The Mystique of Race in Ancient Rome

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A fresco from the thermopolium of Lucius Vetutius Placidus in the city of Pompeii, depicting the spirit (genius) of the house central, flanked by Lares and Penates with Mercury on far left, Bacchus far right.

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Translated by Cologero

Racialist literature has not failed to emphasize everything that shows the importance attributed to lineage, people, origin, and ancestry in ancient Romanity at that time, and has also conducted research to recover the Aryan or Nordic-Aryan element and type in Romanity and to follow its destiny.

Because of the predominant interests in modern racialism and in the very nature of its development, this research is therefore almost always focused on the basically exterior and subordinate elements: thus it remains on the level of ancient law and custom, on certain aristocratic traditions, on the direct or indirect evidence in respect to a give physical type and, somewhat less often, is conveyed in the field of the most noted and widespread certain cults and myths. It is curious that, as far as we know, it is instead almost systematically neglected a series of sources that, in regard to the higher aspects of the doctrine of race, present a special meaning and are richly documented. The reason for that is in the predominance of the prejudice—which we previously reported in this journal—precisely to consider the whole of what in Roman antiquity had a super-rational and properly traditional character as fantasies, imaginations, superstitions, and finally, as something unserious and negligible. In this way a great part of the ancient Roman world still waits to be explored and this exploration, if conducted possessing the right principles and suitable qualification, is destined to yield valuable results, not just in regards to a spiritual and religious consciousness of the forces of the race.

The lares, penates, manes, genii familiari, the archeget heroes and so on are notions well known to anyone who has made even elementary studies of ancient Roman history. But known to what degree? Also, like the equivalents of dead and mute things that are conserved in museums, like the verbal residues of a world that is felt as foreign and “dead,” as much to leave us indifferent, at least, for whatever technical and academic reasons, they are not compelled to make special studies of sources and traditions, in place of mere culture, resulting in a worthy monograph. To integrate such signs, including pulling sufficient elements from them to make us understand the meaning and fundamental truths of ancient Roman and, in general, Ario-Mediterranean, humanity is a task that, with very rare exceptions, is not at all felt. However, even by this we understand the most precise and significant racial profession of the faith of ancient Rome, not a “philosophized” profession of faith restricted to any cultured circle, but alive and active in the most original, most widespread, most revered traditions.

The notions of lares, penates, genies, heroes, etc., are in good measure interdependent. In various ways, they all refer to the ancient Roman awareness of the mystical forces of blood and race, to the lineage, considered not only in its corporeal and biological aspects, but also in its “metaphysical” and invisible aspects, but not “transcendent,” in the limited dualist meaning that has come to prevail for such terms. The single, atomic, deracinated individual does not exist. When he presumes to be a being in itself, he is deceived in the most pathetic way, because he cannot even name the last of the organic processes that condition his life and finite consciousness. The individual is part of a group, a folk, a gente. He is part of an organic unity, whose most immediate vehicle is blood, and is extended both in space and time. This unity is not “naturalistic”; it is not determined and called to life solely through natural, biological, and physiological processes. Such processes just constitute his exterior side, the necessary but not sufficient condition. There is a “life” of life, a mystical force of blood and folk. It subsists beyond the forces of the life of the individuals that are dissolved in it at death or that are given by it through new birth: it is therefore a vitae mortisque locus [a place of life and death]—a place that encompasses life and death and that for that very reason stands beyond both.

To maintain a living, continuous, and deep contact with this profound force of the race is the most direct and essential form of pietas, religiosity, the basis and condition of every other, the principle canons of family laws are its consequences and applications, even in relation to the earth, that it itself—as the notion of the genius loci shows—maintains mysterious and “mystical” relations with the blood and the original strength of the people or gens that possesses it and lives there. Looking toward the origins, there is the sense of a “mystery”—there is the myth both of beings having come from above, and of men who transcended self-humanity, to loosen their life from their person and to thus constitute it as the super-individual force of a folk, of a lineage, of an ancestry that will see its origin in it. Ideally, there is a contact and a perfect match of the individual with this power, to be able to signify through it the apotheosis, i.e., the conquest of the privilege of immortality, and to confer on it the right to be considered even a “son”—in a higher sense—of the being of the lineage, if even a type of new manifestation of this being itself.

This is the essence of the mystical-racial creed of ancient Ario-Mediterranean and, particularly, Roman, humanity. The significance that it gives to the race as spirit, beyond that of the body, is an irrefutable fact and constitutes the base of the belief of the entities indicated and of the meticulous worship that was dedicated to them. We will put forward some evidence that will also be valid to highlight further aspects of the central ideas we succinctly exposed.

According to a noted work of Macrobius (Sat., III, 3) the lares for the Roman were “the gods that make us live: they nourish our body and govern our soul.” Naturally that must not be understood in an ingenuously literal way, but in reference to the mystery of the ultimate forces of our organism. As we pointed out, not one of the most important processes that are at the base of our organic and psychic-physical life depends directly on our power and is illuminated by our consciousness. Ancient man, while he was uninterested in the exterior, physical work of such processes, which are studied by modern positive sciences, instead focused all his attention on the forces that were presupposed by them and that precisely—in a higher and symbolic sense—“nourished” and “governed” our life. Macrobius’ testimony, among many others, is the most explicit in indicating that the ancient cults of lares, manes, or penates were indeed related, above all, to such forces.

These moreover were brought back to a single origin in close relation with the idea of race.

The most ancient documents of the cult of the lares give us mainly their divinity to the individual and embodies it in the lar familiaris [the family spirit], the sole, but ideal, father, of a given race; this word, in reality, means not that he created materially the race at its origin as the forefather, but that he is the divine cause of its existence and duration. (Saglio, Dict. des Antiquités grècques and romaines, III.)

The lar familiaris was also called familiae pater, father or root of the family or of the gens, under this aspect identified with the genius generis, the genius [spirit] of a given lineage. Now the word genius was still meant more distinctly as the hidden and “divine” force that generates—genius nominator qui me genuit—the creator of a given race is generis nostri parens, the word genius already in itself is related to the words geno, gigno, i.e., to the idea of generating, that lies at the base of the same word gens, gente [folk]: here it is still a question for the real power that acts beyond physical generation, in the union of the sexes (a gignendo genius appellatur, Consorino, de die nat. 3), through which the nuptial bed has also the name of lectus genialis (bed of the folk) and every offense to the sacredness of aristocratic marriage and to the lineage was considered as a crime above all in the face of the genius of the lineage.

The ancient writers relate genius not only to the geno, genere (to generate), but also to the word gero, so that, by being etymologically inexact it is not less significant in relations of the idea that they had of the entity in word. This reconciliation in fact brings to light the conviction that the force constituting the mystical origin of a given lineage and the matrix of every generation, remains as a “presence” in the group corresponding and by way of principle governs, directs, and sustains the life of the individuals (Hartung, Die Religion der Römer, I). Our language still has the word “geniale” [brilliant, inspired], but just to designate a rather different thing, also opposed to the most ancient conception. The “inspired” individual, as commonly meant, is more or less the one who invents, who has some “bright ideas,” on the rebellious, disordered, individualistic basis. In the ancient conception, geniality could be conceived only as a special inspiration or inspiration that the individual enjoyed not in that way, but essentially in relation to his race and blood, to the genius, to the divine element of his gens and the tradition of the gens.

The “presence” of the genio, the lares or the penates in the group to which it corresponded, was made aware and symbolized by the fire, the sacred flame, that had to burn uninterruptedly in the center of the patristic houses, in the temple placed in the atrium, the place where the pater familias celebrated the rites and in which the various members of the domestic or aristocratic group were gathered for meals, for example, which itself had a ritualistic significance in ancient Roman and Aryan life. For example, a portion of the food was reserved for the god of the domestic fire, in order to remember the unity of life that connected the individuals to him—a unity of life and also a unity of destiny. In certain aspects, in fact, the genius, beyond being the principle that determines the fundamental traits of the individuals arising under his sign, was also conceived as the directing principle of his most important and most decisive acts, like who helps and guides him, so to speak, from behind the scenes of his finite consciousness, becoming the ultimate cause of his destiny, both good and evil, that was intended for him. In that way, this being of the ancient Roman racial cult successively gave rise to popular depictions, which however conserve very little of the original meaning: we can for example recall the undeniable relation of the genius with the popular Christian conception of the “guardian angels” or of the good and evil angels, these images that have become absolutely mythological and deprived of the essential and concrete relation with the blood and mystical forces of the race.

The intimate connection existing between the individual and the lares, the genius, and in general with the divinity symbolized by the sacred fire of a given bloodline, and the living character, assumed to be present and acting in such a divinity, explain the peculiarities of the ancient cult. This entity of the fire appeared as the natural intermediary between the human world and the supernatural order. Starting from the idea of the unity, fulfilled in the bloodline and in the race, of the individual with a force that, as the genius or the lares, was more than physical, ancient man was convinced of the real possibility of the influence precisely in this way, on his own destiny. Special rites had to propitiate and ennoble in order to ensure that a transcendent influence was of help to his strengths and actions through the mystery of blood and race to which he belonged. A specific character of the most ancient cults of the most ancient Aryan societies was its anti-universalism. Ancient man did not turn to a God in general, a God of all men and all races, but the God of a lineage, in fact, of his gente and his family. And vice versa: only the members of the group that corresponded to them, could legitimately invoke the divinity of the domestic fire and to think that their rites were efficacious. It is easy to pronounce negative judgments and formulaic stereotypes, like that of “polytheism”; it is difficult to clarify that what, in the ancient world, that was about because the meaning of the ancient religion became almost entirely lost, in the ensuing centuries. We limit ourselves to make two points.

First of all, there is a visible hierarchy that legitimizes the ancient aristocratic-racial Aryan and Roman cult. In an army, one does not directly address the supreme leader, but rather the hierarchy on which he immediately depends, because of the fact that he, or the individuals closest to him, were able to settle the situation, without needing to go higher up. Likewise, admitting a universal God was not a reason to exclude every intermediary and to condemn any reference to the particular mystical forces that are closer to a folk or race and connected in a concrete unity of destiny and life. Celsus even brought up the hierarchical argument against the accusation of polytheism made by the Christians by observing, by analogy, that whoever pays tribute to obedience to an authority delegated to the government of a given province implicitly pays tribute to the central government, while whoever claims to address it solely and directly, beyond being impertinent, can, in reality, be acting in an anarchic way. And it is well known that Romanity, beyond particular aristocratic cults, also recognized more general cults, parallel to the universality to which the eternal city gradually elevated itself, and also indicates on the level of entities, like the lares, or genii themselves, because there was also a national conception of the lares, for example, where they attributed a cult to the lares militares, or they spoke of the lares publici, or they referred to the mystical force of the imperial lineage, to the “demigods who founded the city and established the universal empire,” or they introduced the idea of “genius or universal demons.”

In the second place, ancient traditional man did not reduce the cult to a mere sentimental disposition for which the rite was only an empty ceremony. For those who considered the relationship between the human world and the divine as real and effective, he thought that there existed precise conditions. One of these was race and blood. Even without wishing to enter the complex field of the metaphysical presuppositions of the cult, it appears evident that the force, to which the individual thought he owed his life, that he supposed “present” in his same body but to which he attributed super-individual and supernatural characteristics, was conceived as the most direct and positive path to return to what is highest in life. The race, as race of the spirit, was therefore a religious value, it contained a sacrament, it was hidden by “magic,” and that for considerations, one must recognize it well, in their positive and realistic mode.

The oath on the genius in Roman antiquity was made while touching the center of the forehead, and the cult of the genius itself did not lack a relation with that of the Fides, the personification of essentially Aryan and virile virtue, of fidelity and loyalty. The detail related to the gesture of the oath is, for every expert, rather interesting, because it related the genius and the entities similar to it back to mens, to the intellectual and virile principle of life, hierarchically superordinate both to the soul and to the purely corporeal forces: it cannot be by chance that the place attributed by the Roman tradition to mens – the center of the forehead – was that which in the Indo-Aryan tradition is certainly assigned the ajna chakra to the force of “transcendent virility” and to the so-called “center of command.” With that in mind, the suspicion is unlikely, that in the Roman family cult, if not exactly of superstitious personifications, was a type of “totemism,” the totem being the dark entity of the blood of a tribe of barbarians, related to the forces of the animal kingdom. We see instead that the ancient Roman world gave to the gods of the race and family group precisely some supernatural traits, the mind mens or the nous conceived in Mediterranean antiquity exactly as the supernatural and “solar” principle of man.

Certainly, we must not generalize and think that it is about that in every case. The traditions encompassed in the ancient Roman world are more varied and complex that has been supposed up to now. Both ethnically and spiritually, diverse influences met in the most ancient period of Rome. Some are actually related to inferior forms of cult – inferior either by belonging to a non-Aryan ethnic substrate, or by representing a regressive and materialized form of somewhat more ancient cults, of Aryan and particularly Atlantico-Occidental origin. That is valid also for the cult related to mystical forces of blood, race, and, family that in some cases and phases has, let us admit, “crepuscular” traits, with special regard to their inferior chthonic aspect predominantly related to that matching instead celestial and super-terrestrial symbols.

One can nevertheless not contest the idea that in the greater number of cases the highest tradition was present in Rome and that in its development Rome was able to “rectify” and purify to a not negligible measure the different traditions that it had included. So against the myths which, in reference to the cult of the lares at Acca Larentia, to the re plebeo Servio Tullio, and to the Sabine element remaining at an inferior level, we have the “heroic” elements of the cult of the lares and penates and such elements assume ever more significance in the events at the time of the Empire.

Some think that the same term “lares” comes from the Etruscan lar, a word that means leader or chief, that however was related to chiefs and leaders like Porsenna and Volumnio. A very widespread tradition among the ancients for which it suffices to recall Varrone, identifies the lares with the “heroes,” in the Greek sense of demigods, of men who have transcended nature and were made participants of the indestructibility of the Olympians so that it validates, in spite of its generalization, Mommsen’s idea through which every gens would have had as one of its heroes, the principle of the people that was venerated precisely in the person of the lar familiaris.

The supernatural and “regal” side of the ancient cult of the mystical forces of blood is emphasized with that. This is not everything. On the one hand, the funereal epigraphs attest to the Roman faith that the principle of immortality for his descendants was the lares themselves: many epigraphs do not indicate the negative “telluric” possibility of a type of dull and nocturnal post mortem survival in an underworld, but they affirm the higher idea that death is the principle of a superior existence. They put death exactly in relation, to which they were dedicated, with the lares or heroes of his people. On the other hand, as previously noted, Romanity would universalize the notion of the lares, extending it to the central dominating force of Romanity. We find therefore the inscriptions dedicated to the lar victor, the lar martis et pacis and finally to the lares Augusti. It is already in an environment in which it is not about more of the race as gens and nuclear family, but as folk and political community. Even outside the race so conceived a divine force, a mystical entity, is presented, connected to the destinies of war, victory, and triumphal peace – lar victor, lar martis et pacis—and connected finally to the “genius,” to the generating principle of the leaders, the Caesars, to the lar Augusti.

With that we will now discuss a very different subject which is the Aryan conception of the fortune and destiny of the leaders, the city, and nations. For now, we believe we have brought sufficiently to light the meaning of the mythical figurations and cults typical of the ancient Roman peoples, where unequivocally the consciousness of blood and race resided and where religiosity was not a factor of evasion and universalism, but constituted the most solid cement of the unity of folk and bloodlines. The mystery of blood was a central idea of ancient Roman spirituality and to disregard it means to be condemned to a superficial and profane understanding of the most tangible, noted, and celebrated aspects of the law, custom and ethics of ancient society.

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