

## Rituals and Religious Community in the Roman *Curiae*

Roman religion is traditionally understood as having consisted of public rituals associated with the civic community and private rituals addressing the concerns of the household. This dichotomy obscures a wide range of religious activities in the city of Rome. Although many public rituals were celebrated on behalf of all citizens (*pro populo*), others were observed by smaller communities within the civic body. During the Compitalia in early January, for instance, neighbors gathered at local shrines (*compita*) to offer sacrifices to the *lares* of the crossroads. According to the mid-imperial lexicon of Sex. Pompeius Festus (284L), rites and festivals were also celebrated on behalf of Rome's hills (*pro montibus*), country districts (*pro pagis*), and *curiae* (*pro curis*), divisions of the citizenry that traced their origin to the reign of Romulus. Focusing on the thirty *curiae*, this paper suggests that rites occupying the middle ground between the rituals of the city and the rituals of the family merit careful study. More specifically, it argues that these religious experiences helped to shape the individual and collective identities of *curiales* and to define their relationship to the larger civic community.

The rituals of the *curiae* do not feature very prominently in modern histories of ancient Rome (the fullest treatments are in Palmer 1970 and Smith 2006). In part, this is because the tradition we have received is biased in favor of activities that were important to the elite priests and magistrates who constructed Rome's religious history. We are fortunate, however, that the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus took a special interest in the *curiae*, devoting three chapters of his *Roman Antiquities* to their ritual activities. Adopting an ethnographic approach, Dionysius dwells on details that are absent from our native Roman sources, including the importance of community and commensality. On festival days, he tells us, the *curiales* feasted together at common tables in their communal buildings, also known as *curiae* (2.23.1-2). In fact,

Dionysius claims to have witnessed these feasts, which he commends for their adherence to ancestral custom (2.23.5).

Religious rituals allowed *curiales* to solidify social bonds and to construct a shared identity that complemented their identity as citizens of Rome. In fact, the Fordicidia, the festival with which this paper is chiefly concerned, emphasized the connections between these overlapping identities. From Ovid, we learn that the *pontifices* sacrificed a pregnant cow (*forda*) to Tellus and that a parallel sacrifice was carried out in each of the thirty *curiae* (*Fast.* 4.629-640). When the individual sacrifices were complete, the chief Vestal burned the remains of the calves in the flame on the hearth of Vesta. The ashes, together with beanstalks and blood from the tail of the October Horse, constituted the *februa*, or ‘cleansing agents,’ which the Vestals distributed to the people at the Parilia a few weeks later. Romans celebrating the Fordicidia thus shared the experience with their fellow *curiales*, even as they contributed to the production of a ritual substance that would strengthen and preserve the entire community.

The size of Rome, a metropolis that had several hundred thousand, maybe close to a million inhabitants by the time of the early principate, must have prevented many citizens from participating fully in citywide festivals. In fact, Jörg Rüpke has argued that the size of the population makes it difficult to analyze Roman religion with the usual models for describing the religions of Mediterranean cities (Rüpke 2007: 4). Rüpke and his colleagues in the DFG research group “Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective” and in the ERC research project “Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘cults’ and ‘polis religion’” have focused our attention instead on the individual as a religious agent in a variety of ritual contexts (see, for example, Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Rüpke 2013; Kracke, Roux, and Rüpke 2013; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015). This paper suggests that the study of rituals belonging to smaller communities

within the city might also contribute to a more nuanced and finely delineated picture of Roman religion and the place of the individual within it.

### Bibliography

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