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Review Article



Trees and Streets

Current Directions in the Study of Roman Religions

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Abstract

Review of: H.I. Flower, *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden. Religion at the Roman Street Corner*. This excellent book shows how religion and politics interacted during the transition from Republic to Empire. The *lares* are considered to be ‘gods of place’—this category will prove to be useful for future studies of Roman religions.

Keywords

Lares – Roman religions – Religion of place – Materiality – Gods of place

Flower, Harriet I. (2017). *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden. Religion at the Roman Street Corner*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. 416 pp. Pr. \$45.00 (hb). ISBN 9780691175003.

1 *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden*

The *Lares*, *lararia* and *Compitalia* have mainly been researched in the context of domestic cults, weddings, imperial festivals, festivals in urban contexts, and as cult places. *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden* also deals with these contexts, but additionally takes the *lares* outside of the realm of domestic religion and considers them as a political phenomenon in the Late Republic and the Early Principate. As such, this is a valuable new book in its own right. At the same time it is a catalyst of new methodological and conceptual directions for the study of Roman religion. Here, the *Dancing Lares* will first be discussed in relation to previous scholarship about the *lares* after which the book will be contextualized in a recent trend: ‘religion of place’.

In the context of Flower’s earlier publications, the author’s endeavour into the field of ancient religions may perhaps seem a rather surprising one—it, however, makes sense on second thought. Flower’s interest in Roman politics has always been combined with a clear focus on its relation to the history of mentality. Her research interests have been, for example, ‘memory sanctions’ (such as the *damnatio memoriae* leading to disgrace and oblivion) and ancestor masks (a conduit for remembrance of the ancestors within the household and among the family—and a way to show this remembrance to the outside world). The theme of the *Dancing Lares* ties in to issues of the *familia*, household and remembrance. Flower’s earlier books are concerned with chronological developments between Republic and Principate, as is the *Dancing Lares*. The choice for the theme of this book, as well as its temporal scope and focus on the transition between Republic and Principate can in this way be seen as a follow-up to *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (2000) and *The Art of Forgetting. Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (2006).

One of the great merits of the *Dancing Lares* is that it is based on the interpretation of a great variety of sources: literary, numismatic, archaeological, and epigraphical sources are combined (the materials in the latter two categories are mostly from Rome, Delos and Pompeii, showing regional dynamics). An all-round scholar is needed to successfully combine these sources in the way that Flower does. This is best illustrated by referring to her re-interpretations of the altar of the *Vicus Sandalarius* (pp. 291–298) and the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (pp. 320–328). Her careful analysis of these sources builds a convincing argument regarding a topic about which there are no myths or other primary sources that specifically explain the identity or function of the *lares* to us. In Flower’s own words (p. 39): *lares* are “unremarkable and, therefore, not remarked upon. Their value was closely related to their essentially Roman identities, as well

as to their accessibility for everyone.” While the term ‘embeddedness’ seems to have lost some of its force in recent years and does not occur in this book, Flower explicitly demonstrates throughout her argument how the cult of the *lares* was central to both individual and communal, civic and domestic, as well as ‘public’ and ‘private’ practices. In this vein she analyses: “Rather than the sphere of religion collapsing into politics (through manipulation and propaganda), the sphere of politics seemed to be collapsing into that of religion, albeit gradually over time.” (p. 347)

In recent literature on Roman religion, the *lares*, *penates* and *genius/iuno* of the master/mistress (and later of the emperor Augustus) are often discussed together¹—this makes sense in the setting of household religion. However, Flower first shows the importance of distinguishing the *lares* as a separate and distinctive group of gods with their own functions. In addition to being related to the household in city and countryside, the *lares* are shown to be important at crossings and boundaries in and between neighbourhoods. Flower then proceeds to show how the organization of this cult was not only important for the household, but also for the wider community, and the city and its politics. We knew how the *Compitalia* were connected with political violence in the Late Republic—but Flower carefully shows us how and why this was so, and considers how the emperor Augustus transformed the *lares*, as a result of which the emperor could become patron of the humbler classes.

The book is presented in four parts, starting in part I (pp. 1-75) with the fundamental (but much debated!) question about who the *lares* actually were perceived to be: vengeful spirits of deceased family members or benevolent and protective guardians? Instead, Flower proposes that it is, in first instance, more fruitful to see the *lares* as ‘gods of place’. The question what Romans actually did during their rituals then follows: did they appease or celebrate their *lares*? Flower argues for the latter: the *lares* were in first instance gods who protected the Roman territory and the well-being of its inhabitants, through time developing into protectors of the home (including all its inhabitants) as well as of crossroads. They became associated with safety, domesticity, and ‘being at home’ and needed to be properly worshipped at the designated days. Therefore, the master of a household could delegate responsibilities (perhaps only in his absence) to others, most likely slaves and freedmen—or women. For example, Cato mentions a *vilica* (housekeeper) who could perform the necessary rituals at the hearth in the kitchen as part of her household duties; a *vilicus* could represent his master during the *Compitalia* and when honouring the *lares* at the cross-roads shrines of the property. Another illustration of their

¹ E.g., Rives 2007, 188-121.

protective function is that the *lares* were a point of reference for new members of the household: after a bride entered her new house for the first time and had greeted her husband, she would acknowledge the *lares* of her new home, and would then go back outside to acknowledge those of the neighbourhood. These transition rituals indicate that she was now a member of a new community, and part of a new place. This shows the *lares* as 'gods of place': both of the home and of the neighbourhood. The worship for the *lares* was part and parcel of the Roman sacred urban landscape. Their altars (*compita*) punctuated the streets of the city of Rome. Special attention is given to interpretation of the images of *lares* from Campania, which confirms their function as protecting 'gods of place'. They were—in Flower's interpretation—depicted together with the genius of the inhabitants of the house (the genius of place of the human world) and the genius of place of the natural world in the shape of a snake.

Part II (pp. 76-159) shows and discusses the physical setting of the public cult sites in Rome (I would have expected that the lack of archaeological remains in the countryside had been given more attention). There were two temples to the *lares* in Rome, both first attested during the Republican period. Although much is unclear, Flower argues that the oldest temple was for 'over-arching' *lares* of the city, while a second century BC temple to the *lares permanentini* should be seen in the context of Roman expansionism. The Romans were now also at home on the seas. Additionally, we know of a number of communal shrines to the *lares*—for example, the *lares* at one shrine safeguarded the walls of Rome, and another shrine is a landmark on the oldest pomerium. Lastly there are the *compita*, at the cross-roads in Rome, where the *lares* protected the area as well as its boundaries: "... Rome was conceived of as a network of *compita*, a network that brought people together in and beyond the street and neighbourhood (*vicus*)" (p. 136). The *lares* were, then, honoured on a number of levels within the city of Rome.

Part III (pp. 160-254) discusses the Republican public worship of the *lares* and especially the festival of the *Compitalia*. Flower considers the *Compitalia* to be a festival concerned with 'boundaries': "Boundaries were recognized, crossed, and reaffirmed in familiar rituals that celebrated a sense of place and of being 'at home' and part of a household within a wider community" (p. 160). More explicit discussion of De Polignac's thesis—and the criticism it has received—would have supported the argument. Ideas have already been developed about how such notions could be used for Republican Italy.² At the evening before the *Compitalia*, dolls (free individuals), balls (slaves) and other decorations were hung at the compital shrines—and later at doors—which

² Stek 2009, 58-65.

served to invoke protection of the local *lares*. These dolls and balls were also used to count who was living in the neighbourhood. Cakes and such were offered. On the day of the *Compitalia*, a pig was sacrificed, possibly after a *lustratio*. In the country, any household could celebrate at its *compitum*. In the city, celebrations took place on the streets and at crossroads, and involved every inhabitant of the city—and in this sense it was truly a festival of togetherness and protection of Rome and her neighbourhoods. The importance of this aspect could have been supported by including a discussion of the neighbourhood shrines in the context of divination, for example Livy 38.36.4: in 188 BC a solar eclipse took place and it was proclaimed that the street-corner shrines (*in omnibus compitis*) would be the focus of a three-day period of prayer during which expiation took place.³

Flower relates this worship and the festival to the connection between inhabitants of the neighbourhoods, their leaders, and local administrative structures. The *vicomagistri* (usually freedmen) played an important role: they had a leading function in the cult of the *lares* at the *compita* and were points of contact in the *vicus* for magistrates. Another local structure were the *collegia* in which groups of local shopkeepers or craftsmen from the *vicus* had united themselves. Flower shows a development in the late second and first centuries where politicians sought out the *vici* (also through the *vicomagistri* and *collegia*) for local support. A concurrent development was that people began to show their political support by providing offerings to politicians at *compita*—to the likes of the Gracchi, Gratidianus and Sulla. Where the *Compitalia* were at first simply a time during which humbler inhabitants of Rome could express their political views more freely, in the 60s and 50s BC political unrest became closely connected to the *Compitalia*—at least in the view of the elite: the *Compitalia* at this time “developed a popular political overtone and even a reputation for violence” (xi). This resulted in temporary bans on subversive *collegia* and the *ludi compitalicii*.

Part IV (pp. 255–347) shows that Augustus introduced important innovations to the cult of the *lares*. In the city of Rome Augustus “gave” the people the *lares augusti* in 7 BC (which were not his household gods, but an extra epithet for the existing *lares*). In addition, Augustus added two festivals in spring and summer during which the shrines were decorated with flowers. The cult of these ‘new’ *lares* was celebrated by the locals—but especially by freedmen and slaves—at the *compita*, under leadership of the *vicomagistri*. Flower argues that these innovations were closely connected to Augustus’ “cycle of

3 But see also Obs. 13: in 165 BC there was a period of disease and hunger—after consultation the Sibylline Books ordered that the people had to turn to the cross-road shrines.

renewal" (p. 339)—which was, in turn, connected to his own life-cycle and achievements. It can even be said that "Augustus' reimagining of the cult of *lares* at the crossroads throughout Rome is one of the most striking and wide-reaching aspects of the princeps' religious program, one that also had political and social implications." (p. 255)

Flower argues that two interrelated deeper explanations can be given: the changes are reflections of Augustus' interest in local religion; and they showed the citizens that he was a new kind of *patronus*, who provided benefactions and was connected to all those living in the city. In this way he was integrated in each local community (including the poor and those of low status). By contextualizing Augustus' reforms of the cult of the *lares* as part of his other activities related to benefactions, Flower provides evidence that the latter explanation is very important. The cult of the *lares* was an excellent way for Augustus to communicate his patronage to local communities. "In a sprawling city of around a million people, *lares augusti* afforded him greatly enhanced visibility throughout the network of crossroads shrines that articulated communication and communities" (p. 284). His reforms are, then, about expressing "the special relationship of Augustus with the capital of the empire" (xi), and this also explains why the *lares augusti* are only found in Rome. Although this is a much debated topic, Flower argues there was no such thing as a cult for Augustus' *genius* in Rome during Augustus' lifetime (pp. 301-302)—enhancing the importance of the *lares augusti* even more. Religion was a much more visible way for Augustus to communicate his prominence and power than his (invisible) constitutional powers: "they [the *Lares*] also helped facilitate relations between masters and slaves, as well as maintaining continuity with those freed and enfranchised, Rome's newest citizens." (p. 349)

Food for thought is provided in the epilogue, where Flower proposes a novel way of looking at the rise of Christianity and decline of traditional Roman religions. We should not only see 392 as the year of the ban on sacrifice, but note that traditional offerings to the *lares* and other household gods also were banned at that time. This was crucial: these gods, which could be worshipped in a simple way and at home, were too much of a representation of traditional 'Romanness' in a new world.

I was impressed by the extensive, elegant, and especially useful inclusion of many explicative footnotes. Even those scholars who do not share my enthusiasm for explicative footnotes in general, will be convinced: in this case they truly contribute to the readers' understanding and they show the author's mastery of the sources and current debates. While the structure of the book in four parts and 32 subparts does not always contribute to clarity for the

unsuspecting reader, I assume this approach was chosen because it allows for relatively easy cross-referencing—which the author frequently makes use of (and it works very well). This results in a book which reminds me of an exquisite circle dance: the subparts are linked together like dancers holding hands. They dance alone while always congregating back in the centre and touching at the center of the dancefloor—reminding the reader of the core arguments the book is so successfully making.

2 *Dancing Lares in the Context of the Current Study of Roman Religion*

The *Dancing Lares* relates to the ongoing debate concerned with connections between religion and politics. The study of Roman religion and its relation to politics goes way back in time, but prominent authors such as Orlin and Santangelo have recently contributed to the study of this question in the Republic with their own particular aims and purposes.⁴ As mentioned above, the book under review here is focused on the experience of religion in relation to politics on a more local level. A related upcoming new area of studies is ‘urban religion’—where religion in relation to spatiality and local networks (including political ones) are key. A conference with the title ‘Religion of Quarters: Practicing Religion on a Neighbourhood Scale in the Hellenistic and Imperial Periods’ is planned for summer 2018 (organized by Harry Maier, Jörg Rüpke and Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli). Its proceedings will undoubtedly strengthen the impact of the *Dancing Lares*. While the concept of ‘urban religion’ also comprises other categories and foci, the volume under review here is a forerunner in this field as it illustrates how religion functioned in a neighbourhood context and as part of a local network.

Flower’s *Dancing Lares* is also an illustration of a related trend that is fast becoming a new focus in the study of Roman religions: that of ‘religion of place’. Flower argues that the *lares* are ‘gods of place’, which makes their shrines part of a ‘religion of place’. This religion of place moves away from monumental structures such as temples and the ‘bigger gods’ that were worshipped there. Instead, its focus is on ‘smaller gods’ which were more central to everyday experience—for example *lares*, water deities, Silvanus, and those honoured at

4 Notable monographs: Orlin 1997; Orlin 2013; Santangelo 2013. Naturally, authors such as J. Scheid and C. Ando should also be mentioned here.

doorposts.⁵ It is striking that the ‘gods of place’ are mostly traditional divinities from the Italian peninsula and not exotic ones, the study of which has been so popular. They are perhaps not just ‘gods of place’ but also ‘gods who have always been at that place’.

Of course, there have been earlier studies on such features of Roman religion, like Dorcey’s volume on the cult of Silvanus.⁶ He sees this cult as both central to agriculture with Silvanus as patron of herds and shepherds, as well as to forests with Silvanus as overseer of the woods of the hunt. Silvanus is concerned with boundaries separating the farm from the woods and in this capacity he was considered to guard activity of man from the threat of the wild. The *lapis finalis* (boundary marker) personifies Silvanus: “Silvanus’ altars may themselves have been used as boundary markers, since they sometimes seem to have performed apotropaic function”.⁷ In this way, Silvanus can also be called a ‘god of place’. In the context of this review article, it is important to note that Silvanus has been argued to have a close tie with the *lares* (*augustales*). He was sometimes referred to as *Lar Agrestis* and shared dedications with them during the period of the Principate.⁸

Recently, the study of trees has been taken up by Hunt, albeit in a different context because her aim is to show how Roman religion was a ‘thinking religion’ by means of asking: “what did it mean to consider as sacred a material object which happens to be alive?”⁹ Still, she shows that what we here call ‘religions of place’ can show us beliefs and structures of Roman religions. ‘Gods of place’ can also come in the shape of water deities connected to a spring or stream in the sacred landscape, as studied by Ingrid Edlund-Berry. In her 2006 article, she focuses on the healing role of water and not primarily on the gods of place or boundary issue, but we may certainly see these gods in this context.¹⁰ The next kind of ‘religion of place’ that I see in recent literature are gods of thresholds, especially thresholds of houses but also of *pomeria*—these too are gods of liminality and of boundaries. A recent publication is the edited volume *Rites aux portes*, which is primarily concerned with the ancient Near East, but certainly shows promise for the study of religion in the Graeco-Roman world.¹¹

5 Places such as the house, garden and grave where religion took place have been the topic of earlier research. See recently Rüpke 2016, 233–262.

6 Dorcey 1992, cf. also *Les bois sacrés* 1993.

7 Dorcey 1992, 23.

8 Dorcey 1992, 24.

9 Hunt 2016, 27.

10 Edlund-Berry 2006a, 162–180, but for Tin/Tinia and Selvans/Silvanus as ‘gods of place’ see Edlund-Berry 2006b, 116–131.

11 Michel 2018 (n.v.).

What these ‘gods of places’ had in common was their popularity among the non-elite groups of society (as expressed in the courses through finds of many dedications, cult objects and so on). In all cases this is combined with the fact that there are very few literary sources explaining who they are or what their functions are—because those who produced the sources either took these issues for granted or did not deem them interesting enough to be discussed in more detail. It seems that, while these ‘smaller gods’ have been studied before, we see a revival of the study of such divinities. Why do they capture the imagination at this moment in time? This may well have to do with the re-increase of the importance of objects in the field of history, including the study of ancient religions. The new focus on materiality, the question how objects and humans relate, and even the concept of material agency have been on the rise for some years now.¹² This has re-invigorated interest in the study of ancient religion through material evidence in combination with epigraphical texts, but especially with regard to objects which were *thought to do something* under the influence of words or ritual (I am here refraining from the question whether objects truly have agency). In first instance, most will think about religious objects: Faraone’s new book on amulets has recently appeared.¹³ However, 2017 has similarly seen the arrival of two books concerned with the function and role of votives, provided to gods in order to ask them to cure an illness or in order to thank them for having done so.¹⁴ Flower’s book leads me to think that we should explicitly consider *places which were thought to do something* (and not just sanctuaries): the parts of the house central to the *lares*, Silvanus, trees, spring and doorposts. Materiality and locality cannot be separated in these instances. The renewed interest in this approach to ancient religions enables a study of the ‘smaller gods’—and much more. ‘Religions of place’ could also provide a new impetus to existing approaches studying particular phenomena in ancient religions—for example, to the study of *prodigia* in relationship to the location where they occurred, first commented on by Mommsen and more recently analyzed by authors such as MacBain and Rasmussen.¹⁵

I consider ‘gods of place’ worth an analysis as a category, as a window through which Roman religion can be seen, and as a way to provide impetus to current studies of spatiality and religion. An overarching monograph on different kinds of gods of place, presenting them as a category, has not been published yet. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to analyze all ‘gods of place’

12 A worthwhile introduction to the topic in Ter Keurs 2014, 45–60.

13 Faraone 2018.

14 Draycott and Graham 2017; Hughes 2017.

15 MacBain 1982, 25–33; Rasmussen 2003, 219–239.

together in order to find the thematic (in)consistencies in the way they were perceived to function (and were worshipped). To illustrate how 'gods of place' as a category could change the way we present Roman religion I have taken two recent excellent handbooks into consideration. In the *Blackwell Companion to Roman Religion*¹⁶ the categories are: changes, media, symbols and practices, actors and actions, different religious identities, and Roman religion outside and seen from the outside. The household and its gods are discussed in the category 'media'—the house is the medium, an interesting choice that does work in this volume. But what would have happened if 'place' had been one of the categories? It would have circumvented associations with the household gods as 'domestic religion' and provided new ways of approaching these gods. The next example is the *Blackwell Companion to the Archaeology of Roman Religion*,¹⁷ which is centered around the concept of 'lived religion' and does have a category 'creating spaces of experiences', which contains chapters about the home, gardens, and religion and tomb, as well as a category 'designing and appropriating sacred space' in which more monumental structures, oracular shrines, religious buildings and sanctuaries are discussed. Interestingly, water and religion is discussed in the category 'experience' and as mainly related to healing and cleaning. A category 'gods of place' would have provided opportunities to discuss everyday religion connected to boundaries, place and space from a different angle. I concur with Flower that 'gods of place' is indeed a fruitful category for the study of Roman religion.

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¹⁶ Rüpke 2007.

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