

Roman Festivals of the Dead

There are two festivals of the dead mentioned on page 117 in your textbook. These are the *Parentālia* and the *Lemūria*. The Roman poet, Ovid, gives us many details about these unusual festivals. The *Parentalia*, a festival in honor of deceased family members, was celebrated between February 13 and February 21. All temples were closed and no weddings celebrated. Families walked outside the city to visit family tombs and offer simple sacrifices of wine, grain, salt, or flowers. Sometimes flowers, tiles with wreaths, or bread soaked in wine were placed in the middle of the road to honor the spirits. It was a reflective week, a time to remember loved ones and the importance of the family. On February 22 the Romans celebrated the *Carista*, the feast of the dear ones. The living, now that they had paid respect to the dead, gathered in their own homes to celebrate the family and to resolve any outstanding quarrels. They made sacrifices to the *larēs* and enjoyed a family feast.

In contrast to the *Parentalia*, the *Lemuria* was a very private ceremony, taking place entirely in the home and designed to appease and drive away the *lemurēs*, hostile ghosts. The *Lemuria* was held on May 9, 11, and 13 when these ghosts were thought to wander at night and haunt the house. At this festival it was the custom for the *paterfamiliās* to rise at midnight, wash his hands, and walk barefoot through the house. Any form of binding (e.g. of the hair or of the cord around the waist) during a festival of the dead was considered unlucky. As the *paterfamiliās* walked through the house, he spat out nine black beans or else threw them backwards over his shoulder. Ovid mentions some of the other rituals: "As the *paterfamiliās* walks through the house throwing beans, he says nine times, 'These I let fall; with these I ransom me and mine.' He washes his hands again, bangs some bronze cymbals or pots together, and says nine times, 'Be gone, ancestral spirits.'" The beans, picked up by the *lemurēs* as they followed the *paterfamiliās* through the house, were offered as payment to protect the family from the spirits of the dead.

Referring to the readings above, answer the following questions.

- 1 What practices were observed during the *Parentalia* and the *Carista*?
- 2 Explain the difference between the *Parentalia* and the *Lemuria* festivals.
- 3 The *Lemuria*'s origin is thought to have begun when Romulus felt the need to appease the spirit of his brother, Remus, whom he had murdered in a quarrel over the founding of Rome. What does this suggest about the types of actions which might anger the *lemurēs*?
- 4 What is the significance of the ritual washing of the hands at the beginning and end of the *Lemuria*?

- 5 What was the purpose of clanging the bronze cymbals at the end of the ceremony?
- 6 Why did the *paterfamiliās* leave the beans for the *lemurēs*? Why was it important that he not turn around?
- 7 Although the Lemuria was a private family ritual there was a similar ritual for the State. What sort of *lemurēs* would the State have to fear?
- 8 As a class, re-enact the festival of the Lemuria. Here are some items to consider before your re-creation:

- You must dress in Roman tunics and/or togas and pallas, be barefoot, and have the cord on your tunic loosened. Your hair should not be tied back or bound in any way.
- In Roman times only the *paterfamiliās* of each family was in the procession. In our modern re-creation girls will also participate in the procession.
- Bring in black beans and pots and pans.
- Practice the incantations.

