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## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD IN ROMAN CULTURE

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**Rezumat.** Vechii romani credeau că există mai multe spirite diferite, dar cele care au afectat în mod direct casa și viața de zi cu zi a unei familii au fost: *Penates*, *Lares*, *Manes*, *Lemures*, *Umbræ*. Credința comună era că morții continuau să trăiască și sufletele acestora, pur și simplu fuseseră transferate după moarte într-un alt tărâm însă ei rămâneau membrii ai familiei, romanii înțelegând prin familie nu numai viii ci și morții. Celor vii le revenea datoria de a menține vie memoria defuncților nu numai prin asigurarea descendenților, ci și prin celebrarea unui cult regulat pentru spiritele strămoșilor, temându-se să nu stârnească furia acestora. În demersul nostru ne vom opri asupra unor aspecte legate de practicile care aveau legătură cu sufletele stăbunilor – *Lemures*, *Manes* – și asupra celor două sărbători dedicate lor – Lemuria și Parentalia. Sărbătoarea *Feralia* din 21 februarie, ultima din zilele Parentaliei se ținea numai la morminte, pentru că zeii Mani sunt ascunși în morminte și aici li se aduceau ca sacrificiu mai multe feluri de mâncare. În timpul "zilelor morților", familiile și prietenii se reuneau pentru a sărbători legăturile care legau pe cei vii de morți, pentru a onora legăturile verticale și orizontale și pentru a perpetua amintirile celor pe care îi iubeau.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Lemuria, *Manes*, ofrandă, Parentalia, Tacita.

Ancient Romans considered both the living and the dead as members of their family. The living had the duty to keep the memory of the dead alive not only by ensuring the lineage of the family, but also by observing specific rituals to honor the spirits of the ancestors to appease them. The common belief was that the dead continued their existence in another realm where they entered upon their death.

The ancient Roman belief system included several household spirits among which most influence upon everyday life of a family had *Penates*, *Lares*, *Manes*, *Lemures* and *Umbræ*. The following paper aims to present the spirits connected with the souls of the ancestors – *Lemures*, *Manes* – and the two festivities dedicated to them – Lemuria and Parentalia.

Although traditional Roman culture did not believe in reward or punishment after death, it considered the spirits of the dead may be of two types: either happy, called *Lares*, or unhappy, called *Larvae*<sup>1</sup>. In Roman mythology, the *Lares* were spirits of the family dead and they were honored daily by their living relatives. The mother of the *Lares* deities was *Acca Larentia* – an archaic goddess, protectress of pregnancies, as

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<sup>1</sup> Marinescu, 2005, p. 85.

well a goddess of the dead. The festivity held in her honor, called *Larentalia*, is associated with the cult of the dead as well as with the worshiping of the light offered by Jupiter<sup>2</sup>. *Larentalia* initially had a funeral character, similar to *Feralia* and *Parentalia*, but was later assimilated to the cult of the *Lares*, becoming a domestic and agrarian celebration<sup>3</sup>.

The world of the dead appears as a terrific community of *Larvae* and *Lemures*. It must be mentioned that these deities are not mentioned on epitaphs or in literature<sup>4</sup>. There are several stances of *Larvae*. They are sometimes the tormentors of the souls in inferno, or of the souls of the mad. Sometimes they are evil ghosts and even demonic spirits, unrelated to the spirits of the dead<sup>5</sup>. During Augustus, both *Larvae* and *Lemures* were considered to be evil spirits<sup>6</sup>.

It is still not clear what the *Lemures* were, but the most common believe is that the *Lemures* were restless or evil spectres of the dead. These spirits were collectively considered *Coamae* (anyone who dies becomes *coamae* and then becomes *lares* or *parentes* for their family. *Coamae* was the divine spark of life in each person believed to reside in the head. Funeral masks of fathers, mothers or more distant ancestors were made not only to honor them but, to allow their mane to reside in the bust whenever it pleased and to make it welcome. These masks were usually placed in the atrium of a dwelling in the public area. *Coamae* could therefore attend these gatherings through their busts. *Coamas* were included in the *Parentalia* festival, as well as those of *Feralia* and *Lemuria*, although the latter festival focused much more on lemurs) which, for some reason, were unhappy in the afterlife. I was believed that the spirits of the dead (*Lemures*) were divided in good spirits – *lares* (who had been good persons in their lives) and bad spirits – *larvae* (who were evil persons in their lives)<sup>7</sup>. The harmful spirits were simply associated with *Lemures*. This category of souls were similar the undead, being spectres of those who died prematurely or who inflicted criminal acts in their lives, or who had a terrific death<sup>8</sup>. They haunt the night and must be propitiated because they are always unhappy and resentful<sup>9</sup>. *Larvae* inflict fear, mental illnesses and epilepsy upon the living. Their spirits haunt the world of the living as ghosts, and, to pacify them, ritual observances called *Lemuria* were held each year in May<sup>10</sup> which are still little known. For fear of the evil and vengeful spirits – *Larvae* – which scared people at night, the Romans would visit the tombs of their ancestors especially on the anniversary of their birth and death, as well as during the festivity of the dead, *Feralia*, held on February 21. Ovid<sup>11</sup> in his work *Fasti*, book V, describes the way in which

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<sup>2</sup> Kernbach, 1995, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Cizek, 1998, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Thaniel, 1973, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Thaniel, 1973, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Thaniel, 1973, p. 186.

<sup>7</sup> de Coulanges, 1984, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Georgescu, 2011, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Thaniel, 1973, p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> Fredouille, 1974, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> 43 B.C–17 A.D.

*Lemures* caused havoc upon Rome when people forgot to honor them appropriately during the festivities of *Lemuria*. The most common reason for which spirits returned as a *Lemures* was the improper observance of funeral or burial rituals, disrespecting the wishes of the deceased stipulated in their testament, or if their families did not honor and remember them properly. The head of the family (*pater familias*) had to protect his household with special magical rituals during the nocturnal festival *Lemuria*, held on three non-consecutive days (May 9, 11 and 13) when the spirits of the dead would return and visit the houses of their descendants. To propitiate these spirits and to prevent them from kidnapping one of the living members of the family, the head of the family woke up at midnight, walked barefoot through the house snapping his fingers to scare away the spirits, holding black beans in his mouth and then throw them over his shoulder, without looking behind him<sup>12</sup> and repeating nine times the formula “*I redeem me and my family with this bean*”. He would then sprinkle holy water<sup>13</sup> and bang loudly a bronze object to frighten the spirits away, repeating nine times “*Manes of my parents, go away*”<sup>14</sup> as they believed that the undead who came to suck the blood of the living would be satisfied with these beans and go away<sup>15</sup>. Walking bare feet was considered a sign of mourning<sup>16</sup>. These ritual observances were probably repeated in all the three days of *Lemuria* and had the purpose of chasing away the *Lemures*. The days of *Lemuralia* were considered to bring bad luck and all the temples were closed.

Ancient Romans considered that the spirits of the dead relatives, called *Manes* or *Di Manes*<sup>17</sup>, dwelled in the underworld. The spirits of the ancestors had to be honored and always remembered, the *Manes* were collective dead who lived in the afterlife. This cult of the dead was observed for centuries under the name of *di Manes* who were worshiped as protectors of the household<sup>18</sup> and honored officially as *Di Parentes* during the *Parentalia* festivity. Like other Roman deities, they had a cult which had to be strictly observed, formulas which had to be spoken without mistake in a specific order. The rituals had to be performed wearing a specific outfit, bare foot or not, taking a specific route from right to left or the other way around. It was clearly stipulated which animal could be sacrificed, what should be the color of its fur, at which moment during the day the sacrifice should be performed. The exact observance of the rituals practiced by the ancestors ensured the spirits were kept as protectors and not enemies of the household. Not performing these rituals could lead even to the removal of the consuls culpable for not organizing proper celebrations and rituals<sup>19</sup>.

*Dies parentales* were festivities taking place for nine days (February 13–21/23) during the *Parentalia* festival when it was believed that the spirits of the dead wandered

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<sup>12</sup> Georgescu, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Georgescu, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Ovidiu, 1965, p. 429-447.

<sup>15</sup> Georgescu, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Ovidiu, 1965, p. 397.

<sup>17</sup> Thaniel, 1973, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> Addison, 2006, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> de Coulanges, 1984, p. 243.

on the earth and *feasted* upon the offerings of food placed on graves. During this period, the temples of the other deities were closed and wedding ceremonies were prohibited. Apparently there is no clear distinction between *Parentalia* and *Feralia*, which are considered to be two name variants for the same festivity<sup>20</sup>. During *Parentalia*, magistrates would not wear official symbols, temples were closed, the fires on altars were extinguished and weddings were not held<sup>21</sup>. Tortures and executions were also postponed. Besides these general rules, there were also other customs specific for February 21. First, it was not allowed to burn incense, which is unusual, as the vast majority of the Roman rituals involved burning incense, herbs or dry leaves of laurel, juniper or cedar. People were not allowed to make fire in their houses, and cooking was also prohibited that day. It was not allowed to speak badly about the deceased, considering gossiping as inappropriate and provocative which can anger the spirits of the deceased and make them vengeful. Sexual intercourse was also prohibited.

*Parentalia* festivities started on February 13 (February is the last month of the year and shared the fluid, chaotic condition that characterized the intervals between two cycles, in which the rules were abolished), on the seventh hour of the day, with a general invocation to the shadows of the dead made by the Vestal Virgins. This special prayer, known as *parentatio*, was performed on the tomb of *Tarpeia*, who used to be a vestal virgin in ancient times<sup>22</sup>. This opening incantation seems to be the only public event of this private mourning period. Family members visited graveyards and placed on the graves of the dear departed flower garlands and food offerings such as bread, water, wine, milk, salt, honey, olive oil. The typical flower offerings during *Parentalia* were roses<sup>23</sup> and violets for the spirits of the dead<sup>24</sup>. According to Festus: “*usually fathers and mothers are considered parents, but those who observed the law considered that grandfathers and great-grandfathers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers are also considered parents*”<sup>25</sup>.

On the last day of the festival called *Feralia*, and quite possible in other days as well, the celebrations of the rites of the dead started with a pilgrimage to the graves<sup>26</sup>, bringing together both the living and the dead<sup>27</sup>. The name of the festivity *Feralia* is in relation to the appropriateness of the offerings presented to the dead – *justa*, the term being widely used in relation to funeral rituals, conveying the message of correct or appropriate<sup>28</sup>. The festivities held on February 21 were taking place only at the graves, where *Manes* deities are hidden, and involved food offerings on the graves. Ovid<sup>29</sup> tells that on *Feralia*, an old woman would sit in the middle of a circle created by young girls

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<sup>20</sup> King, 2020, p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> Ovidiu, 1965, p. 553, 557-567.

<sup>22</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Warde Fowler, 1899, p. 306, 308.

<sup>25</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Ovidiu, 1965, *passim*.

and would make an offering to the mute goddess *Tacita*<sup>30</sup> consisting in a fish with its mouth sewed, symbol of the silence dwelling in the land of the *Manes*. Tacita's cult *Numa* expressly commended to the Romans, *Tacita* induces silence and there are no images, no representations. It can be imagine with a finger or hand over her mouth<sup>31</sup>. This old woman would hold seven black beans (black was seen by the Romans as the color of the Underworld) in her mouth and would chew them while she would perform following rituals. With three fingers she<sup>32</sup> would place incense under the threshold where a mouse would be buried. Then, she would take the head of a dead fish, glue its mouth with tar and would pass a log bronze needle through its skull. Then she would soak it in wine and throw it in fire and the old woman exits drunk. It was believed that on this last day of festival – the ninth – the spirits of the dead would walk among the living. This was considered the most appropriate day to give prayers to the goddess *Tacita* to be protected from the enemies and to reduce them to silence. During the entire ritual performance, the old woman would enchant “*I tied the hostile tongues and the mouth of the enemy*”<sup>33</sup>.

The ceremonies on *Feralia* were meant to pacify these angry entities and to force them back in the realm of the spirits for another year. It was also a time for cursing others, especially to prevent enemies from gossiping. We can conclude that this *Dea Muta*<sup>34</sup> assists those who need to defend themselves from the other or to defend themselves from the excesses of their own loquacity<sup>35</sup>.

On the same day flower garlands were put on graves, as it was believed that the dead could wake up in certain moments and places, like some dreamy creatures and could haunt the living. The dead were considered to be able to wander invisibly among the living and to show themselves to the dying<sup>36</sup>. The dead would return on earth and would feast on the food offerings placed on graves. On this occasion, graves were covered in garlands made of flowers and grass, and pies and fruits were placed on them and were sprinkled with milk, wine or the blood of a sacrificed animal. The food was thus offered to the deceased, as proved by the milk and wine poured on the grave. Sometimes a hole was made in the grave so that the solid food could get to the deceased. The souls of the dead were considered to suffer from the so called *thirst of the deceased*<sup>37</sup> which justified funeral libations, liquid offerings on graves.

It can be concluded that there was the belief that, together with the inert body, there was something else placed in the grave, and ***this something*** continued to live and had to be propitiated. Thus, in ancient Roman belief, the soul continues an existence after death similar to the one earth, either in the grave, or in another realm ruled by

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<sup>30</sup> von Forsslun, 2021, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> de Abreu, Fleetwood, 2014, p. 66-67.

<sup>32</sup> de Abreu, Fleetwood, 2014, p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> King, 2020, p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> Wagenvoort, 2015, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> de Abreu, Fleetwood, 2014, p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> Aries, 1996, p. 37-38.

<sup>37</sup> Eliade, 1999, p. 163.



*Orcus*<sup>38</sup>. *Parentalia* was just one of the many ritual observances which brought together the living and the dead because the cult of the dead was very diverse in forms and changed in time and space<sup>39</sup>. *Parentalia* was a vital part of the Roman life. Incorrect observance of the rituals of *Feralia* could block the spirits of the dead in the world of the living as ghosts, bringing adversity in the following year.

The dead were considered holy beings. The purpose of the *Feralia* (held on February 21 – on the last day of *Parentalia* festival) was to preserve good relations between the dead ancestors and their living descendants by bringing offerings to their graves which prevent the spirits of the dead to leave their tombs and haunt their living relative. On the other hand, during the *Lemures* festivals, the spirits of the dead leave their graves, mingle with the living who, by cunning and deceit, try to chase them away<sup>40</sup>.

If we consider that Roman rituals created to cast away bad luck and the anger of the spirits are truly old, it is possible that *Feralia* might have been the oldest of all festivals in honor of the dead. Versions of this festival were held long before, in far pre-history. Whether it was tradition or obligation<sup>41</sup>, high appraisal of the dead, social commitment or a mixture of other reasons which motivated participants, *Parentalia* was a fix and important event in the lives of Romans from various social categories in the Latin occident. Once the dead had moved on as spirits, then was the time for worship and prayers honoring who they had been in life and who they remained in the afterlife. The common belief was that the dead continued to live and had simply been transformed by death to another realm<sup>42</sup>. During "the days of the dead", friends and families gathered together to celebrate ancient ties which connected the living with the dead, in order to honor vertical and horizontal ties and to preserve the memories of the dear departed.

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<sup>38</sup> Georgescu, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 127.

<sup>40</sup> Dumezil, 1993, p. 952.

<sup>41</sup> Dolansky, 2011, p. 153.

<sup>42</sup> Mark, 2019.

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