

# Roman Household Spirits: Manes, Panes and Lares

by Joshua J. Mark, 28 October 2019

To the ancient Romans, everything was imbued with a divine spirit (*numen*, plural: *numina*) which gave it life. Even objects like rocks and trees possessed a *numen*, a belief which no doubt grew out of the early religious practice of **animism**. There were spirits of a place, of rivers and springs, hills and valleys, the home - and even aspects of the home - as well as those who guarded, or could threaten, the people who lived there.



*Pompeii Fresco with Lares.* by Carole Raddato (CC BY-NC-SA)

## Spiritual Life of State & Home

In ancient Rome, religion was state-sponsored. The gods were thought to have a vested interest in the health and success of the Roman state and so religious beliefs and practices were not just suggested but **mandated**. People were expected to participate in state-sponsored religious rituals and festivals but also to appease and honor the spirits of their homes.

**Animism- the attribution of a soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.**

Although there were regular festivals honoring state gods such as **Jupiter** and **Juno**, **Mars** and **Saturn**, individual Roman lives were influenced to a greater degree by the spirits of the earth, the home, and the spirits of those who had passed on. These state festivals and the honors due to the gods were readily handled by the *pontifices* (priests), the *pontifex maximus* (high priest), the *rex sacrorum* (king of sacred things), the *augures* (diviners), and the minor priests of the individual deities known as the *flamines*.

These authorities had the job of honoring the gods well in hand while it was up to each individual household (specifically the head of that household) to honor their own spirits. It seems likely, therefore, that the people thought it was better by far to forget to sacrifice at the temple of Jupiter at a festival than to eat a meal or leave the house in the morning without thanking the spirits which guided, provided for, and protected one's family.

**A HOME IN WHICH RITUALS WERE KEPT & THE SPIRITS WERE HONORED WOULD THRIVE WHILE THOSE WHO NEGLECTED THE SPIRITS WOULD SUFFER ACCORDINGLY.**

This is not to say forgetting Jupiter was inconsequential by any means, only that the spirits which walked with one daily and guarded the hearth and home took precedence in one's day-to-day rituals because they would make their displeasure known immediately in a person's life while Jupiter might wait to punish the state on a larger scale.

Roman religion was based on the concept of **quid pro quo** ("this for that"), and it was understood that, as long as one paid proper respect to the spirits of one's home, one would enjoy health and prosperity. This was true of the gods as a whole but, the closer to one's daily existence a god or spirit came, the greater attention one needed to pay to those divine forces.

There were many different spirits in Roman religious belief, but the ones who most directly affected a family's home and daily life were:

- *Panes & Penates*
- *Lares*
- *Parentes*
- *Manes*
- *Lemures*
- *Genius*
- *Genius Loci*
- *Umbræ*



*Janus.* by Loudon dodd (CC BY-SA)

Additionally, there was the god **Janus**, god of beginnings but also of gates and doorways, and **Vesta**, goddess of the hearth and home, who required the homeowner's special attention. Janus also had helper-deities in guarding the doors of a house: **Cardea** (goddess of hinges), **Forculus** (god of the door itself, especially double doors), and **Limentinus** (god of the threshold). Further, the boundaries of one's property were protected by another god, **Terminus**, who inhabited the boundary stone marking one's property line from a neighbor's.

**Panes and Penates** (pronounced Pah-nays and Pe-nah-tays) were the spirits of the pantry and the kitchen. It was the *panes/penates* who kept food in the house and provided a pleasant atmosphere in which to live. They protected foodstuffs from spoilage but also provided the means whereby a family procured food in the first place. Accordingly, statuettes of the *panes/penates* would be taken out of their cabinet, usually located in the kitchen area, and set on the table during meals. Families gave thanks to them before eating and a portion of the meal was set aside in their honor and then burned afterwards in the hearth fire as a ritual offering to them. The first fruits of the harvest were offered to them regularly and they were thanked at every significant event in a family's life such as a birth, a birthday, promotion, or the marriage of one's children. There was a public festival of communal thanksgiving and offerings around 14 October annually.



*Penates.* by The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA)

**THE LARES WERE THE SPIRITS OF ONE'S FAMILIAL DEAD (NOT THE GENERAL DEAD) REQUIRING ACKNOWLEDGMENT & HONOR DAILY.**

**Lares** (pronounced Lah-rays) took on different characteristics at different times in Rome's history and were considered guardian spirits and the spirits of one's dead ancestors in different eras.

Alternately, the *lares* were the spirits of one's familial dead (not the general dead) requiring acknowledgement and honor daily. There was a cupboard-shrine in the home (the *lararium*), usually in the atrium, which housed their statuettes and from which they worked to make sure the family prospered. In this, they were closely associated with the *panes/penates* and rituals to all three were often combined. These spirits were known as **Lares Familiares** (spirits of the family) or **Lares Domestici** (spirits of the home) but *lares* were also acknowledged in protecting the community (**Lares Compitales**) and were honored at the Compitalia Festival on 22 December.

**Parentes** (pronounced Pah-rent-ays) were associated with the *lares* as defined as the spirits of one's ancestors but were also those of one's immediate family - a mother or father - who had passed on but were also the spirits of one's living family. If a Roman were to travel to, say, Athens, he would bring along the statuettes of his wife and children, along with some fire from his hearth, so that wherever he went, they would go also.

*Manes* (pronounced Mah-nays) were the collective dead (*di manes* = the divine dead) who inhabited the afterlife. Anyone who died became a *mane* and then were specified as a *lare* or a *parentes* by their family.

The *mane* was the divine spark of life in each person which was thought to reside in the head. Busts of one's father, mother, or more distant ancestors were made not only to honor and remember them through a work of art but, just as importantly, to allow their *mane* to inhabit the bust whenever it pleased and to make it welcome. These busts were usually located in the atrium of a home, the public room of the house where parties were thrown or serious political or civic discussions were held. The *manes* could, therefore, participate in these gatherings through their busts. *Manes* were included in the festival of Parentalia as well as those of the Feralia and the Lemuria, though this latter festival was focused far more on the *lemures*.



*Atrium of Villa San Marco in Stabiae. by Carole Raddato (CC BY-NC-SA)*

*Genius* was the household spirit of manhood and was symbolized by the snake. The household *genius* was honored on the birthday of the head of the household and was defined as "a spirit of manhood" with special influence over the marriage bed. The *genius* was also thought to enable the head of the household to do what needed to be done. The *genius* of the house, manifested in the *paterfamilias* – the father and head of the family – ideally worked in concert with the *Genius Loci* – the spirit of the ground on which one's house was built. These two spirits were completely different entities but if the *genius loci* was honored and appeased, then the *genius* of the household would be also and the family would live in peace and prosperity.

*Umbrae* (shades) were ghosts who returned from the afterlife and were also referenced as *imagines*, *species*, and *immanes* (shapeless). *Umbrae* were neither good or bad but could be interpreted as either depending on how they appeared to a person. If a ghost appeared to one in a dream, this was usually considered a good thing but only if it was the spirit of a loved one and especially if the ghost relayed some important information such as where they had put their will or some valuable the family thought lost.

Conversely, if the spirit of a stranger appeared in a dream, it was a bad omen and, even worse, if a ghost appeared to a person who was awake. This was interpreted as a haunting for some misdeed on the part of the living person. One would then need to examine what one might have done (such as skimping on the funeral feast) and make amends. *Umbrae* were honored with the other spirits at Feralia and Lemuria but, just to be safe, amulets and charms were worn or placed on doorposts or in rooms and rituals observed to placate and keep them away.

*Lemures* (pronounced Leh-mur-ays) were the uneasy or wrathful or mischievous dead. Today a *lemure* would be known as a poltergeist, an angry spirit who disrupts the home until its needs are addressed or it is exorcised by some spiritual authority. These spirits were collectively *manes* – divine spirits of those who had once lived - but were those who, for one reason or another, were unhappy in the afterlife. The most common reason for a spirit to return as a *lemure* was improper observance of funerary rites or **burial** or not complying with the deceased's wishes as set down in their will.

A *mane* could also return as a *lemure*, however, if they felt they were not being properly honored and remembered by the family. A *lare*, *parentes*, or the collective *mane* could become *lemures* if proper offerings and prayers were not made to their satisfaction. The Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE), in his work *Fasti*, Book V (8 CE), describes how the *lemures* brought chaos on Rome when the people forgot to honor them properly through the Lemuria festival. Lemuria was held 9,11, and 13 May and would later become All Saint's Day in the Church, honoring the holy dead, before it was moved to 1 November in the 9th century CE.

**TODAY A LEMURE WOULD BE KNOWN AS A POLTERGEIST, AN ANGRY SPIRIT WHO DISRUPTS THE HOME UNTIL ITS NEEDS ARE ADDRESSED.**

Everyone, throughout their lives, was watched over or influenced by some combination of the above spirits. There is no spirit mentioned in Roman religious or secular literature, however, specifically named as attending a person's death.

The funeral, then, was for the living, not to specifically honor the dead. The family would sacrifice a pig, carry out a ritual cleansing of the house, and then have a feast with guests as a symbol of life continuing on in the home. Once the dead had moved on as spirits, then was the time for worship and prayers honoring who they had been in life and who they remained in the afterlife.

Only the living, who daily lived with the uncertainty of their future, required spiritual protection and assurance. The spirits of the dead, as well as the eternal spirits of the earth, guided and protected the Romans in their daily endeavors but, when forgotten, or when a sacrifice or prayer seemed more an act of custom than of actual care, the spirits withdrew their favor and one suffered misfortune great or small. It was for this reason, that a typical Roman family, no matter how devoutly they attended the state rituals and festivals honoring the gods, would always make sure to honor the spirits of their hearth, home, and those who had gone before them.

**Compitalia was a festival celebrated once a year in honor of the *Lares Compitales*, household deities of the crossroads, to whom sacrifices were offered at the places where two or more ways meet.**

**The word comes from the Latin *compitum*, a cross-way.**



*A rare fresco from a building near Pompeii, depicting Roman men in togae praetextae with dark red borders and probably participating in the **Compitalia**.*