



ROMAN BIRTH

1. Newborn is placed on ground (Macr. Sat. 1.12.20)
2. Newborn opens eyes
3. Newborn is bathed, anointed, and dressed
4. 9 day period between birth and naming of son on the 'dies lustricus' (8 day period for girls) (Macr. Sat. 1.16.36)
 1. Marks end of liminal phase of life
 2. *Neniae* sung as lullabies to babies

INTRODUCTION

Women in ancient Rome were tasked with ushering people into the world and out of it. Their roles in these two capacities mirror each other. Modern scholarship has not been able to reconstruct exactly what the Roman afterlife consisted of, and it is likely that the Romans never fully developed a consensus themselves. Much of Roman funerary ritual is distinctly Roman - i.e. devoid of Greek influence. This project, through comparison of Roman birth and death rituals, aims to glean an understanding of the spiritual beliefs of those who came before the Romans.



Marble relief depicting a birthing scene from Ostia, Italy. In the Science Museum, London, England (CC BY 4.0).

METHODS

There is a limited amount of evidence for Roman funerary ritual in ancient literature. These steps have been pieced together from the writings of many Roman and Greek authors (Polybius, Varro, Cicero, Lucretius, Livy, Ovid, Valerius Maximus, Pliny the Elder, Petronius, Seneca the Younger, Tacitus, Apuleius, Servius, Macrobius), funerary art, and archaeological evidence. Difficulties arise when attempting to account for variances across space, time, and socio-economic status, as most literary evidence focuses on the ideal death of an aristocratic elite male in Rome.



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What Happened to Roman Souls? An Analysis of Roman Birth and Death Rituals

PRESENTER: Meghan O'Donnell

Similarities between Roman birth and death rituals suggest a belief in a rebirth of the soul after death amongst pre-Roman Italic peoples.



Funerary relief from Amiternum, first century BC, showing a Roman funeral procession, the '*pompa funebris*.' In the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, L'Aquila, Italy. Photo: Jane Masségli, (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

"nunc hic nunc illic superant vitalia rerum / et superantur item: miscetur funere vagor / quem pueri tollunt visentis luminis oras"
-Lucretius 2.575-77

"Now on this side, now on that, the vital force conquers and is conquered in turn; mixed in with the funeral dirge is the wail that children raise upon first seeing the shores of light."



ROMAN DEATH

1. '*Depositio*' - dying person is placed on ground
2. Eyes of deceased are closed
3. Deceased is bathed, anointed and dressed
4. 9 day period after death
 1. Days 1-7: '*collocatio*' - deceased is laid out in the atrium of the home
 2. Day 8: cremation
 3. Day 9: burial or entombment
5. Funeral procession
 1. '*Laudatio funebris*' - speech commemorating deceased given at *rostra*
 2. *Neniae* sung as funeral dirges by *praeeficae*, hired mourners (shown below and left by arrows)
6. Eyes of deceased opened on pyre
7. 9 days after burial or entombment, the '*novendialis*' feast marks end of mourning period

1. Ov. Pont. 2.2.45; trist. 3.3.40; Serv. Aen. 12.395
2. Ov. trist. 3.3.44
3. Serv. Aen. 6.218; Apul. Met. 8.14; Liv. 34.7.2-3
4. Serv. Aen. 5.64; Apul. Met. 9.31
5. Polyb. 6.53-4; Ov. Fast. 6.668
6. Plin. nat. 11.150
7. Tac. Ann. 6.5; Petron. Sat. 65



Tomb of the Haterii, c. 100 C.E. In the Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. Photo: Erin Taylor, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Roman funerary ritual acts as an inversion of birth ritual
- The funeral procession marks the beginning of the deceased's 'rebirth' out of the liminal state between life and death
- *Neniae* were sung at the beginning and end of a person's life, as both lullabies and funeral dirges, perhaps to help usher them into and out of the world
- These practices may have come out of a belief in a cyclical existence of the soul, passed down to the Romans from those living on the Italic peninsula before them

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