

## **Eduqas Latin GCSE**

Resource material for Component 3B:  
Roman Civilisation

# **Roman Festivals and Worship**

(Examination in 2027-29)

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## Acknowledgements - Images

Clay slab from the House of Livia depicting Luperci with thongs **Photo credit:** ancientblogger.com

An altar dedicated to Mars and Venus depicting the Lupercal and the she-wolf feeding Romulus and Remus. Thought to be a representation of the *Lupercal* Photo credit: [Marie-Lan Nguyen](#)

Bona Dea is often depicted sitting, holding a cornucopia and wearing a *stola*, with a snake wrapped around her arm: **Photo credit: Andrea Pancotti, reproduced under [Licence](#).**

A relief from the Ara Pacis depicting a goddess, possibly Pax. Many of Pax's attributes are associated with Bona Dea: **Photo credit: Diane Birt.**

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Pigs were common sacrifices, particularly for purification and fertility rites, or when claiming new land **Photo credit:** **TonyBaggett (iStock / Getty Images Plus)**

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A mosaic of a skeleton holding jugs, perhaps used by the household to make a noise to frighten away the *lemures* **Photo credit:** **Diane Birt**

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Translation **Table X. Sacred Law**, Johnson, Allan Chester, Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton and Frank Card Bourne. Clyde Pharr, General Editor. Ancient Roman Statutes: A Translation with Introduction, Commentary, Glossary, and Index. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961.

Translation **Rome, 1st century A.D. Museo Nazionale Romano**

Translation **Ovid describes the Parentalia** [Ovid \(43 BC–17\) - Fasti: Book II](#)

Translation **Ovid, *Fasti*, 2. 557-567, 548-556: [Poetry in Translation - Ovid \(43 BC–17\) - Fasti: Book II](#)**

Translation **Ovid, *Fasti*, 5.431 – 444: [Poetry in Translation - Ovid \(43 BC–17\) - Fasti: Book II](#)**

Translation **Cicero, *De Re Publica*, vi.13 – 14 – Beard, North, Price, vol 2, p.220** ISBN 978-0-521-45646-3

## Introduction

This booklet Roman Festivals and Worship is intended to support teachers and students preparing for the WJEC Eduqas GCSE Latin Component 3B examination in Roman Civilisation in 2027, 2028 and 2029.

### Important notice: the purpose and status of this booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to provide teachers with a wide range of sources for their teaching. It should therefore be considered only as a teaching support publication. Such booklets are not intended to be definitive catalogues of sources which may be used in the examination and students should not attempt, nor be encouraged, to 'rote learn' the sources contained within. Although examiners may use some of the sources in the booklets, other similar sources may also be used in the GCSE examination.

Likewise, teachers should feel under no obligation to study any or all of the sources contained herein with their students.

### Additional Support Resources

Teachers may find additional support materials in the following textbooks which are endorsed by WJEC Eduqas.

- The Cambridge Latin Course – Books I, II, III IV and V  
<https://www.clc.cambridgescp.com/course>
- Suburani - Books 1 and 2. <https://hands-up-education.org/textbook.html>

## Topic 8: Roman Festivals and Worship

### Major Roman Festivals: origins, rites and celebrations

#### Lupercalia

- Celebrated annually on 15th February
- This festival was generally considered a festival of purification and fertility.
- It was also believed to have a connection to the Ancient Greek Festival of the Lykaia, a wolf festival, brought over to Italy by the Arcadian king, Evander.
- Ancient sources tend to agree on the content of the rites but not on the origin, except that the festival was very ancient.

#### Plutarch describes the Lupercalia festival and offers two explanations of its origins

The Lupercalia, by the time of its celebration, may seem to be a feast of purification, for it is celebrated on the *dies nefasti* (inauspicious days) of the month of February, (which name signifies purification), and this day of the feast the ancients called *Februata*. But his name is equivalent to the Greek, *Lycaea*; and it seems to be of great antiquity, and brought in by the Arcadians who came with Evander. But it may come as well from the wolf that nursed Romulus; and we see the Luperci, the priests, begin their course from the place where they say Romulus was exposed. But the ceremonies performed in it make the origin of the festival more difficult to be guessed at; for there are goats killed, then two sons of noble families are brought forward, some touch their foreheads with a bloody knife and others quickly wipe it off with wool dipped in milk, then the young boys must laugh. After that is done, having cut the goats' skins into thongs, they run about naked, only wearing something about their middle, lashing all they meet; and the young wives do not avoid their strokes fancying they will help conception and childbirth. Another thing peculiar to this feast is for the Luperci to sacrifice a dog. But, a certain poet ... says that Romulus and Remus, after the conquest of Amulius, ran joyfully to the place where the wolf suckled them, and that the festival is an imitation of this, and the two young noblemen run:

'Striking at all, as when from Alba town,

with sword in hand, the twins came hurrying  
down,'

and that the bloody knife applied to their foreheads, was a sign of the danger and bloodshed of that day, the cleansing of them in milk was a reminder of the twins' food and nourishment. Caius Acilius writes that before the city was built, the cattle of Romulus and Remus had gone astray, praying to the god Faunus, they ran out naked, so that they were not troubled with sweat, and that is why the Luperci run naked. If the sacrifice was a means of purification, a dog might very well be sacrificed, for the Greeks in rituals of purification also carry out young dogs and frequently used the ceremony of '*periskylakismos*' as they call it. Or if the sacrifice is for gratitude to the she-wolf that nourished and preserved Romulus, there is a good reason in killing a dog as being an enemy to wolves, unless indeed, after all that, the dog is punished for getting in the way of the running Luperci!

Plutarch, *Life of Romulus*, 21.3-8

### Clay slab from the House of Livia depicting Luperci with thongs



**Ovid suggests the nudity and the goat thongs have separate origins.**

**Ovid describes how Pan/Faunus attempted to seduce Omphale, the lover of Hercules, in the middle of the night. However, she and Hercules had swapped clothes, humiliating the god when he realised he was attempting to seduce Heracles. Ovid tells us that it is for this reason the Luperci run naked and why a goat is sacrificed.**

The third Dawn after the Ides views naked Luperci;  
And the rights of two Horned Faunus are held....

Why then do they run and why (since they run this way),  
Disrobed with their bodies naked, you ask?  
The god likes to dash quickly across high hillsides  
And he is the author of sudden flight.  
The naked God tells his servants to go naked;  
And clothes are not suitable for running. ...  
Since clothes fooled him, the god hates deceptive clothing  
And summons people naked to his rites. ...

**Ovid goes on to explain that the Luperci race each other because Romulus and Remus raced to rescue stolen cattle, and the families from whom the Luperci were recruited were their followers**

The goat was duly butchered to horn hooped Faunus  
A crowd came summoned to the meagre feast.  
While the priests cured the guts with willow spits  
And dressed them, and the sun was in mid-course,  
Romulus and his brother in the shepherd lads  
Sported nude bodies on the sunlit plain.

...

A hilltop shepherd called, 'Romulus and Remus!  
'Thieves rustle our cattle in the distant fields.'  
No time to arm: they leave in different directions.  
Remus found and recovered the plunder.  
He returns and unscrews the hissing innards,  
Saying, 'Only the victor shall eat these.'  
He acts on his words, the Fabii joined him. Romulus  
Remus foiled and sees bare tables and bones.  
He laughed and felt pain that the Fabii and Remus  
Could triumph, his Quintilii could not.  
The manner of the event survives: they run stripped

And that day's success has enduring fame.

**Women would be struck with the strips of the sacrificed goat in the hope of becoming pregnant and then having an easy delivery.**

He sacrifices a goat. The girls offered their backs  
As ordered to be cut by strips of its hide.  
The tenth moon renewed its horns; suddenly the husband  
Was a father and the bride a mother.  
Thanks to Lucina. You are named from *lucus*, a grove.  
Or because you begin life's *lux*, it's light.  
Show mercy I ask kind Lucina, to pregnant girls  
And gently extract the womb's ripe burden.

**Ovid, *Fasti*, 2.267 - 380 and 445-452**

**The Luperci were young men of at least equestrian rank, usually between the ages of 20 and 40, and recruited from two colleges of priests, the *Quintilii* (followers of Romulus) and the *Fabii* (followers of Remus). Marc Antony established another college, the *Julianii*, but this did not survive the assassination of Caesar.**

**The rites would begin at a cave on the Palatine Hill known as the Lupercal**

This place the Romans call the Lupercal, but we should call it *Lykaion* or "*Lycaeum*." ... at first, we are told, there was a large cave under the hill overarched by a dense wood; deep springs issued from beneath the rocks, and the glen adjoining the cliffs was shaded by thick and lofty trees. In this place they raised an altar to the god and performed their traditional sacrifice, which the Romans have continued to offer up to this day in the month of February, after the winter solstice, without altering anything in the rites then performed.

**Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.32**

An altar dedicated to Mars and Venus depicting the Lupercal and the she-wolf feeding Romulus and Remus. Thought to be a representation of the *Lupercal*



Sources do not agree on the specific route run by the Luperci, but it is likely they ran around the Palatine Hill to the Via Sacra, following this until they reached the Forum Romanum, possibly where the race ended. It was in the Forum that Marc Antony famously offered Caesar a diadem, to the dismay and horror of the Roman people.

As the Lupercalia fell within the period of the Parentalia festival (13th - 22nd of February), some Romans connected the Lupercalia with that of the dead. For example, Varro suggests that the Lupercalia could be seen in the context of purifying the city by casting the spirits of the dead back to the underworld.

I prefer to think 'Februarius' is named after the Day of Purification, *dies februatus*, because the people are purified, *februatur*, on that day. That is, the naked Luperci go round the ancient Palatine city, which is surrounded by human flocks (of the dead).

**Varro, *On the Latin language* VI.34**

## Bona Dea (private and public)

- “Bona Dea” means “The Good Goddess”. It is a title given to her, because her name is uncertain.
- She was an Italian goddess but could be associated with other similar goddesses such as Tellus, Ops, Pax, or even Cybele.
- She had festivals twice a year, on 1st May (open to women of all classes) and on 3rd December (attended by the upper classes).
- Her sanctuary was a small temple on the Aventine Hill, likely associated with healing. However, her annual nocturnal ceremony was held at the house of a chief magistrate (*praetor* or *consul*), from which men were excluded. All male images had to be covered.
- It was led by the women of the magistrate’s family with the help of the Vestal Virgins.
- The rites began with a sacrifice. Then there was dancing and the drinking of strong sacrificial wine, brought in a covered jar. The wine was called “milk” and the jar a “honey pot”. The room was decorated with branches and other plants.
- It was a state ritual performed in secret for the welfare of the Roman people.
- Roman men viewed the festival with some suspicion, as upper class women meeting in groups at night to drink wine and dance seemed, to some, a thinly disguised means of committing adultery.

Bona Dea is often depicted sitting, holding a cornucopia and wearing a stola, with a snake wrapped around her arm



**A relief from the Ara Pacis depicting a goddess, possibly Pax. Many of Pax's attributes are associated with Bona Dea**



**Men were not permitted to view or be a part of the rites, although Ovid implies that the women did not always uphold this rule.**

When Bona Dea drives away the eyes of men from her temple,  
except any (men) *she* commands to come (there).

**Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, III.637-8**

### **Cicero reveals that it took the senate, magistrates and priests to resolve the crisis of a man infiltrating the Bona Dea in 62BC**

I expect you have heard that, when the state sacrifice was being carried out in Caesar's <sup>1</sup> house, a man in woman's clothes got in; and that after the (Vestal) Virgins had repeated the sacrifice, the incident was raised in the senate by Q. Cornificius ... Then what happened is that the senate voted to refer the matter back to the Virgins and the *pontifices* – who pronounced that it was sacrilege. After that, by senatorial decree, the consuls brought forward a bill, and Caesar divorced his wife.

**Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* I.13.3**

### **Juvenal (who probably knew very little about these rites) writes a scathing account of what he thinks took place during the secret ceremonies**

All know the secret rites of the Good Goddess, when the pipe  
Stirs the loins, and the maenads of Priapus, maddened they say  
By wine and horns alike, go tossing their flowing hair about  
And howl. ...,  
And the shouts from the whole grotto echo there, in unison,  
'Now's the moment, admit the men.' ...  
...In the old days, what human being ever scorned the gods' powers,  
Or dared to laugh at Numa's earthenware libation-bowls, the black  
Pots, and the little fragile plates found on the Vatican Hill?  
But now does any sacred altar exist that lacks its own Clodius?

**Juvenal, *Satires* VI**

## **Saturnalia**

- **This was a festival honouring the God Saturn.**
- **Originally it was only one day, but by the late Republic the Saturnalia extended over a number of days, 17th – 23rd of December.**
- **The religious ceremony began at the Temple of Saturn in the Forum, and a sacrifice, paid for by the state, took place on the first day in the form of a huge public banquet.**
- **Shops and businesses were closed during the festival so that everyone could enjoy the celebration and people greeted one another in the streets with shouts of 'Io' or 'Saturnalia'.**
- **Saturnalia had a private aspect for family feasts, parties and gift giving.**
- **Enslaved members of the household became masters for a day and were waited on by their masters. Generous masters gave their slaves gifts and allowed them a day off. Even Cato the Elder gave his slaves extra wine rations for the Saturnalia.**

<sup>1</sup> Caesar was *praetor* that year

## The temple of Saturn in the Forum Romanum



The god Saturn holding a scythe

## Roman banquet scene from Pompeii



### The poet, Statius, asks Apollo and the Muses to let him have a day off to enjoy the festivities of the Saturnalia

Father Phoebus and stern Pallas, go away! You too Muses, take a vacation and go far away! I will call you back on New Year's Day. But you, Saturn, cast off your fetters and come near. You too, December, tipsy from so much wine, and laughing Good Cheer and reckless Joviality. Come and be present!

**Statius *Silvae* 1.6 .1-7**

### Saturnalia gifts

At this time of the year when the equestrians and senators show off their party clothes, and even the emperor wears a freedman's cap<sup>2</sup>, and the homebred slave is not afraid to look straight at the aedile and shake the dice box (even though he sees

<sup>2</sup> Everyone would wear a freedman's cap during Saturnalia, perhaps to symbolise the freedom of the festival.

the icy tank so nearby<sup>3</sup>). Accept the gift you have drawn<sup>4</sup>, whether from a poor or a rich man. Let everyone give his guest an appropriate gift.

Accept this parasol, which can block even intense sunlight. Even when it is windy, you will be protected by your own awning.

The pig will make your Saturnalia merry. He was fed acorns and pastured with foaming boars.

If your clothing has been soiled by yellow dust, this little oxtail brush will clean it with a light whisk.

On wintry cold days of Saturnalia, Umber used to give me, when he was poor, a cape as a gift. Now he gives me a drink, because he has become rich.

**Martial, *Epigrams* 14.1, 28, 70. 71; 12.81**

<sup>3</sup> A slave found to be gambling outside of Saturnalia could be punished by the *aedile*, possibly by being thrown into a tank of icy water!

<sup>4</sup> Gifts were distributed by lot.

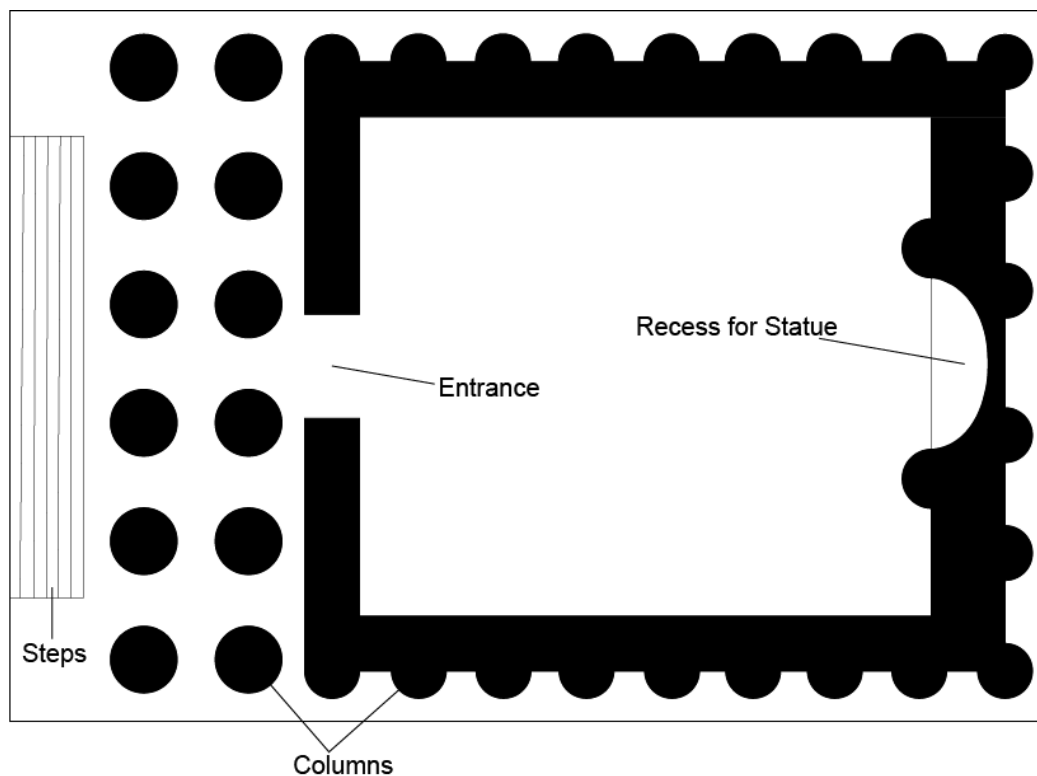
## Major Roman temples and religious buildings

Features of a Roman sanctuary and temple, including the altar

Maison carrée, Nîmes, 1st century AD Roman temple for the Imperial cult



A plan  
of a  
typical  
Roman  
temple



**Temple of Apollo, Pompeii**



**Temple of Hercules Victor, Rome**



## Temple of Portunus, Rome



## Ara Pacis

When I returned from Spain and Gaul, ... after successful operations in those provinces, the senate voted in honour of my return the consecration of an altar to Pax Augusta in the Campus Martius, and on this altar it ordered the magistrates and priests and Vestal virgins to make annual sacrifice.

**Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 12**

## Ovid describes the Ara Pacis

My song has led to the altar of Peace itself.  
This day is the second from the month's end.  
Come, Peace, your graceful tresses wreathed  
With laurel of Actium: stay gently in this world.  
While we lack enemies, or cause for triumphs:  
You'll be a greater glory to our leaders than war.

May the soldier be armed to defend against arms,  
And the trumpet blare only for processions.  
May the world far and near fear the sons of Aeneas,  
And let any land that feared Rome too little, love her.  
Priests, add incense to the peaceful flames,  
Let a shining sacrifice fall, brow wet with wine,  
And ask the gods who favour pious prayer  
That the house that brings peace, may so endure.  
Now the first part of my labour is complete,  
And as its month ends, so does this book.

**Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.709–722**

### **Western side of the Ara Pacis**



## Eastern side of the Ara Pacis



## Pantheon

### Pliny the Elder describes the decoration of the original Pantheon

The capitals of the pillars which were placed by Marcus Agrippa in the Pantheon, are made of Syracusan bronze. [The building] has been decorated by Diogenes of Athens and the Caryatides built by him which form the columns of that temple are considered to be masterpieces of excellence: the same, too, with the statues that are placed upon the roof.

**Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 34.7**

## The Pantheon, Rome



### Inscription on the frieze

M . AGRIPPA. L. F. COS. TERTIVM. FECIT

*M[arcus] Agrippa L[ucii] f[ilius] co[n]s[ul] tertium fecit,*

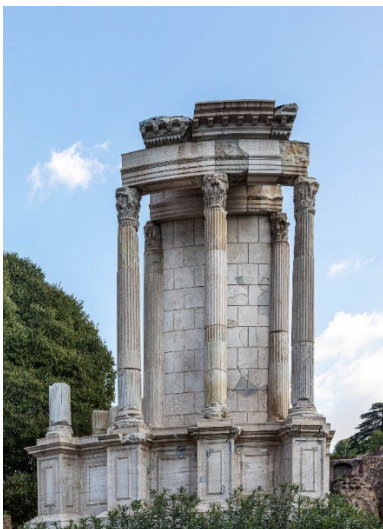
Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, made [this building] when consul for the third time

## The interior of the Pantheon



## Temple of Vesta

### Temple of Vesta, Rome



**Ovid tells us there was no cult statue in Vesta's temple**

Vesta equals Earth. Sleepless fire underlies both,  
Earth and hearth denote their own fixity.

For long, I stupidly thought Vesta had statues;  
I soon learned that the rotunda has none.  
That temple encloses an undying fire,  
But no image of Vesta or of fire.

**Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.267- 268, 295 - 298**

## Priests, priestesses and religious officials

### Roles and duties of *pontifices* (including the *Pontifex Maximus*), *flamines*, *augures*, *haruspices*, Vestal virgins

- The priesthoods of Rome were the 16 *pontifices*, the 15 *flamines* who were in charge of the cults of specific gods, and the six Vestals. There were also, 16 *augures* and 15 men whose task it was to take care of the Sibylline Books.
- Most priests were elected to office. They had to learn complicated religious procedures and rituals to officiate these.
- Religion was so intertwined with the state that priesthoods were occupied by politicians.
- Men of wealth and education had an obligation to serve the state and being a priest was one way they could fulfil this duty.
- Holding a priestly office brought with it social distinction and ambitious men sought to become elected. For example, Julius Caesar was *Pontifex Maximus* and Cicero was an *augur*.
- The *Pontifex Maximus* lived in a palace in the Roman Forum and oversaw the other priests.

### The official positions held by the emperor Augustus included religious duties

I have been Pontifex Maximus, *augur*, a member of the College of fifteen for performing sacrifices, a member of the College of seven for conducting religious banquets and a member of the Arval brotherhood.

Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 7

### The duties of the *pontifices*

The *pontifices* have authority over the most important matters in the Roman state, they serve as judges and all religious cases involving private citizens or magistrates or ministers of the gods. They make laws concerning religious rituals which have not been recorded or handed down by tradition, but which they judge as appropriate to receive the sanction of law and custom. They closely scrutinise all the magistracies which have duties involving any sacrifice or ministry of the gods. They also scrutinise all the priesthoods and watch carefully their servants and ministers whom they employ in the rituals to make sure that they commit no error in regard to the sacred laws. For private citizens who are not knowledgeable about religious matters concerning the gods and divine spirits, the *pontifices* are explainers and interpreters, and should they learn that some people are not obeying their injunctions, they punish them, examining each of the charges. They themselves are not liable to any prosecution or punishment, nor are they accountable to the Senate or people, at least concerning religious matters.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.73.2

Image of Augustus (centre) as an *augur*. Notice his *lituus* (augural staff) and the sacred chicken at his feet



### A general ignores the auspices

Claudius Pulcher showed his scorn of religion during a naval engagement off Sicily. When he took the auspices and discovered that the sacred chickens were not eating, he threw them into the sea, saying, 'If they don't want to eat, let them drink': and then he engaged the enemy in a naval battle. He lost the battle.

Suetonius, *The lives of the Caesars: Tiberius* II.2

### King Numa created priesthoods

Next Numa turned his attention to the creating of priests: he himself (Numa) was in fact conducting most of the rights, particularly those that now belong to the *flamen Dialis*. But because he realised that, in such a war like city, more kings would be like Romulus than Numa and that these will go to war themselves, he protected the royal rituals from being thus neglected by creating a *flamen* permanently devoted to Jupiter. He marked the office by the grant of special dress and official chair of state, *sella curulis*, like the kings. He added two more *flamines*, one for Mars, one for Quirinus, and also chose virgin priestesses for Vesta.

Livy, *ab urbe condita libri*, 1.20.

**flamines wearing the pointed apex cap, from the Ara Pacis**



**Processional frieze from the Ara Pacis, showing figures with covered heads**



Image of statue base from Aquae Sulis (Bath) showing the name of the *haruspex*, Lucius Marcius Memor



A model liver made of bronze. Significant areas are labelled to help *haruspices* interpret any markings



## Vestal Virgins

The virgins who serve the goddess were originally four and were chosen by the kings according to the principles established by Numa, but afterwards, from the multiplicity of the sacred rites they perform, their number was increased of six and has so remained down to our time. They live in the temple of the goddess, into which none who wish are hindered from entering in the daytime, whereas it is not lawful for any man to remain there at night. They were required to remain undefiled by marriage for the space of thirty years, devoting themselves to offering sacrifices and performing the other rites ordained by law. During the first ten years their duty was to learn their functions, in the second ten to perform them, and during the remaining ten to teach others. After the expiration of the term of thirty years nothing hindered those who so desired from marrying, upon laying aside their fillets and the other insignia of their priesthood. And some, though very few, have done this; but they came to ends that were not at all happy or enviable. In consequence, the rest, looking upon their misfortunes as ominous, remain virgins in the temple of the goddess till their death, and then once more another is chosen by the pontiffs to supply the vacancy. Many high honours have been granted them by the commonwealth, as a result of which they feel no desire either for marriage or for children; and severe penalties have been established for their misdeeds. It is the pontiffs who by law both inquire into and punish these offences; to Vestals who are guilty of lesser misdemeanours they scourge with rods, but those who have suffered defilement they deliver up to the most shameful and the most miserable death. While they are yet alive they are carried upon a bier with all the formality of a funeral, their friends and relations attending them with lamentations, and after being brought as far as the Colline Gate, they are placed in an underground cell prepared within the walls, clad in their funeral attire; but they are not given a monument or funeral rites or any other customary solemnities. There are many indications, it seems, when a priestess is not performing her holy functions with purity, but the principal one is the extinction of the fire, which the Romans dread above all misfortunes, looking upon it, from whatever cause it proceeds, as an omen that portends the destruction of the city; and they bring fire again into the temple with many supplicatory rites, concerning which I shall speak on the proper occasion.

**Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.67.2-5**

## Denarius of Lucius Cassius Longinus depicting Vesta



### Criteria for a Vestal Virgin

A girl chosen to be a Vestal Virgin must, according to law, be no less than six and no more than 10 years old. Both her father and her mother must be alive. She must not be handicapped by speech or hearing problem or disfigured by some physical defect.... Neither one or both her parents may have been slaves or may engage in demeaning occupations. ...

As soon as a Vestal Virgin has been chosen, escorted to the House of Vesta and handed over to the *pontifices*, she immediately leaves control of her father without a ceremony of manumission or loss of civil rights, and she acquires the right to make a will. ... The words which the Pontifex Maximus should speak when he accepts a Vestal Virgin are these, 'I accept you Amata as one who is legally suitable to be a priestess of Vesta and to perform the sacred rights which is this lawful for a priestess of Vesta to perform on behalf of the Roman people.'

**Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 1.12.1-3, 5, 9, 14.**

## Methods and processes of sacrifice

### Sculpture of a sacrifice



### An inscription from a tombstone

Here lies the bones of Quintus Tiburtius Menolavus, freedman of Quintus, who made a living slaughtering animals for sacrifice.

***CIL 1.2.1604 (ILS 7642)***

### A relief depicting the sacrifice of a bull

Notice two men, known as *victimārii*, hold down the bull, while the another raises a hammer to stun him before he is slaughtered. One of the kneeling men carries a knife on his belt. The presiding magistrate (centre) did not carry out the act of killing the animal, instead, he oversaw and performed the rituals and prayers.



### Animals being led to sacrifice



**The emperor Marcus Aurelius as Pontifex Maximus leading a procession before a sacrifice**



## Types of offerings



**Pigs were common sacrifices, particularly for purification and fertility rites, or when claiming new land**

### **Cato offers advice on how to propitiate woodland spirits**

When thinning a grove of trees, it is essential to observe the following Roman ritual. Sacrifice a pig as a propitiatory offering and repeat the following prayer: ‘whenever, whether you are a god or a goddess to whom this grove is sacred, as it is proper to sacrifice to you a pig as a propitiatory offering for the disturbance of the sacred place, and therefore, for these reasons, whether I or someone I have appointed performs the sacrifice, provided that it be performed correctly, for this reason, in sacrificing this pig, I pray in good faith that you will be benevolent and well disposed to me, my home, my family and my children. For these reasons, therefore, be honoured by the sacrifice of this pig as a propitiatory offering.’

If you wish to apply the cleared land in the grove, offer a second propitiatory sacrifice in the same manner, but add these words, ‘for the sake of doing this work.’

**Cato the Elder on Agriculture, 139, 140.**

### The poet Ovid describes offerings left at a tomb

Honour is also paid to the grave. Appease the souls of your fathers and bring small gifts to the tombs built for them. Ghosts ask only a little: they value piety more than a costly gift ...A tile wreathed with votive garlands, a sprinkling of corn, a few grains of salt, bread soaked in wine, and some loose violets, these are offerings enough: set these on a potsherd and leave it in the middle of the road. Not that I forbid larger offerings, but even these suffice to appease the shades: add prayers and the appropriate words at the hearths set up for the purpose.

Ovid, *Fasti* 2.533-540 (adapted)

## Private religion: worship in the home

### Lararium and household gods

#### Two examples of lararia



### Lares and Penates

- *Lares* and *Penates* were the gods of the family.
- Every Roman family had its own guardian, known as the *Lar familiaris*, who would protect them.
- Each morning Romans prayed and made offerings to a small statue of the *Lar familiaris* which was kept in the family shrine (*lararium*).
- The statues wore short tunics and carried dishes to hold food or drink offered to them.
- The *Penates* were originally thought to be the gods of the pantry, ensuring that the family would never run out of food, and therefore survive, but eventually they became guardians of the entire household.
- Other *Lares* were believed to look after towns, specific districts and crossroads and to protect travellers. In the *forum* of Pompeii, there was a temple dedicated to the *Lares* of the city.



### The *Lar Familiaris* describes his duties and responsibilities

In case you don't know who I am, let me briefly introduce myself. I am *Lar Familiaris*, the guardian spirit of this house, that house from which I have just come. I have been in charge of this house now for a great many years. I have looked after it for the present owner and his father and his grandfather. It was the grandfather who put into my care a long time ago, with great secrecy, and with many sacred oaths, a large sum of money. He had buried it under the hearth of the central hall, and he charged me on my honour to keep it safe for him.

So he died, the old man who entrusted me with the money, and I began to take notice of how the son would treat me, whether he would be more or less dutiful than his father. He was far less dutiful, as it turned out, and far less respectful to me. Likewise, I did as little as possible for him... the son ... is a man of similar characters to his father and grandfather, but he has a daughter. She is very kind to me, brings me daily offerings of incense or wine or something, flowers too. So as a return for these attentions, I have arranged that her father shall find this treasure, and thus be in a position to give her in marriage if he so wishes.

**Plautus, *Pot of Gold*, lines 1-30**

### Worship in the home

What is there more holy, what is there more worthy of respect, than the house of every individual citizen? For here are his altars, here are his hearths, here are his household gods: here all his sacred rites, all his religious ceremonies are preserved, a holy spot. ...

**Cicero, *de domo sua*, 41.109 (adapted)**

## **Births, naming ceremonies, coming of age, marriage rites**

### **Plutarch suggests a reason why girls are named after eight days and boys after nine**

Why do they name boys when they are nine days old, but girls when they are eight days old?

Does the precedence of the girls have Nature as its cause? It is a fact that the female grows up and attains maturity and perfection before the male. As for the days, they take those that follow the seventh; for the seventh is dangerous for newly-born children in various ways and in the matter of the umbilical cord; for in most cases this comes away on the seventh day; but until it comes off, the child is more like a plant than an animal.

**Plutarch, *Roman Questions*, 102**

### **A Roman boy wearing a bulla**



- Children would wear a *bulla* or a *lunula* to ward off evil spirits.
- The *bulla* was only for boys. Along with the *toga praetexta*, it was symbolic of youth.
- When a boy reached adulthood, he would take off his *bulla* as a rite of passage that symbolised his safe passage into adulthood.
- When a boy reached adulthood, he would take off his *bulla* and lay it aside in a rite of passage that symbolised his safe passing into adulthood.
- The *bulla* might still be worn after that point on certain special occasions.
- Girls would wear a *lunula* (a crescent moon-shaped pendant), to similarly ward off evil spirits.
- Along with the rest of her childhood toys, a girl would dedicate her *lunula* to the goddess Venus on the eve her wedding day.

### A wedding ceremony



- This picture shows a marriage ceremony, with the bride and groom in the centre standing on either side of an altar.
- The ceremony is presided over by many different gods and goddesses: the goddess of Harmony stands between the bride and groom, behind the altar. To the left of the bride, stand Venus, the goddess of Love, and her son, Cupid (with his bow and arrows). Next to Cupid is Hymen, the god of marriage, holding the torch carried during the marriage procession which guided the bride to her new home.
- Other attendees depicted on the sarcophagus are the friends and family of the newly-weds, carrying various gifts and symbols of marital harmony and fertility. The ox would have been sacrificed to the gods during the ceremony to invoke their blessing for the new marriage

## Vestalia festival

- The festival was celebrated on 9th June in the temple of Vesta in the *Forum Romanum*
- This was a women only festival and the only occasion when women offered sacrifices
- From 7th-15th June the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple of Vesta (*penus Vestae*) was open to women only and closed again on the 15th June
- This festival celebrated family life, their food and safekeeping.

The Vestalia was associated with food and prosperity for the family, but also the baking of bread.

- One duty of the Vestal Virgins was to make the *mola salsa* used in sacrifices

A clean platter offers Vesta food.

Look, loaves of bread hang from garlanded and donkeys,

And chains of flowers veil rough millstones.

Farmers formerly roasted only rough grain in ovens

... The hearth baked the bread, which was buried in its ash.

A chipped tile was laid on the warm floor.

Hence the Baker respects the hearth and the hearth's mistress

And the donkey turning the pumice millstones.

Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.310 - 318

- Donkeys were sacred to Vesta and were harnessed to turn the heavy mill stone in Roman bakeries.
- A donkey saved Vesta from the unwanted attentions of the lustful god, Priapus, and so are celebrated in this festival.

Vesta lies down and takes a quiet, carefree nap,

Just as she was, her head pillowed by turf.

But the red saviour of gardens (Priapus) prowls for nymphs

And goddesses, and wanders back and forth.  
He spots Vesta. It is unclear if he thought she was a nymph  
Or he knew it was Vesta. He claims ignorance.  
He conceives a vile hope and tries to steal upon her,  
Walking on tiptoe as his heart flutters.  
By chance old Silenus had left the donkey,  
he came here on by a gently burbling stream.  
... (the donkey) bellowed a warning bray.  
The goddess starts up, frightened by the noise, the whole crowd  
Fly to her. The God flees through hostile hands.  
Lampsacus sacrifices the donkey for Priapus, chanting:  
'We rightly give the flames the informant's guts.  
You must remember, Goddess, give it a necklace of bread.  
Work ceases. The idle mills are silent.

**Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.331 - 348**

## Honouring the dead

### Tombs and burial

**The laws of the Twelve Tables were the foundation of Roman law:**

#### Table X. Sacred Law

1. A dead person shall not be buried or burned in the city. ...
3. ... Expenses of a funeral shall be limited to three mourners wearing veils and one mourner wearing an inexpensive purple tunic and ten flutists . ...
4. Women shall not tear their cheeks or shall not make a sorrowful outcry on account of a funeral.
- 5a. A dead person's bones shall not be collected that one may make a second funeral.
- 5b. An exception is for death in battle and on foreign soil.
- 6a. ... Anointing by slaves is abolished and every kind of drinking bout ... there shall be no costly sprinkling, no long garlands, no incense boxes ...
- 6b. ... A myrrh-spiced drink ... shall not be poured on a dead person.
7. Whoever wins a crown himself or by his property, by honour, or by valour, the crown is bestowed on him at his burial ...
8. ... Nor gold shall be added to a corpse. But if anyone buries or burns a corpse that has gold dental work it shall be with impunity.
9. It is forbidden ... to build a new pyre or a burning mound nearer than sixty feet to another's building without the owner's consent.
10. It is forbidden to acquire by prescriptive right a vestibule of a sepulchre or a burning mound.

#### **A man warns passers-by not to pillage or damage his tomb**

To the Spirits of the Deceased. Caius Tullius Hesper made for himself this altar where his bones shall be interred. If anyone violate it or take (anything) out from it, I wish for him to live a long time with bodily pains, and for the gods of the underworld not to receive him when he has died.

**Rome, 1st century A.D. Museo Nazionale Romano**

## Tombs situated along the Via Appia, Rome



### Section of a Roman burial found near Caerleon, Wales, early 2nd century AD

- The lead canister contained the cremated bones of a person aged at least 35 years, originally wrapped in a linen cloth within a roughly walled cist (small stone lined chamber) built into a grave pit.
- A leaden pipe ran down from the ground to the container below ensuring offerings of food and drink could be poured into the canister containing the ashes below.
- Analysis of the linen revealed frankincense was involved in the funeral rites associated with the pipe burial.



## **columbarium**



**People's cremated remains would be stored in the niches. Families would mark the niches of their loved ones with a plaque or bust. One niche may accommodate multiple family members.**

## **Cremation urns**

**Not all Romans could afford elaborate burials. Poorer people may used storage jars for their loved ones' ashes and buried these in the ground.**



## **Festivals of the dead: *Lemuria* and *Parentalia***

### **The *Parentalia***

- This was a Roman religious festival held in honour of the dead.
- It began at noon on the 13th February each year and ended on the 21st February.
- It began as a private celebration of the lives of deceased family members but was gradually extended to remembering and honouring the dead in general.
- During the days of the festival, all temples were closed and no weddings could be performed.
- On the last day a public ceremony, the *Feralia*, was held, during which offerings and gifts were placed at the graves and the anniversary of the funeral feast was celebrated.

### **Ovid describes the *Parentalia***

But while these rites are enacted, girls, don't marry:

Let the marriage torches wait for purer days.

And virgin, who to your mother seem ripe for love,

Don't let the curved spear comb your tresses.

Hymen, hide your torches, and carry them far

From these dark fires! The gloomy tomb owns other torches.

And hide the gods, closing those revealing temple doors,

Let the altars be free of incense, the hearths without fire.

Now ghostly spirits and the entombed dead wander,

Now the shadow feeds on the nourishment that's offered.

But it only lasts till there are no more days in the month

**Ovid notes that the offerings given during the *Feralia* do not need to be expensive, it is the act of remembering that is important.**

**Ovid describes the terrifying events that took place when the people of Rome neglected the *Parentalia*.**

They neglected the *Parentalia*, Festival of the Dead.  
It did not go unpunished: they say from that ominous day  
Rome grew hot from funeral fires near the City.  
I scarcely believe it, but they say that ancestral spirits  
Came moaning from their tombs in the still of night,  
And misshapen spirits, a bodiless throng, howled  
Through the City streets, and through the broad fields.  
Afterwards neglected honour was paid to the tombs,  
And there was an end to the portents, and the funerals.

Ovid, *Fasti*, 2. 557-567, 548-556

**The *Lemuria***

- **The *Lemuria* lasted for three days in May: the 9th, 11th and 13th.**
- **Marriages were not allowed, no official business could take place and temples were closed.**
- **The purpose of the *Lemuria* was to chase away evil spirits.**
- **It is difficult to say just how seriously Romans viewed this festival.**

**Ovid describes the *Lemuria***

When midnight comes, lending silence to sleep,  
And all the dogs and hedgerow birds are quiet,  
He who remembers ancient rites, and fears the gods,  
Rises (no fetters binding his two feet)  
And makes the sign with thumb and closed fingers,  
Lest an insubstantial shade meets 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, while throwing:

'With these beans I throw I redeem me and mine.'  
He says this nine times without looking back: the shade  
Is thought to gather the beans, and follow behind, unseen.  
Again he touches water, and sounds the bronze,  
And asks the spirit to leave his house.  
When nine times he's cried: 'Ancestral spirit, depart,'  
He looks back, and believes the sacred rite's fulfilled.

Ovid, *Fasti*, 5.431 – 444

**A mosaic of a skeleton holding jugs, perhaps used by the household to make a noise to frighten away the *lemures***



## Beliefs in the afterlife

### A scene of mourning on a child's sarcophagus



### Cicero is informed of the eternal life that the great men of Rome can hope to expect after death

Listen to this (Scipio Aemilianus) Africanus, and it will make you even keener than you are to defend the Republic. All those who have protected or assisted the fatherland, or increased its greatness, have a special place reserved for them in the heavens, where they may enjoy perpetual happiness. There is nothing on earth more acceptable to the supreme god who rules the whole world than at the gatherings and assemblies of people joined together by law, known as cities. It is from here that the rulers and preservers of the cities come, and it is to here that they eventually return. ... I asked Africanus whether he, himself and my father Paullus and others we regard as dead were really still alive. 'Yes, they are', he replied. 'And freed from the chains, from that prison house, the body, for what you call life is in fact death.'

**Cicero, *De Re Publica*, vi.13 -14**

**Aeneas on his journey to the Underworld was given an unprecedented tour in book 6 of the *Aeneid*. Once the souls who were chosen (and who could pay) were ferried across by Charon, the underworld appears to be an organised place, where souls were judged and either punished or rewarded for their deeds in life. After a thousand years, souls could be born into a new body.**

When life leaves them at the final hour,  
still all of the evil, all the plagues of the flesh, alas,  
have not completely vanished, and many things, long hardened

deep within, must of necessity be ingrained, in strange ways.  
So they are scourged by torments, and pay the price  
for former sins: some are hung, stretched out,  
to the hollow winds, the taint of wickedness is cleansed  
for others in vast gulfs, or burned away with fire:  
each spirit suffers its own: then we are sent  
through wide Elysium, and we few stay in the joyous fields,  
for a length of days, till the cycle of time,  
complete, removes the hardened stain, and leaves  
pure ethereal thought, and the brightness of natural air.  
All these others the god calls in a great crowd to the river Lethe,  
after they have turned the wheel for a thousand years,  
so that, truly forgetting, they can revisit the vault above,  
and begin with a desire to return to the flesh.'

**Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.735-751**

**Read the whole of book 6 of the *Aeneid* here:**

[Virgil \(70 BC–19 BC\) - \*Aeneid\*: VI](#)