

Roman Household Religion and the Lararium

Privately they shall worship those gods that they have duly received from their ancestors. In cities they shall have shrines; in the country they shall have groves and places for the Lares. They shall preserve the rites of their family and their ancestors. (Cicero, On the Laws 2.19)

So that no one may wonder who I am, I'll briefly introduce myself. I am the Lar of the family of this home that you saw me come from. For many years now I have been in possession of this house. I looked after it for the father and grandfather of the present occupant. As a supplicant, the grandfather secretly entrusted to me a pot of gold. He buried it in the center of the hearth, enter entreating me to guard it for him...After the death of the man who entrusted the gold to me, I began to observe whether his son would pay me greater honor than his father. But his devotion to me soon diminished, and I had a smaller and smaller share of the honor. So I did the same by him, and he died. He left a son who now occupies this house, a man of the same sort as his father and grandfather. He has one daughter. She is constantly praying to me every day, with gifts of incense and wine or something. She gives me garlands. Because of her devotion, I have caused her father Euclio to discover the treasure here so that he might more easily find her a husband, if he is willing. (Plautus, Pot of Gold 1-27)

Definitions

domus: the house; the family.

familia: the paterfamilias, his wife, children, other family dependents, slaves and their families.

Genius: guardian spirit of individual household members, especially the paterfamilias.

Lar (pl. Lares): God that protected the household. Cities also had Lares to protect the city. A Lar usually holds a drinking horn and patera, has flowers in his hair, and wears a short tunic.

Lararium: shrine to the Lares. Usually two Lares are either painted on the back of the lararium or there are two statues of Lares sitting on the lararium. The household genius is in the center of the lararium—either painted or as a statue wearing a toga. A serpent is sometimes shown approaching a patera of food. The serpent probably represents fertility. The lararium was located in the atrium, the kitchen, or the garden.

patera: sacrifice plate.

paterfamilias: male head of household.

Penantes: god that protected the pantry (*penus*) and food supply.

Lararium Rituals

Daily Lararium Ritual

The daily Lararium prayers and rituals are known only generally. Because the Lararium was important throughout the entire Roman time frame, these prayers and rituals likely changed over time. Romans offered coins, first fruits, wine, spices, or salt every morning to the Lares and Genius. Although it was nominally the responsibility of the paterfamilias to honor the household gods, women and servants could also honor the Lares and Genius on their own behalf and may have actually been responsible for the daily ritual.

Upon the Marriage of a Daughter

A father or other male guardian arranged a young woman's marriage. A girl would generally be first married at about the age of 12. The night before her wedding, a girl would dedicate her toys and dolls to the Lares of her birth family. This symbolized the end of her childhood. Some references claim that the toys and dolls were burned.

Very early in the morning on the day of the wedding, an auger would take the auspices to confirm that the marriage would be favorable. Friends and family would assemble at the bride's house. The bride would wear a white tunic fastened at the waist, a red veil and red shoes. Her hair would be arranged in six locks. When the groom arrived, the couple would speak certain words to indicate their consent to the marriage. The matron of honor would join the right hands of the bride and the groom. An animal sacrifice would be made. The families would sign a marriage contract and those gathered would have a feast.

The bride would then be taken in procession to the groom's residence where he would carry her over the threshold to make sure she did not stumble (a bad omen). In the atrium of her new home, the groom would give the bride fire and water to symbolize her authority in her new home. Then she would offer a coin to both the Lares of the family and the Lares Compitales, the guardian deities of her new neighborhood, formally transferring her allegiance to her new family.

Coming of Age Ceremony for Boys

Boys who were Roman citizens wore a toga with a purple stripe until he became a man at the age of 15 or 16. Boys, and perhaps girls as well, would also wear a bulla, an amulet meant to protect them from harm. A boy's father or guardian would determine the day when a boy would become a man. On that day, the boy would begin to wear a plain white toga and would also dedicate his bulla to the Lares. The family would keep the bulla, however, so that if the boy was ever honored with a military triumph, he could wear his bulla to protect him from the envy of others.

Some Common Issues and Problems That Arise When Presenting the Lararium

- Roman household rites were private. Because they were not a matter of public record, literary evidence is scarce. Double check your sources and keep a skeptic's eye.
- There is no *vomitorium* in a Roman house. A *vomitorium* is an egress hallway at amphitheatres. It is the place where the people “spew forth” after the games. The idea of the *vomitorium* as a room in a Roman house originated in a Saturday Night Live skit by Burt Reynolds and Anne Murray that aired on April 12, 1980. This same skit started the belief that Romans ate until they vomited. Traditional Roman ethics called for self-control and moderation. Although some of the Caesars were known for debauchery, excess was not the norm. The Romans did eat foods that to us are unsavory. They raised and ate mice that were cooked whole and covered in honey and they loved fermented fish sauce.
- The Romans practiced slavery. However, Roman slavery was different from slavery in the United States. It was not racially based and the treatment and position of slaves varied considerably--much more so than in the United States. Slaves were sometimes educated and held positions of great trust while others were worked to death in mines. Often slaves were freed upon their owners' death. Sometimes owners helped a slave start a business and took a cut of the business in return for granting freedom. Evidence suggests that about 40% of the population were slaves. This number, however, is a very rough guess and in fact, the total population of the Roman Empire at any point in time has never been accurately measured.
- Our *domus* is a model of a typical upper middle class *city* home. In particular, it is modeled on homes from Pompeii and Herculaneum. *Villas* are country houses—either large or small. *Insulae* are apartment buildings. Poorer people lived in *insulae* or rented a room in a house. Shopkeepers probably lived over or in back of their shops. In the country, poorer people would have lived in small houses that may have been made from materials that have not survived. It is easier to find and document cities and larger villas so the archaeological evidence for Roman habitation patterns is skewed toward the wealthy and the urban.
- Running water was available in many Roman towns including Pompeii and Herculaneum but these systems were not foolproof. The near universal installation of *impluvia* in Roman houses predates the development of central water systems, at least at Pompeii. However, even after piped water was available, *impluvia* continued to be built and used. Romans apparently wanted or needed two separate sources of water whenever possible. Roman faucets did not have a “tap.” The water always ran. The water was simply diverted from a river down through the pipes of the town. Where water came out of the pipes at public fountains, the fountains just ran over into the streets. Pompeii stored water to better regulate the pressure into individual buildings. Water piped into houses was cold—and untreated. Water used in public and private baths—also untreated--was heated by wood on location.