

# Roman

## Practices

Both cremation and burial was practiced by the Romans. The Romans maintained a very systematic approach when tending to the dead. First, relatives would close the deceased's eyes while calling out the name of their dearly departed three times. The body was then washed and a coin was placed in the mouth. The coin was payment to Charon, who ferried the dead across the rivers of the underworld.

If a married man was dying, his wife would stay close to him and when he died would kiss him. This was done because it was believed that the soul left with the last breath. By kissing her husband the wife took the soul into herself and could protect it.

The dead were then put on display, laid out in their finest garb and jewels: the length of this ancient "wake" depended upon the departed person's position in society. Upper-class individuals, such as the nobility, were often put on display for as long as a week while lower class individuals might be only be put on display for a day. Paid female mourners might also be hired to mourn a death by wailing and pulling out their hair.

After the display, a funerary procession followed. Roman funerals were typically held at night. Hired musicians led the parade, followed by mourners and relatives who often carried portrait sculptures or wax masks of the ancestors of the deceased. The procession would end outside of town (it was forbidden to bury anyone within the city limits). If the person was being cremated a pyre, or cremation fire, was built. As the fire burned, a eulogy, oration and/or chants were given in honor of the deceased. After the pyre was extinguished, a family member (usually the deceased's mother or wife) would gather the ashes and place them in an urn. Whether the body was buried or cremated there were three ceremonial necessities: the consecration of the resting place, the casting of earth upon the remains, and the purification of all polluted by the death. In ancient times the body, if buried, was lowered into the grave either upon the couch on which it had been brought to the spot, or in a coffin of burnt clay or stone. Eulogies, orations and chats were also performed when the deceased was buried.

The tombs of the Romans were often decorated with both inscriptions and ornamental depictions, but rarely directly represented death. One of the most common depictions was a horse head, representing departure.

Many poorer Romans belonged to funeral societies, called *collegia*, to ensure proper burial. They would pay monthly dues, which would be employed to cover the cost of funerals for members.

After the burial or cremation the immediate family solemnly observed the "Nine Days of Sorrow". During this time funeral games were sometime held. Lastly, the deceased was remembered during the annual memorial festivals held from February 13th to the 25th.

Children were buried without ceremony, as were slaves.

## Deities and Important Concepts

- Pluto  
Ruler of the underworld. He was said to have an invisible helmet and a golden chariot.
- Proserpina  
Queen of the underworld. She lives six months in the underworld with Pluto because she ate six pomegranate seeds in the land of the dead.
- Ceres  
Mother of Proserpina. Each spring she makes sure all the flowers bloom in welcome when her daughter back. Each fall when Proserpina returns to Pluto, she lets all the crops die as she mourns being separated from her daughter.

- Cerberus  
The three headed dog that guards the underworld.
- Libitina  
Goddess of funerals and burials. Undertakers were called *libitinarii*. Her grove was located at Esquiline Hill.
- Nenia Dea<sup>1</sup>  
Ancient funeral deity who had a sanctuary outside of the Porta Viminalis. She was the personification of the funerary lament's protective power. She was therefore a goddess also connected to the end of a person's life.
- Mana Genita  
Goddess who determined if a child was born alive or dead. Her name means "flux and birth" or "flowing birth"; Especially appropriate to call on if the funeral is for a child.
- Charon  
Ferryman god who takes the deceased across the River Acheron Styx. A coin is placed in the mouth of the deceased to pay for this service.
- Mania / Mania  
Goddess of the dead.

Mother of ghost, the undead, other spirits of the night, the Lares (guardian deities who may have been hero-ancestors), and the Manes (chthonic deities sometimes thought to represent souls of deceased loved one).

### Modern Adaptations

- State something like 'It is good to remember our dead. We thus start this ceremony by all of us calling out the name of our beloved deceased three times. \_\_\_ (3x)'.
- Place a coin either in the urn or coffin. Stating that it is an offering to Charon to smooth the transition of the dead to the underworld.
- Have a processional to the grave site led by musicians.
- Give out pictures of the ancestors of the deceased to be carried in the procession to the grave. Put the pictures by the coffin / urn as a reminder that the deceased will be joining their ancestors.
- Have athletic games or activities in honor of the deceased. This is especially appropriate if the person was athletic in life. For example, have people go on a nature hike in a place that the deceased liked to go in life.
- Place a picture or sculpture of a horse head in the grave of the deceased as a symbol that they will travel swiftly and with ease to the underworld.
- Conduct chants and eulogies to the dead.
- Create a website or social media oration dedicated to the memory of the deceased.
- Fulfill the three obligations of a funeral as follows:
  - Consecrate the resting place using salt water, incense, and/or prayers
  - Cast earth upon the remains. If in an urn add some earth to the urn.
  - Have people wash their hands when leaving the grave site.
- Call on the Lares, the honored ancestors who protect us in life and death.
- Call on the Manes, to represent the soul of the newly departed in its new form.

### Sample Readings

#### Common Epitaph

non fui, non sum, non curo, "I did not exist, I do not exist, I'm not concerned about it."

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<sup>1</sup> "Nenia Dea." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 17 Sept. 2013. Web. 08 Oct. 2013. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nenia\\_Dea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nenia_Dea)

### ***From Seneca's collection of letters***<sup>2</sup>

Life is like a play – it doesn't matter how long the action is drawn out, but how good the acting is. It makes no difference at what point you stop. Stop whenever you choose; but make sure your conclusion's a good one.

### ***Poetry: mid 1st c AD.***<sup>3</sup>

Men restrained their lamentations and a deep silent grief over-took the people. Just as the moment of death a household is shocked and speechless before the body is lamented over and laid out, and before the mother with disheveled hair calls her maids to beat their breasts with cruel arms; the mother still clings to the limbs stiff with loss of life and the face with eyes fierce in death. She feels no fear, but not yet grief; not thinking she wonders at her loss.

### **Resources**

- National Geographic video on Roman Burial customs  
<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/videos/roman-burial-ritual/>
- Cremation in a Roman port town  
[http://www.umich.edu/~kelseydb/Exhibits/Death\\_on\\_Display/Cremation\\_Group/index.html](http://www.umich.edu/~kelseydb/Exhibits/Death_on_Display/Cremation_Group/index.html)
- The Private Life of the Romans by Harold Whetstone Johnston, Revised by Mary Johnston  
[http://www.forumromanum.org/life/johnston\\_14.html#464](http://www.forumromanum.org/life/johnston_14.html#464)
- A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities, John Murray, London, 1875 – Funus.  
[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA\\*/Funus.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Funus.html)

Has lots of details about the specifics of the rites performed. Such as women wearing their hair disheveled and men covering their hair during the procession.

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<sup>2</sup> "Death in Ancient Rome." Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/kc6kmcs>

<sup>3</sup> "Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook." Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2013. p. 96 <http://tinyurl.com/og3hs9n>