As an orator himself, Cicero could have altered the dialogue that occurred between Scipio and his dead father in order to help spread the message about the importance of following orders from the leaders to the lower classes. Scipio's father may never have told him that a life of service to the city "is a highway to the skies," but that was definitely a message that Cicero and the other elites of Rome would have wanted to spread.²⁰ Because he wrote so long after the actual exchange of words was said to have happened, Cicero could have altered the dialogue significantly without anyone noticing and may have used his interpretation of this event to convince citizens to comply with the regulations of the city.

Several times throughout the year, the city of Rome would hold festivals that encouraged citizens to honor and worship their ancestors who had passed away. The most important of these ancestors were the *Lares*, the deified spirits of ancestors who were meant to protect the household. Citizens were responsible for worshipping not only their personal *Lares*, but also the *Lares Praestites* – the city *Lares* of Rome. By holding these annual festivals, the leaders of Rome were able to teach the citizens the proper way to sacrifice and thus ensure their compliance in other areas of society as well. Leaders, especially those around the time of Augustus, could use the festivals as tools for reminding the citizens what the appropriate behavior was and in a way conditioning them to follow the rules. By reminding the Roman townspeople about the potential wrath of the *Lares*, the leaders were able to create a society of more obedient citizens, who would do what they were told in order to avoid any problems that could occur as a result of neglecting their responsibilities. The leaders of Rome were also able to use interactions with the ancestral spirits to remind the citizens that they should dedicate their lives to service to Rome in order to have the best chance of happiness in the afterlife. Therefore, it is clear that ancestor worship in ancient Rome was not just a way of communicating with dead relatives and seeking guidance and protection from the spirits; it was also a way for the government leaders of Rome to regulate citizen activities through structured festivals and encourage obedience in all aspects of daily life.

²⁰ Ibid.