

## Roman Ceremonies Honouring Departed Ancestors Based on Selected Sources

Maria Piechocka-Kłos

**Summary.** – Since the dawn of history, people of all cultures and regions of the world have shown respect and reverence to their departed ancestors – in whatever form they found fit – in deference to the majesty of death while striving not to disturb the peace of the souls of the dead in any way. Given such circumstances, the worship of ancestors may be classified as a form of universal worship. In this study, an analysis of the sources will demonstrate that manism was a component of the Roman belief system. The inquiry focuses successively on the Roman ceremonies in honour of dead ancestors: the *Parentalia*, *Lemuria*, *Larentalia*, *Compitalia* and the rite of *mundus patet*. Dedicated to the memory of the deceased, the *Sacrificia* were not only celebrated by the Romans as part of the pagan tradition, some also penetrated into the Christian consciousness. In fact, a number of such celebrations were eventually Christianized and integrated into the new religion. The ancient rituals were thus perpetuated in their Christian equivalent. The sources selected to elucidate the problem examined here include Ovid's "Fasti, De verborum significatu" by Festus, "De Lingua Latina" by Varro, "Saturnalia" by Macrobius, as well as the first two Christian calendars (fourth and fifth cent.), namely Filocalus' "Chronography" and "Laterculus" by Polemius Silvius. For a more comprehensive understanding of the issue in question, the author also briefly addresses the significance of ancestor worship. In addition, prior to discussing Roman ceremonies in honour of the dead, some attention will be devoted to family rituals surrounding death and burial. [*Ancient Rome, paganism, ceremonies, ancestor worship, early Christianity*]

**Maria Piechocka-Kłos**, PhD in history; since 2003 scholar at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, where she teaches Classical Languages; currently an assistant professor at the Department of Philosophy and Canon Law. Areas of research: early Christian literature, state and ecclesiastical legislation of the late imperial period, ancient history and culture. Selected major publications:

Gelazy I, “Tego samego Papieża Gelazego przeciw Andromachowi i innym Rzymianom, którzy trwali według dawnego zwyczaju przy świętowaniu luperkaliów” (2012; translation and commentary); “Wróżbiarstwo i praktyki magiczne w świetle dokumentów wczesnochrześcijańskich synodów oraz ustaw państwowych pierwszych cesarzy chrześcijańskich (IV-VI w.)” (2020); “‘Plaga Justyniana’ jako ‘dzieło Boga’ w relacji Prokopiusza z Cezarei” (2021).

Email: maria.piechocka@uwm.edu.pl

### *Introduction*

The desire to pay respect to and honour the dead goes back to the very beginnings of human history. Archaeological and paleoanthropological studies of human origins on Earth supply evidence of necrolatry (Gr. cult of the dead from (ὁ) νεκρός – dead and (ἡ) λατρεία – service (Jurewicz 2001: 6, 74) in excavations from the Middle Palaeolithic (before 40,000 BCE). The Neanderthals not only buried their dead but also engaged in funerary rituals, which implies the existence of a complex culture and belief system as early as that (Morse and Papagianni 2022).

The cult of the dead or necrolatry is closely linked to manism, or ancestor worship (Lat. *manes* – ancestral spirits) (Swienko 1981: 214–22). However, even though related, these terms should not be confused. It is worth noting that ancestor worship involves a range of ritual behaviours to venerate specific departed individuals, as well as their commemoration in various circumstances and situations. Ancestor worship does not apply to all the dead. In manism, worship surrounds selected members of society, such as the progenitors of families, the founders of dynasties or prominent leaders.

Being one of the earliest forms of religiousness, manism is referred to in the literature as a watershed in the development of religious beliefs (Kaczmarek 2007: 115). In the eighteenth century, ancestor worship was classified among primitive beliefs, alongside fertility worship, fetishism, totemism and shamanism. Traces of such practices are in evidence all over the world – regardless of latitude – dating from the earliest periods to the modern times, primarily among agricultural and pastoral peoples, less frequently hunter-gatherers (Szyjewski 2008: 15, 395, 426). Since the dawn of history, people of all cultures and regions of the world show respect and reverence to their departed ancestors – in whatever form they found fit –

in deference to the majesty of death, while striving not to disturb the peace of the souls of the dead in any way. Consequently, the cult of ancestors readily qualifies as a form of universal worship. According to Izabela Szerszeniewska, the theories put forward by Hubert Spencer (last accessed in 2023), Émile Durkheim (2010) and Marcel Mauss (2001) “constitute proof of anthropological specificity of cultural behaviours towards the dead” (Szerszeniewska 2020: 228). Research by the aforementioned anthropologists suggests that the belief in the afterlife and the cult of ancestors are common and the most primeval indicator of humanity, regardless of religion. Thus, beliefs are inherent to the culture of a community, while “universalistic, supra-ethnic higher needs ... of the human” distinguish the latter from animals (Szerszeniewska 2020: 228). As an element of human life, observance of ancestor worship is also intrinsic to human dignity, which in axiological terms, should be treated as one of the principal benchmarks of the modern world (Szerszeniewska 2020: 223).

Hence, it should be underlined that all historical belief systems relied on the ancestral cult (Swienko 1981: 215). Similarly, sacred ceremonies in their honour should also be considered a form of universal rites encountered in the religious beliefs of various communities, even in cultures which are remote from one another. Although religious practices evidently differ both in the underlying notions and the actual observances in honour of the souls of the dead, the belief in the existence of distinct sacred domains, intended exclusively either for the living or the dead, is universal. Periodic conjunctions of these two realms are a virtually universal and enduring phenomenon (Burkert 2006: 18). The privilege of sacredness to which the dead are entitled also fosters a relationship between the living and the departed members of the community. However, the relationship involves both a fear of the inevitable and reverence towards the unknown. In his “Fenomenologia religii” [*Religionsphänomenologie*], Geo Widengren observes that “the fear of the dead is counterbalanced by the love and devotion one felt for the deceased while they were alive. At the same time, the fear reaction leaves room for a strong admixture of reverence which, under certain conditions, grows into a religious cult” (Widengren 2008: 406).

This study aims to present the Roman ceremonies in honour of the deceased ancestors based on selected sources. A detailed analysis of the source writings will demonstrate that manism was a component of the Roman belief system. The inquiry focuses successively on the Roman ceremonies in honour of dead ancestors: the *Parentalia*, *Lemuria*, *Larentalia*,

*Compitalia* and the rite of *mundus patet*. Dedicated to the memory of the deceased, the *Sacrificia* were not only celebrated by the Romans as part of the pagan tradition, some also penetrated into the Christian consciousness. In fact, a number of such celebrations were eventually Christianized and integrated into the new religion. The ancient rituals were thus perpetuated in their Christian equivalent. Pagan festivals are mentioned by Furius Dionysius Filocalus in his “Chronography” (354), the earliest Christian calendar to date, and by fifth-century author Polemius Silvius in “Laterculus” (448/449), the first known liturgical calendar (Filocalus and Silvius 1893: 332–357). One should note that when Polemius Silvius was working on his calendar in the Roman Empire, Christianity had already been established through Theodosius as the official state religion by virtue of the imperial Edict of Thessalonica of 380 (Krüger 1954. I: 1), while any manifestations of pagan worship, both private and domestic, were prescribed by an edict of 392 (Mommsen 1905: 16,10,12; Piechocka-Kłos 2010: 64–73).

The sources selected to elucidate the problem examined here include Ovid’s “Fasti, De verborum significatu” by Festus, “De Lingua Latina” by Varro, “Saturnalia” by Macrobius as well as the first two Christian calendars (fourth and fifth cent.), namely Filocalus’s “Chronography” and “Laterculus” by Polemius Silvius. For a more comprehensive understanding of the issue in question, the author also briefly addresses the significance of ancestor worship. In addition, prior to discussing Roman ceremonies in honour of the dead, some attention will also be devoted to family rituals surrounding death and burial.

### *The Significance of Ancestor Worship and Its Distribution in the fasti*

For the ancient Romans, the veneration of the dead ancestors – whom they perceived as divine beings – “was a sacred injunction, strictly associated with religious duties” (Kaczor 2019: 64). At this point, it may be worthwhile to cite relevant excerpts from Cicero and Lucretius. For instance, in *De legibus*, Cicero states that “Sacra privata perpetua manento. Deorum Manium iura sancta sunt. Nos leto datos divos habento” (II: 22).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Lucretius asserts in *Rerum natura*: “... et quo cumque tamen miseri venere

---

1 “May there always be private sacrifices. The relatives embraced by death are to be regarded divine” (II: 22).

parentant / et nigras mactant pecudes et manibus divis inferias mittunt ...” (III: 51–53).<sup>2</sup>

In ancient Rome, the observances by means of which the deceased ancestors were venerated were either private or public. Private ceremonies were the responsibility of the members or representatives of the family community and involved, e.g., funeral rites and the annual commemoration of the mourning. In Festus’ “De verborum significatu” such ceremonies are referred to as *dies denecales* (p. 348 L).

In the sacred calendar of the Romans, public ceremonies, or *feriae publicae* (public holidays), were divided into celebrations taking place on a particular day (*feriae stativae* or *statae*), which were included in the official annual schedule of public festivities and other observances whose date was not determined but would be designated each year by priests or municipal officials (*feriae conceptivae*). One-time holidays (*feriae imperativae*) also had their place in the calendar (Kaczor 2019: 65f.).

Among the holidays of the first group, i.e., those which had their fixed date entered in the *fasti*, particularly noteworthy festivals in the system of religious events dedicated to the memory and honour of the dead include the February *Parentalia*, a sacrificial celebration for the deceased ancestors, the May *Lemuria*, whose name drew on a certain category of souls with a disturbing, even negative hierophany (the *Lemures*) (Kaczor 2019: 64), and the December holiday dedicated to Acca Larentia (*Larentalia*).

On the other hand, one of the chief moving festivals known as *feriae statae sollemnes* was the *Compitalia*, which the Romans most often celebrated in early January or, more seldom, in late December, after the *Saturnalia*. The *mundus patet* was another major occasion: a rite celebrated three times during the sacred year but not included in the official *fasti*. In addition, the *fasti* of each individual family featured private anniversaries of the death of a close family member.

### *Rituals Following a Death in the Family*

From the Republic to the times of the Empire, the spectrum of religious beliefs concerning the further existence or complete disappearance of the soul after death is certain to have had an impact on how the deceased was

---

2 “And wherever they come they worship their dead, / They murder black cattle and carry bloodless gifts / In sacrifice to venerable the Manes ...” (III: 51–53).

treated. The very faith that the deceased and their family professed was also a factor that cannot be ignored (Dworniak 2014: 13).

The Romans devoted ample time to preparing the deceased properly for the final journey and dignified interment, as most citizens believed in a form of life after death. In the social dimension, death made everyone equal. In ancient Rome, anyone, whether freeborn, slave, rich or poor, could expect to be laid to rest in a grave. The ancients did not deny burial even to criminals condemned to death (Hamman 1990: 205). An age-old custom required anyone who came across an unburied corpse to throw a lump of earth on the remains, thus performing a symbolic burial (Jońca 2013: 19f.).

The Romans had a strong need to ensure that “the soul is satisfactorily freed from the dead body through appropriate rituals” (Dworniak 2014: 13f.). This conviction determined the nature of the funerary rites, which involved both interment and cremation. Among other things, the Romans believed that an incomplete cremation or burial might lead to the damnation of the soul, which would then wander eternally (Lindsay 2000: 168). Thus, the greatest evil that could be inflicted on the deceased was a failure to bury them according to the custom, as a result of which the departed would be doomed to eternal limbo between the world of the living and the realm of the dead (Jońca 2013: 21).

For the Romans, death itself was “unclean and tarnished the living” (Bodel 2000: 128–149; De Francisci 1959: 373) throughout mourning but, from the standpoint of the average citizen, an honourable death and a dignified burial was the perfect end to the earthly journey. Nonetheless, the nature of the obsequies depended on social status and, occasionally, the cause of death (Dworniak 2014: 17).

In Roman antiquity, the private sphere of everyday life was replete with rituals one performed directly upon the death of a loved one. The Romans paid homage to their deceased ancestors even at the moment of one’s death. The ancients attached great importance to the form of the last offices (*iusta facere*), not only out of respect due to the mystery of death but also guided by the belief in their continued existence as *manes* (good spirits) or *lemures* (evil spirits), capable of taking revenge on the living if their memory was neglected (Jurewicz and Winniczuk 1968: 33).

The closest relative would lay a kiss on the lips of the deceased – with some sources speaking of taking the last breath from the dying person – and, immediately after the individual passed away, close their eyes and mouth to lend the dead face a serene expression. Meanwhile, other family

members would call the deceased by name (*conclamatio, clamor supremus*) to make sure that they had really died, lament, and bid them the *extremum vale*, or the last farewell (Toynbee 1971: 42).

Once the death had been reported to the funeral clerk and the deceased was added to the list of the dead, preparations were made for the funeral, whose form and setting depended on the status and wealth of the family (see more in Dworniak 2014: 17–20). The body was taken off the deathbed onto the floor, washed and anointed with oils, and then wrapped with bands, attired in a toga with all the insignia of the offices held during life, and decorated with flowers and wreaths. The making of an *imago cera*, the posthumous wax mask, was another important element of the procedure. Finally, the body, provided with a coin for Charon, was deposited on the *lectus funebris* in the atrium with its feet towards the exit. A cypress tree was placed in the *vestibulum* of the house; alternatively, fir or cypress branches were hung there. The body remained in the house of mourning from three to seven days, after which the funeral took place, preceded by a funeral procession (Jurewicz and Winniczuk 1968: 33). However, the Roman poor could not expect such a grand funeral: the affair was confined to washing and then burying the body before dawn, in line with the Greek custom. A short ceremony took place at the tomb or the crematorium, during which a small amount of earth would be thrown on the body or, if the deceased was to be cremated, the *os resectum* was removed to perform a symbolic burial of at least a fragment of the body afterwards (Lindsay 2000: 165; Graham 2009: 51–74). The rites over the body concluded with a brief laudation and prayer.

The period of mourning ended on the ninth day after the funeral, marked by the offering of water, wine, oil and animal blood and a feast at the tomb or directly on the tomb. The Romans visited the graves of their loved ones frequently but did so invariably on the birth and death anniversaries as well as during the general festival of the dead, the *Feralia* (the *dies parentales*, or parental days) (Toynbee 1971: 61–64).

### *Major Ceremonies in Honour of the Departed Ancestors*

Knowledge of the consistently held religious ceremonies is supplied primarily by the Roman *fasti* (Winniczuk 1951). Their entries offered a brief account of the ceremony, stated its location and simultaneously named the deity to which it was dedicated. As for the moving festivals, which the tradi-

tional sacred calendar did not mention, “their nature and course can only be reconstructed by drawing on the literary testimonies and comparative studies which presume similarity of universalistic religious phenomena” (Kaczor 2019: 66).

According to the ritual schedule, the first to be held was the *Parentalia* in February. The festivities would begin on 13 February and last until 21 February, with the final day distinguished as the *Feralia*. It would appear that the lapse of nine days between the *Parentalia* and the *Feralia* is not coincidental, as the *Feralia* became something akin to the *novendiales feriae*, a celebration marking the end of a period of mourning and temporary impurity of the living, demarcating a symbolic boundary between this world and the one beyond. The essential difference between the *Parentalia* and the *Feriae* lay in the fact that during the former, the offering to the Manes was performed by the Vestal Virgins, whose task it was to hold public observances for the benefit of the Roman people (cf. Gellius:12). In contrast, during the *Feralia*, the deceased ancestors were honoured by the members of Roman families.

The combination of the *sacra publica*, in which all Roman citizens were obliged to participate, with private religious duties, epitomizes the importance of the cult of the dead in the Roman belief system (Kaczor 2019: 67). According to the sacred tradition mentioned by Ovid in the Book Two of the *Fasti* (II: 533–536), the celebration of the *Parentalia* in Rome originated with Aeneas who worshipped his father’s divine Manes. The reminiscence of the distant past, going as far back as the wanderings of the refugees from Troy who sought a new place to live, hoping to continue the “sacred tradition of their forebears, is meant to underscore the archaic nature of the festival and the cult of the dead, ingrained in the minds of their descendants” (Kaczor 2019: 67). According to the poet, dire consequences followed when the *Parentalia* was neglected and then discontinued for a time as a result of prolonged armed conflict, as the souls of the dead left their burial places and populated the world of the living. As the custom would have it, the rites of *Parentalia* in honour of the dead were to be performed at their resting place which, in keeping with the Roman sacred law (*ius sepulcrorum*), was situated outside the city. During that time, the Manes were traditionally given wreaths to decorate their earthly abodes; also, grain and grains of salt, and bread mixed with wine and violet flowers were scattered at the site as a token of offering. They were thus fed so as not to bring harm to the living. In addition, the Romans upheld a centuries-long tradition of leaving offerings to the dead in the middle of the



road, believing that the souls of their ancestors wandered along it during the *Parentalia*.

The sacred scenario of the *Parentalia* did not require fixed ritual formulas from the celebrant and a prayer composed by a priest. Ovid states explicitly: "... adde preces ... et sua verba..." (II: 542).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Romans were forbidden to marry during the *Parentalia*, while the law required that temples be closed and hearths extinguished. The Roman poet provides clear instructions on how one should conduct themselves during the festival:

dum tamen haec fiunt, viduae cessate puellae: / expectet pueros pinea  
taeda dies, / nec tibi, quae cupidae matura videbere matri, / comat vir-  
gineas hasta recurva comas. / conde tuas, Hymenaeae, faces, et ab ignibus  
atris aufer: / habent alias maesta sepulcra faces / ... (II: 569f.)<sup>4</sup> di quoque  
templorum foribus celentur opertis, / ture vacent arae stentque sine igne  
foci (II: 569f.)<sup>5</sup> nunc animae tenues et corpora functa sepulcris / errant,  
nunc posito pascitur umbra cibo (II: 569f.)<sup>6</sup>

The fourth-century Roman scribe and stone engraver Filocalus, the author of "Chronography" – which remains the earliest known Christian calendar – refers to the *Parentalia* under the date of 13 February. In the annotation concerning that day, the author makes a mention of the Vestals. Filocalus also included the *Feralia* in the calendar as an official festival (Filocalus et Silvius 1893: 336). Almost a century later, Polemius Silvius did likewise. In the entry for 13 February, the author of *Laterculus* noted that "parentatio tumulorum incipit quo die Roma libertata est de obsidione Gallorum" (Filocalus et Silvius 1893: 337).<sup>7</sup>

The nature of the festival celebrated in ancient Rome on 9, 11 and 13 May to honour the *Lemures*, evil spirits of the dead, was completely different.

---

3 "Add yet a prayer of your own..." (II: 542).

4 "But on these days may the widows not change their state, / Let the bridal firebrand wait for more auspicious days. / Though to your impatient mother you seem / ready for marriage, do not cut your hair" (II: 569f.).

5 "Hide, nuptial idol, thy smouldering torches; / let other fires burn on the sorrowful graves" (II: 569f.).

6 "Hide the gods, having shut the doors to the temple, / may the incense vanish from the altar, the flame from the hearth. / now do the airy souls and the bodies committed to the graves /wander abroad now does the spectre feed / on the bread that was cast ..." (II: 569f.).

7 "The rites at ancestral tombs began on the day when Rome had been liberated from the Gallic siege."

In the *Fasti*, Ovid gives a very detailed account of the course and the ritual scenario of the ceremony, though he discusses private rituals exclusively. His description is considered the only such comprehensive literary testimony of that event. The poet clearly highlights the archaic nature of the May observances using the phrase *ritus veteris sacri* and suggests that the tradition predates the *dies Parentales* in February. As Festus observes, the *ritus* defined how the Romans were to perform a religious rite – a private one in the main – in strict conformity with the tradition (p. 389 L). A similar account may be found in Cicero's *De legibus*, where the author admonishes: "Ritus familiae patrumque servanto" (II: 19).<sup>8</sup>

The *Lemuria* was performed at night since, according to Roman beliefs it was then that the shadows of the dead populated the world of the living most numerous, and their sacred potency was the strongest (Kaczor 2019: 70). The night also ensured the necessary quiet in which to make the offering. The ceremonies would take place at individual family homes, with the father of the family performing the ritual. The *pater familias* acted as a household priest, in the manner of the Roman public priests. In the "Fasti," Ovid speaks of the time and place of the ceremony as follows: "nox ubi iam media est somnoque silentia praebet, / et canis et variae conticuistis aves, / ille memor veteris ritus timidusque deorum / surgit ..." (V: 429–432).<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the *Parentalia*, the *Lemuria* followed a sequence of specific ritual motions, which the *pater familias* had to perform precisely and in the correct order. The sacred injunction required the celebrant to conduct the ceremony barefoot and join two fingers together in an apotropaic gesture which would protect him from a direct encounter with the souls of the dead (Kaczor 2019: 70). Moreover, he was required to wash his hands in water from a stream, throw black beans over the shoulder, and call upon the Manes nine times as follows: "manes exite paterni' respicit, et pure sacra peracta putat" (V: 432–440).<sup>10</sup>

The Roman poet describes the circumstances surrounding those rituals in ample detail. Thus: "...

(habent gemini vincula nulla pedes), / signaque dat digitis medio cum pollice iunctis, / occurrat tacito ne levis umbra sibi. / cumque manus

---

8 "May they guard the old rites in the family, as their fathers had done" (II: 19).

9 "When midnight comes, bringing somnolent quietude, / and the dogs and other animals fell silent, / he recalls of the rite, god-fearing, and rises..." (V: 429–432).

10 "depart, ghosts of the fathers', he looks back, and believes the sacred ritual is concluded" (V: 432–440).

puras fontana perluit unda, / vertitur et nigras accipit ante fabas, / aver-  
susque iacit; sed dum iacit, 'haec ego mitto, / his' inquit 'redimo meque  
meosque fabis.' / hoc novies dicit nec respicit: umbra putatur / colligere  
et nullo terga vidente sequi" (V: 432–440).<sup>11</sup>

The ritual ended with the father of the family washing his hands again and striking bronze vessels. Subsequently, he would once again appeal to the recipient of the rite with the invocation *manes exite paterni* ("depart, ghosts of the fathers") repeated nine times. Those words were a request for the spirits to leave the house. The noise that arose at that point was a sign to the other family members that the time of the *Lemuria* was over. The sacred status of the house and its inhabitants had been renewed.

Distinct from other rituals, the *Lemuria* stood out not only because of its nocturnal time and the peculiar sacred artefacts used by the *pater familias* but, above all, by the vocabulary and formal structure of the prayer with which the father of the family addressed the Manes. Praying to the "paternal Manes" meant "redeeming from their world the loved ones potentially at risk of death in the coming year." The payment for their lives was "beans, which in the phytomorphic sacred code represent a substantive offering in lieu of the ritual human sacrifice which had probably been once made to the deities of the underworld" (Kaczor 2019: 71).

The May *Lemuria* are not to be found as official entries in the respective early Christian calendars of Filocalus and Silvius from the fourth and fifth centuries.

According to historians, the ancient *Lemuria* was Christianized as All Hallows' Day. Studies into the Roman element in the origins of this holiday trace its roots to the Eastern Church, where the feast of all martyrs on earth was established as early as the fourth century. In Syria and Edessa, they were venerated precisely on 13 May, the day when *Lemuria* had been cele-

---

11 "... (having no fetters to bind his legs). / He gave a sign with his hand, having joined his two fingers together, / lest a silent shadow should come upon him. And first / he washed his hands in the stream, and when he turned round, / he saw before him suddenly a black broad bean, so he threw / it behind him, and as he did so, these were the words / he spoke: 'I throw the broad beans to purify myself / and those close to me.' Nine times he said this, without once / looking back. Surely the spirit took the broad beans / and disappeared behind him / And makes the sign with thumb and closed fingers/ lest an insubstantial shadow meets comes upon him in the silence/ after cleansing his hands in spring water/ he turns and first taking some black beans/ throws them with averted face, saying, as he does so: 'with these beans I throw I redeem me and the mine.'/ he says this nine times without looking back/ the shadow is thought to gather the beans, and follow behind, unseen (V: 432–440)."

brated in the traditional Roman *fasti*. It appeared in the West much later, only in the early seventh century. At the time, during the reign of Phocas, Pope Boniface IV transformed the Pantheon into a Christian temple by naming it *Sancta Maria ad Martyres*; the date also coincides with 13 May. When was it moved to 1 November? This probably happened as early as 741 during the pontificate of Gregory III. Then, in 835, Pope Gregory IV requested Emperor Louis the Pious to make the celebration of 1 November an obligatory holiday across the empire (Féry 2011: 169–175).

Further ceremonies in honour of dead ancestors were held as part of the *Larentalia*, celebrated on 23 December; these also belong to the group of observances dedicated to the Manes. It was a ceremony instituted in line with the Roman tradition by Romulus as homage to his adoptive mother Acca Larentia. In this regard, Macrobius cites Cato: “Cato ait Larentiam ... et ideo sepulcri magnificentia et annuae parentationis honore dignatam” (cf. Macrobius 1963 I: 10, 16).<sup>12</sup> Further information about the December ceremony is provided by Varro in “De Lingua Latina,” in which the author, one of the most educated men in the history of ancient Rome, noted: “Hoc sacrificium fit in Velabro ... prope faciunt diis Manibus servilibus sacerdotes ...” (Varro 1910, VI: 24). It follows from Varro’s account that not far from the tomb of Acca Larentia offerings were made to the Manes of the departed slaves. As I. Kaczor observes, this coexistence of “the intention of a sacred ceremony in honour of the deceased free citizens and slaves stems from the broad definition of the family in Roman society; slaves, although disenfranchised and thoroughly subordinated to the will of their owner, belonged to the family and either participated in or, occasionally, at the behest of the *pater familias*, even acted in his place as priests at family and public ceremonies, provided that the religious requirements of the festival did not exclude them from the sacred community” (2019: 71f.). This peculiar mutual participation of slaves and the free in the December festivities was not confined to the offerings celebrated at the tomb of Acca Larentia; much the same was the case during another December festival, the well-known *Saturnalia*, when the *pater familias* entertained the slaves with a feast. The celebration of the *Larentalia* coincided with the last day of the *Saturnalia*.

Again, the early Christian calendars of Filocalus and Silviu from the fourth and fifth centuries do not mention the *Larentalia*.

---

12 “Cato, however, says that Larentia ... was deemed worthy of a splendid tomb and the honour of an annual service of remembrance.”

The *Compitalia* were another ceremony worthy of note. They belonged to a group of moving festivals in honour of the Lares of the crossroads (*Compitales*) and their mother, Mania, most likely a goddess identical to Acca Larentia. Acca Larentia is the semantic equivalent of female dating known as *Mater Larum*, to whom the Romans also referred as *Mania*. Next to being celebrated at much the same time, the *Compitalia* and the *Saturnalia* also featured analogous ritual practices as, according to literary accounts, during the festivals, the Romans sacrificed representatives of their community to the deities worshipped at either event (Kaczor 2019: 72).

The rituals in question is described by e.g. Macrobius, who states as follows: "... Compitalibus ... ludi per urbem in compitis agitabantur ... Laribus ac Maniae ex responso Apollinis, quo praeceptum est ut pro capitibus capitibus supplicaretur. idque aliquamdiu observatum, ut pro familiarum sospitate pueri mactarentur Maniae deae, matri Larum ... factum est ut effigies Maniae suspensae pro singulorum foribus periculum, si quod immineret familiis, expiarent...". (Macrobius 1963, I: 7, 34f.)<sup>13</sup> As a substitute for people, both free and slaves belonging to the family, effigies of human figures were hung at crossroads. Similar information is provided by Festus, who observes:

Pilae et effigies viriles et muliebres ex lana Compitalibus suspenduntur in conpitis quod hunc diem festum esse deorum inferorum quos vocant Lares putarent, quibus tot pilae quot capita servorum, tot effigies quot essent liberi ponebantur ut vivis parcerent et essent his pilis et simulacris contenti" (p. 344 L; cf. p. 248 L ).<sup>14</sup>

As an instance of moving holidays, the *Compitalia* are not mentioned in the traditional Roman calendar, nor are they listed in the aforementioned *Chronography* by Filocalus and *Laterculus* by Silvius.

---

13 "During the *Compitalia* ... a feast was held in the city at the crossroads ... for the Lares and Mania, the Mother of the Lares in accordance with Apollo's oracle, in which the god commanded that prayers for the living should be offered to the gods by making them a sacrifice of the living. For a time this recommendation was obeyed and children were sacrificed to save their families ... afterwards it was made so that for Mania certain effigies were hung in front of every man's door to avert danger if it threatened families."

14 "During the *Compitalia*, woollen balls and effigies representing men and women are hung at the crossroads. This is done because the day is meant for the underworld divinities called the Lares. As many balls are hung for them as there are slaves and as many human effigies as there are free with the hope that they shall be content with these balls and human effigies, sparing the living."

Another rite in honour of the dead, attested in literature as the *mundus patet* – literally meaning “the opening of the world” – was not included in the official *fasti*. The Romans performed it as many as three times during the year. Festus mentions the dates of 24 August, 5 October and 8 November (p. 237 L). In the account of the Roman grammarian, public activities were prohibited on the days on which the rituals were celebrated; among other things, military recruitment and warfare were not allowed during the observances (p. 273 L). Macrobius states that one was not permitted to enter into marriage either (I: 16, 18). According to Festus, the days set aside to celebrate the rite of the opening of the world belonged to the so-called *dies religiosi*, when engaging in forbidden activities constituted a religious offence (p. 382 L). An analysis of a definition of the very name in Festus’ “De verborum significatu” sheds some light on that mysterious rite. The author of the lexicon draws on Cato to elucidate the origin of the term *mundus*, citing this excerpt: “Mundo nomen inpositum est ab eo mundo, qui supra nos est; forma enim eius est, ut ex is qui intravere cognoscere potui, adsimilis illae” (p. 273 L).<sup>15</sup> The quote, supplemented by Festus’ commentary, suggests that it is by virtue of the ancestral decisions that the lower part of the alleged *mundus* “...veluti consecratam Dis Manibus clausam omni tempore, nisi his diebus qui supra scripti sunt” (p. 273 L).<sup>16</sup> Kaczor argues that in physical terms, the Romans construed the *mundus* as a real place composed of two parts where, once the safeguards separating the world of the dead and the world of the living had been lifted, it was possible “to enter it and open it up, so as to enable the souls of the dead to enter the world of the living, in the metaphysical sense” (Kaczor 2019: 74). Regrettably, its actual location cannot be conclusively determined due to numerous conflicting statements.

Just as in the case of the *Compitalia*, the fourth- and fifth-century authors Filocalus and Silviu do not refer to the above ritual of the *mundus patet* at all.

---

15 “The mundus [which opens] derives its name from that mundus which is above us; in its shape, as I was able to learn from those who went down [there], it is similar to that [the mundus which is above us].”

16 “... as if destined for the Divine Manes it is to be closed at all times, except on those days indicated above.”

## Conclusions

Across time and space, the history of humankind has followed the rhythm of many different festivals, as people of different cultures have written them into their calendars in every latitude. Ceremonies in honour of the dead have also found their place in such calendars.

For millennia, people in remote civilizations on all continents have worshipped their deceased ancestors because they have believed not only in the existence of the soul and the afterlife but also in the guardians of their families and houses – sometimes attributing semi-mythical qualities to such figures – whereby they did not fail to pay due regard to the soul of a departed member of the society. It was no different with the Romans, whose traditional calendar included several ceremonies venerating the ancestors at different times of the year, while the nascent Christianity did not deviate from the principle either.

To recapitulate, the current study discussed the *Parentalia*, the *Lemuria* and the *Larentalia*, as well as the *Compitalia* and the *mundus patet* ritual. Following a detailed examination of these observances, it would be legitimate to conclude that they all tally with the definition of manism.

Moreover, the first of the ceremonies recorded in the official *fasti* would be performed by the Romans in the month of purification. The May ceremonies honouring the departed loved ones coincided with the end of the agrarian-vegetative cycle, whereas the December *Larentalia* in honour of Acca Larentia, together with the *Compitalia* dedicated to the Mother of the Lares, are linked to the cycle of turn-of-the-year festivals. To placate the disfavour of the *Manes* and fearing the *Lemures*, the ancients chose to practice cults. The Romans firmly believed that the souls of the dead were able to take action that could bring misfortune to the living should the ancestors feel disrespected or insulted. This is one of the reasons why they remembered their deceased relatives during the *Parentalia*, chose to sacrifice members of their community during the *Compitalia* and, by way of the *mundus patet*, voluntarily created opportunities for the dead to reside in a space of the universe to which they generally had no access. The belief in and veneration of the *Manes* as well as the efforts to mollify their potentially sinister attitude towards the living stemmed from the fear (*timor*) that the Romans felt towards the dead. In Christian times, the pagan *timor* was superseded by *pietas* and *miseratio*, not only in terms of funerary practices but also in the veneration of the dead ancestors, because Christian love was not limited to the living. Christians believe that the community of

the faithful encompasses both the living and those who have passed away. Therefore, they should be remembered and honoured.

### *References Cited*

**Bodel, John,**

2000 Dealing with the Dead. Undertakers, Executioners and Potter's Fields in Ancient Rome. In: V. M. Hope and E. Marshall (eds.), *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*; pp. 128–149. London: Routledge.

**Burkert, Walter**

2006 *Stwarzanie świętości. Ślady biologii we wczesnych wierzeniach religijnych*. Przeł. L. Trzciokowski. Kraków: Homini.

**Cicero, Marcus Tullius**

1965 *De Legibus*. (Ed. by W. M. Lindsay.) London: Harvard University Press.

**Durkheim, Émile**

2010 *Elementarne formy życia religijnego. System totemiczny w Australii*. Tłum. A. Zadrożyńska. Warszawa: PWN.

**Dworniak, Justyna**

2000 Rzymskie spojrzenie na śmierć. Pogrzeb i rytualne oczyszczenie w okresie Republiki i Imperium Romanum na przykładzie miasta Rzym, *Koło historii* 15: 13–22.

**Féry, Robert**

2011 *Historia święt chrześcijańskich*. Tłum. Agnieszka Kuryś. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Cyklady.

**Festus, Sextus Pompeius**

1913 *Sexti Pompei Festi De verborum significatu quae supersunt cum Pauli Epitome*. (Ed. by W. M. Lindsay.) Lipsiae: Teubner.

**Filocalus et Silvius**

1893 *Fastii Philocalii et Silvii*. In: Th. Mommsen (ed.), *Inscriptiones Latinae Antiquissimae ad C. Caesaris mortem*; pp. 332–357. Berolini: Reimerum

**Francisci, Pietro de**

1959 *Primordia civitatis*. Romae: Apollinaris.

**Gellius, Aulus**

1984 *Noctes Atticae*. Vol. I. (Ed. by J.C. Rolfe.) London: Harvard University Press.

**Graham, Emma-Jayne**

2009 Becoming Persons, Becoming Ancestors. Personhood, Memory and the Corpse in Roman Rituals of Social Remembrance. *Archaeological Dialogues* 16: 51–74.

**Hamman, Adalbert Gautie**

1990 *Życie codzienne pierwszych chrześcijan*, Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.

**Jońca, Maciej**

2013 *Przestępstwo znieważenia grobu w rzymskim prawie karnym*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.

**Jurewicz, Oktawiusz**

2001 *Słownik grecko-polski*. T. 2. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN.



**Jurewicz, Oktawiusz and Winniczuk, Lidia**

1968 *Starożytni Grecy i Rzymianie w życiu prywatnym i państwowym*. Warszawa: PWN.

**Kaczmarek, Kamil**

2007 *Herbert Spencer a problemy socjologii religii*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu.

**Kaczor, Idalianna**

2019 *Parentalia, Lemuria, Larentalia, Compitalia, mundus patet – ceremonie ku czci zmarłych w rzymskim systemie wierzeń*. *Collectanea Philologica* 22: 63–84.

**Krüger, Paul**

1954 *Codex Iustinianus*. In: P. Krüger (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Vol. 1-2. Berlin: Weidmann.

**Lindsay, Hugh**

2000 *Death-Pollution and Funerals in the City of Rome*. In: V. M. Hope and E. Marshall (eds.), *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*; pp.152–173. London: Routledge.

**Lucretius, Titus Carus**

1962 *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*. (Ed. by A. Mazzarino.) Lipsiae: Teubner.

**Macrobius, Afimbrosius Theodosius**

1963 *Ambrosii Theodosii Macrobiani Saturnalia*. (Ed. by I. Willis.) Lipsiae: Teubner.

**Mauss, Marcel**

2001 *Socjologia i antropologia*. Tłum. M. Król, J. Szacki, K. Pomian. Warszawa: PWN.

**Mommsen, Theodor (ed.)**

1905 *Codex Theodosianus. Theodosiani Libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis*. Berlin: Weidmann.

**Morse, Michael A. and Papagianni, Dimitra**

2022 *Neandertalczyk odkryty na nowo. Współczesna nauka pisze nową historię Neandertalczyków*. Tłum. Bartosz Salbut. Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka.

**Ovidius**

2008 *Fasti*. Kalendarz poetycki. Tłum. Elżbieta Wesołowska. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich: Wrocław.

**Piechocka-Kłos, Maria**

2010 *Prawodawstwo cesarskie i kościelne wobec kultu pogańskiego w IV-VI wieku*. Olsztyn: Studio Poligrafii Komputerowej „SQL.”

**Spencer, Herbert**

2020 *Dane socjologii*. Tłum. J.K. Potocki. <<https://socrel.edu.pl/index/socklas/hsa/ds/>> [19.04.2023].

**Swienko, Henryk**

1981 *Religia i religie*. Warszawa: Iskry.

**Szerszeniewska, Izabela**

2020 *Godność ludzka w kontekście poszanowania kultu przodków przedstawicieli różnych kultur*. *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 40/2: 223–237.

**Szyjewski, Andrzej**

2008 *Etnologia religii*. Kraków: Nomos.

**Toynbee, Jocelyn M. C.**

1971 *Death and Burial in the Roman Word*. London: Cornell University Press.

**Varro, Marcus Terentius**

1910 M. Terenti Varronis *de lingua latina* quae supersunt. (Ed. by G. Goetz and F. Schoell.) Lipsiae: Teubner.

**Widengren, Geo**

2008 *Fenomenologia religii*. Przeł. J. Białek. Kraków: Nomos.

**Winniczuk, Lidia**

1951 *Kalendarz starożytnych Greków i Rzymian*. Warszawa: Z Zasiłku Ministerstwa Szkół Wyższych i Nauki.