

To Seek the Boundaries of the Roman Lares: Interaction and Evolution

BY

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Classics  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master's of Arts.

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To Seek the Boundaries of the Roman Lares: Interaction and Evolution

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Date Approved April 27, 2009

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## Abstract

Worship of the Lares is an integral part of Roman life and the Lares are ubiquitous in the art and literature of the Roman world. The Lares are frequently glossed as simply “household gods” and comprise part of domestic religion. Yet, our understanding of domestic religion is incomplete, as is our knowledge of the Lares. The purpose of this work is to provide new insight into the nature and worship of the Lares, using textual and physical evidence. I examine the development of the Lares from their initial stages around the time of Rome’s founding into the Empire, noting which of their qualities are static and which are fluid. Such an approach allows us to see how the Lares interacted with their contexts and reveals that the Lares became associated with ancestors under the influence of other gods, but always retained their connections to boundaries and to silence.

“Did your pretty-little Liberty,” Cicero asks Clodius Pulcher, “evict the Penates and my familial Lares so that she could settle herself, as it were, in a captured home? What is more sacred, what is more protected by all religious reverence than the house of each and every citizen?” (*Ista tua pulcra Libertas deos penates et familiares meos lares expulit, ut se ipsa tamquam in captivis sedibus collocaret? Quid est sanctius, quid omni religione munitius quam domus unius cuiusque civium?*).<sup>1</sup> In this strong statement, Cicero identifies the *Lares Familiares*, apparently some type of household gods, as an integral part of the sacred house. Yet, what precisely are the Lares, familial or otherwise, and in what aspects of religion are they involved? In the following, I will explore the Roman concept of the Lares, especially noting which aspects are intrinsic and persistent, in an attempt to discover a better understanding of their nature.

### **The Origin Debate**

Scholarly discussions about the Lares have primarily focused on a debate between their nature as ancestor spirits or as guardians of fields or places.<sup>2</sup> This debate culminated in two articles in the early 1920s; Margaret Waites lays out the case for the ancestor theory, following several scholars before her.<sup>3</sup> Gordon Laing responds to and refutes the assertions of Waites.<sup>4</sup> The issue of origins, while

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *dom.* 108-109. This and all subsequent translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Waites (1920) 242 n.5, directly opposes Wissowa (1912) 166-174. Wissowa argues that the Lares must have started out in the fields and were moved into the house by slaves, but other scholars who follow him are more flexible and see the Lares as guardians of places in general. See Dumézil (1970) 341.

<sup>3</sup> Waites (1920) 241. She mentions works by De-Marchi, Rohde, Samter, and von Domaszewski in particular.

<sup>4</sup> Laing (1921) ultimately argues for a third different origin, which I accept later.

occasionally discussed, has not been vigorously disputed since and later scholars tend to agree with one side or the other, without actively engaging in the debate. While it is clear that the Romans themselves were unsure as to the exact origin of the Lares, a brief examination of the debate is useful in order to explore the ancient evidence, to understand the limitations of the modern arguments, and to identify why these alternative origins are both so compelling.

Proponents of the ancestor theory note that several ancient authors unequivocally state that the Lares are the spirits of ancestors. Festus identifies the Lares as chthonic spirits, calling them underworld gods (*di inferi*).<sup>5</sup> Apuleius differentiates between the Lar and the *Genius* in his *de Deo Socratis*, saying that both are human spirits, but the *Genius* is still within a human body while the Lar no longer possesses a corporeal form.<sup>6</sup> According to Apuleius, the Lares are not just underworld spirits, but they were once humans and therefore ancestors. Arnobius, a Christian apologist writing in the fourth century, makes a similar claim, saying that the Lares are ghosts (*larvas*) and asserting that in this he is following the wisdom of the ancients, particularly Varro.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the explicit evidence is relatively late, but modern scholars following the ancestor theory see hints of it as far back as Plautus. The dramatist mentions the Lares in his plays, particularly the *Aulularia* and the *Mercator*. Waites believes that

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<sup>5</sup> Fest. 239. In another passage (Fest. 121), the Lares are said to be humans who have been drawn back to the number of the gods.

<sup>6</sup> Apul. *Socr.* 15. Yet a Lar is still attached to a physical location, unlike a *Lemur*, the more general name for human spirits whose bodies are now deceased but are unattached to anything.

<sup>7</sup> Arnob. *nat.* 3.41.

Plautus uses the Roman “Lar” as a translation of the Greek ἥρωσ (hero).<sup>8</sup> Stefan Weinstock proposes an even earlier connection between Lar and ἥρωσ in an inscription from Latium dating from the fourth century B.C. that reads: *LARE AINEIA D(ONOM)*.<sup>9</sup> There are multiple ways to interpret the inscription, but Weinstock understands the first two words as “two datives, the dedication being to Lar Aeneas.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that “it is also known that Lar was generally the equivalent of ἥρωσ ... [which was] the divine ancestor.”<sup>11</sup> The ancient translation of the word “Lar” into the Greek ἥρωσ seems to support the ancestor theory since heroes were once human and were often claimed as the progenitor, and therefore one of the most important ancestors, of a family line. If a Lar is basically the same as a ἥρωσ, then a Lar is also an ancestor. The translation is quite frequent; other authors, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch, seem to understand the terms Lar and ἥρωσ as equivalents.<sup>12</sup> The idea of the hero/Lar as forefather is supported by the stories about Lares as the founders of certain families, particularly in the stories about the origins of Romulus and Servius Tullius. Plutarch records the stories of the conception of these two early kings, and in both cases the virgin mothers are impregnated by a Lar who is also connected to the hearth.<sup>13</sup> As Waites notes, “such

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<sup>8</sup> Waites (1920) 243 n. 5.

<sup>9</sup> See Weinstock (1960) 114-118.

<sup>10</sup> Weinstock (1960) 115.

<sup>11</sup> Weinstock (1960) 116-117.

<sup>12</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.2, 4.14.3-4 and elsewhere. Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 50.

<sup>13</sup> Plut. *De fort. Rom.* 10. Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 2

stories bring into prominence one of the chief characteristics of the *Lar familiaris*, -- his generative power.”<sup>14</sup>

Ritual evidence is also used by scholars to promote the ancestor theory. For instance Pliny the Elder records, but does not explain, the following custom: any food dropped on the floor by someone is restored to and sacrificed to the Lar as a burned offering in order to appease the spirit.<sup>15</sup> This custom is not unique to the Romans. In other contemporary cultures, such as among the ancient Greeks, it is the tradition that food that accidentally falls on the floor belongs to the ghosts. In certain cultures the connection between fallen food and ghosts persists into modern times. Some scholars, therefore, believe that these customs provide a cultural parallel for the practice described by Pliny. Since these ghosts are inhabiting the house, the suggestion is that they would naturally be ancestors.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, the *Compitalia* festival for the Lares of the crossroads, instituted by Servius Tullius, may be interpreted as rites honoring or appeasing the ancestors.<sup>17</sup> The date of the festival was variable, but it occurred around the time of the *Larentalia*, a funeral celebration held in December at the grave of Acca Larentia, who was a prostitute and slave. The servile connections, that Acca Larentia was a slave and Servius Tullius was born to a slave woman possibly impregnated by a Lar, as well as the similarity between the names Lar and Larentia suggest a link between the

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<sup>14</sup> Waites (1920) 246.

<sup>15</sup> Plin. *nat.* 28.27.

<sup>16</sup> Laing (1921) 129-130, following Samter (1901) 110, explores a number of comparative customs in conjunction with Pliny the Elder's claim.

<sup>17</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.14.3-4.



two festivals.<sup>18</sup> Since the *Larentalia* was a rite centered on the dead perhaps the *Compitalia* was as well. During the celebration of the *Compitalia*, the Romans hung up woolen effigies for the free family members and woolen balls for the slaves. Macrobius and Festus explain this practice as scapegoat ritual.<sup>19</sup> The woolen representations of the *familia* are considered to be symbolic replacements for the actual people so that the malevolent ghosts would take the substitutes rather than attack the living. Furthermore, the crossroads, where the *Compitalia* is celebrated, have connections to Hecate, magical rites, and the dead and are therefore aptly termed, as Waites says, “a chthonic centre.”<sup>20</sup> Such a location would seem to be a proper place to interact with ancestors, who are themselves chthonic since they are deceased. Scholars, such as Waites, who believe that the Lares have their origins as ancestor spirits, see these disparate pieces of circumstantial evidence as sufficient proof when taken all together.

Those scholars who oppose the idea that the Lares were ancestor spirits and champion that they were the guardians of fields or places instead, claim that these scattered bits of evidence are far from convincing. Furthermore, they too have textual evidence to support the idea of Lares as guardians, although it is not as explicit and hence more open to interpretation. The hymns of the Arval brothers include a prayer to the Lares: “Lares, help us! ... Mars, do not let plague and ruin happen among the

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<sup>18</sup> Her name even suggests a connection to the Lares; however, the vowel in Lar is short while it is long in Larentia, making the connection unlikely. Laing (1921) 130-131, Harmon (1978) 1594.

<sup>19</sup> Fest. 239 and Macr. *Sat* 1.7.34.

<sup>20</sup> Waites (1920) 248.

people” (*enos Lases iuvate ... neve lue rue Marmar sins incurrere in pleoris*).<sup>21</sup> The Lares, here *Lases*, are called upon as guardians of the agricultural fields along with Mars. The accepted archaic age of the Arval Hymn and the capacity in which the Lares are appealed to supports the theory that they were originally guardians of the rural fields. Waites reconciles the Arval Hymn with the ancestor theory by explaining that “the souls of deified ancestors, ... like other chthonic deities, [were able] to bring increase to the crops.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, two other texts seem to provide supportive evidence for the Lares’ identification as agrarian gods. Tibullus calls the Lares the *agri custodes* (guardians of the field) with no ancestral overtones.<sup>23</sup> Cicero also places the shrines of the Lares specifically in fields, connecting the spirits to places and not to the dead.<sup>24</sup>

Scholars favoring the argument of the Lares as guardians of places are not deterred by the ancient authors who claim that the Lares are ancestors. All these ancient texts, they point out, are relatively late and so may not convey the true origins of the Lares.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, all of these later ancient authors rely on the same source: Varro.<sup>26</sup> Yet even Varro is uncertain as to the nature of the Lares; Arnobius paraphrases him, saying: “Varro, similarly hesitating, at one time pronounces that the Lares are the same as ghosts, ... at another time that they are gods of the air and to be

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<sup>21</sup> CIL VI 2104.31-32.

<sup>22</sup> Waites (1920) 243-244.

<sup>23</sup> Tib. 1.1.19-20.

<sup>24</sup> Cic. *leg.* 2.19.

<sup>25</sup> This argument does not, of course, refute the claim that Plautus mentions the Lares as possible ancestors, although the following argument about the translations between Greek and Latin does cast doubt on that interpretation of Plautus.

<sup>26</sup> Laing (1921) 126.

called heroes” (*Varro similiter haesitans nunc [Lares] esse illos Manes ..., nunc aërios rursus deos et heroas pronuntiat appellari*).<sup>27</sup> The Lares may be the spirits of the dead, or they may have no chthonic connections at all; Varro did not know. Additionally, Varro admits that the Lares may be heroes; but if they are heroes, then they are not deceased ancestors since they are gods of the air, not the underworld. The ancient Roman translations of Lar into the Greek word ἥρωας (hero), therefore, cannot necessarily support the ancestor theory. Scholars who prefer the guardians of places theory note that “Lar” may also be translated, as Cicero does in his *Timaeus*, as δαίμων (daimon), a more indistinct type of Greek spirit.<sup>28</sup> As Georges Dumézil notes, “the Greeks, who had no truly equivalent term, gave [the word Lar] a conjectural translation, ordinarily ἥρωας (whence Lar Aeneas [as in the inscription from Latium]), occasionally δαίμων.”<sup>29</sup> So, Lar and hero are not synonyms; they merely express somewhat similar concepts.

Scholars who advocate the guardians of places theory also do not refute that the crossroads had chthonic connotations. They highlight that the shrines of the *Lares Compitales* are clearly situated on boundary lines between properties (originally between rural fields and then expanding to the crossroads in cities) and thereby consider the potential associations with the dead at the crossroads to be secondary.

Daniel Harmon explains that it may have been these very associations which confused Macrobius and Festus into thinking that the Lares of the *Compitalia* festival

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<sup>27</sup> Arnob. *nat.* 3.41.

<sup>28</sup> Cic. *Tim.* 38. A δαίμων may be connected with an ancestor, but does not have to be; it can also be simply a good or evil spirit or fate.

<sup>29</sup> Dumézil (1970) 342. Ancestor theorists, like Weinstock, point out that ἥρωας is a far more common translation; Weinstock (1960) 116-117.

were malevolent ghosts: “it is surely the sinister atmosphere which belongs to crossroads in general, combined with a frequent tendency to see an eerie meaning in all rites making use of effigies ... that prompted the gloomy aetiology preserved in Festus and Macrobius.”<sup>30</sup>

Some scholars also interpret the date of the *Compitalia* differently. Its proximity to the *Larentalia* may be mere coincidence, because the festival of the *Compitalia* took place in the early part of January, the beginning of a new agricultural year.<sup>31</sup> The date, therefore, may not have had anything to do with other festivals occurring in that same part of the year, but rather it may have been a result of the agrarian nature of the Lares, arising from their connections to the fields.

Furthermore, the Lares seem uninvolved in the *Parentalia*, which was certainly a chthonic ancestor festival and was celebrated in February. As Laing argues, “if the Lares had been from the beginning regarded as the spirits of ancestors, surely their worship would have formed a much more prominent part of the [*Parentalia*] festival than it did. It was only on the day after the festival, ... that any attention was paid to the Lares,” and then only as part of the general domestic worship.<sup>32</sup>

### **Limitations of the Origin Debate**

The debate over the true origins of the Lares remains unresolved. The ancient authors were unclear about the origin of the Lares, since the textual evidence supports

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<sup>30</sup> Harmon (1978) 1595.

<sup>31</sup> Huß (2005) 248.

<sup>32</sup> Laing (1921) 132. Opponents answer this argument by suggesting that the Lares were involved in the festival, but not as the focus. Romans celebrated the *Parentalia* at the grave site rather than within the house; therefore, the Lar is only marginally involved because of its location; see Waites (1920) 245 n. 4.

both theories and does not clearly contradict either. For example, the Lar who opens Plautus' *Aulularia* introduces himself:

I am the Lar of the family (*familiaris*) from this household (*familia*) from which you saw me exiting. Already for many years I have occupied and inhabited this house with the father and grandfather of the man who now lives here (*ego Lar sum familiaris ex hac familia / unde exeuntem me aspexistis. Hanc domum / iam multos annos est cum possideo et colo / patri auoque iam huius qui nunc hic habet.*).<sup>33</sup>

Plautus' Lar connects himself with the family, emphasizing the continuity between grandfather and grandson, but he also explicitly identifies himself with the physical house. The Lar even etymologizes his own name, saying that he is called the Lar of the family since he comes from the household and is involved with the family that lives there. The word *familia* refers to both the domestic space and those who live within, and so the Lar connects himself to both concepts at once.<sup>34</sup> Either side of the origin debate could use this passage for support, emphasizing one nuance over the other. Yet, an exclusionary attitude obscures the fact that Plautus does not find the two views contradictory or incompatible since he implies the twin views of the Lares.

Both sides of the debate focus predominantly on what the ancient authors say or suggest without looking at the physical evidence. For instance, there are a number of bronze statues of Lares extant from throughout the empire, which are generally left out of the origin debate, as well as wall paintings with Lares from Campania. Any understanding of the Lares must take the physical evidence into account as well as the textual; and therefore, the explanation of the Lares must be more complicated.

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<sup>33</sup> Plaut. *Aul.* 2-5.

<sup>34</sup> OLD *s.v.*

By far the most unfortunate result of the origin debate is that it focuses attention solely on the derivation of the Lares from some assumed original, unitary meaning without full consideration of the actual, and sometimes inconsistent, rituals and beliefs adopted by the Romans on a daily basis. In general, with the exception of later ancient authors who were attempting to explain earlier or contemporary practices, when the Romans worshiped, talked about, or depicted the Lares they did not concern themselves with the origins of the spirits.<sup>35</sup> Rather the textual evidence provides a variety of opinions about the Lares, which are, I argue, all equally valid; likewise, the physical remains of material culture offer a range of practices and concepts that the Romans associated with the Lares.

The origin debate also presupposes that the Roman conception of the Lares was unchanging over time. Therefore, textual evidence ranging from the Early Republic to the Late Empire has been used to reconstruct artificially the original idea of the Lares. This type of approach obscures the fact that, whatever their origin, the Lares acquired new meanings according to their historical contexts. We may form a more accurate understanding of the Lares by investigating how the Lares are mentioned in literature and physically depicted, accepting all the possibilities that the Romans offer, and by examining diachronically how the concept of the Lares changes through time.

Therefore, I involve myself in the origin debate insofar as it allows me to reach a closer understanding about how the Lares came to embody multiple

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<sup>35</sup> *Ov. fast.* 2.615-616 provides a mythological birth story, but does not attempt to explain truly the origin of the Lares as a specific type of deity.

meanings. I offer, in what follows, a logical progression of the way in which the Lares came to be associated both with places, as guardians, and with ancestors. This method, incorporating textual, cultural, and physical evidence, will illuminate that the concepts of boundaries, visibility, and silence always remained in the Romans' conception of the Lares, even as the deities' identification with ancestors became stronger over time.

### **The Early Indefinite Nature of the Lares**

I propose that the Lares had multifaceted and nebulous functions from the very beginning. Laing calls the early Lares “spirits of so general a type that they could be connected with persons or places or activities widely divergent.”<sup>36</sup> The indefinite nature of the Lares allows them to have various associations, and they are identified by these connections; examples include the Lares *Familiares*, *Compitales*, *Praestites*, and *Permarini* (of the family, the crossroads, community, and sea travel). Other gods are identified in this same way, for example *Iuppiter Stator* and *Iuppiter Tonans*. The assorted compounds of god-plus-attribute do not express completely separate divine entities; *Iuppiter Stator* and *Iuppiter Tonans* are the same god, Jupiter, with different aspects, not two different gods. Likewise there are not various gods which are collectively called Lares but rather the same type of spirit functioning in a variety of spheres.

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<sup>36</sup> Laing (1921) 138. Laing also notes that “Latin writers sometimes use the word Lares as a practical equivalent of *dei*.”

The Roman gods who became part of the main pantheon, such as Jupiter and Mars, seem to have once been much like the Lares. Dumézil explains the original characteristics of the Roman gods:

Roughly, what does one find in the Roman world of the gods if one removes everything that it owes to the Greeks? First, a certain number of gods with relatively fixed outlines, separately honored but without kinship and unmarried, without adventures or scandals, without connections of friendship or hostility, in short, without mythology; some, a very few, palpably the most important, are frequently present in religious life; the rest are distributed throughout the months of the calendar and the precincts of the city, made real once a year by a sacrifice, but without anyone's knowing ... what services they render.<sup>37</sup>

Through syncretism with the Greek gods, the distinct characters and roles of the prominent Roman gods become more pronounced. The process of syncretism relies on an underlying similarity between the gods; a god of one culture will not be paired with its total opposite from another culture. As certain gods slowly gain individual personalities and traits they begin to offer more readily accessible points of comparison. This, in turn, further defines the character of the god. The Lares, however, belong to a distinct group of divine spirits which, along with the *di Penates* and the *Manes*, retain their ambiguity. Unlike the major gods of the Roman pantheon, the Lares “as a rule ... had no definite personality.”<sup>38</sup> The absence of personality explains why the Lares cannot be precisely matched up with the gods of another culture, because the Lares are indefinite spirits. The closest association the Greeks can provide for a Lar is ἥρωας or δαίμων, both of which are rather imprecise

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<sup>37</sup> Dumézil (1970) 32.

<sup>38</sup> Huß (2005) 248, cf. Dumézil (1970) 33: “Some of the gods ... do not have any personality other than their name, which is often a collective name, or any mode of existence other than the brief worship which is rendered to them.”



terms themselves. Instead of being equated with other gods and gaining new and fixed attributes through syncretism, the concept of the Lares remains fluid. Similarly, the Lares and the rituals surrounding these spirits absorb the traits and connotations of other gods and ceremonies celebrated in proximity to them. The changes that the Lares undergo through time are as essential in creating an accurate idea of the Lares as what some Romans thought about them in any one specific instance.

The indefinite nature of the Lares and their lack of personality – and hence their ability to adapt to changing historical circumstances – persist even into the Augustan era. The emperor Augustus revived the cult of the *Lares Compitales* by supporting the rededication of the neighborhood shrines in Rome. In doing so, Augustus gave each neighborhood new dedicatory statues and at this point the *Lares Compitales* became known as the *Lares Augusti*.<sup>39</sup> Many scholars have understood the *Lares Augusti* to mean “Augustus’ own Lares”: Augustus expanded his private religion to encompass all of Rome and these newly restored Lares sprinkled throughout the city were, in fact, his personal family Lares.<sup>40</sup> Yet *Augusti* is not here the genitive of the Emperor’s name but a plural nominative adjective describing the Lares; therefore, *Lares Augusti* means not “the Lares of Augustus” but “the august Lares.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Augustus was very careful with which gods he allowed to have the appellation *augustus*, the others being Pax, Providentia, Ops, Iustitia, and

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<sup>39</sup> Lott (2004) 101.

<sup>40</sup> Beard, North, and Price (1998) 1:185 among others.

<sup>41</sup> Lott (2004) 107-110 suggests this interpretation and I have confirmed it with a perusal of the TLL article on *Augustus*; see for example, *Laribus Augustis* CIL 6.448 and *Lares Augustos* 3561. Later the term *Lares Augusti* does come to mean the Lares belonging to the Augustus (meaning Emperor), but that is not the initial meaning. See TLL *s.v. dii Augusti*.

Concordia.<sup>42</sup> Since these other gods are all feminine, the form of the word is *Augusta*, clearly an adjective. The adjective still contains an implication of a bond between the Lares and Augustus, but it is a suggestion rather than a grammatical fact of possession.

Like the Lares, the deified personifications of these abstract nouns do not have particular personalities. Therefore it seems reasonable that the Lares were considered to be positive forces for the Romans just like Peace and Justice. Furthermore, as J. Lott argues concerning *Concordia Augusta*, Augustus “did not substitute a family cult for a state one but rather associated his family with the state cult and the benefits the goddess represented.”<sup>43</sup> The Lares, then, are comparable to the deified abstract nouns on two counts: both are gods that Augustus integrates into the state and both lack individual personae. The correlation between the Lares and the deified abstracts further emphasizes the vague nature of the Lares. Since the Lares remain nebulous with regards to their exact functions even into the early Empire, they continue to be flexible and gain new associations and aspects.

### **Epithets and Places**

At the start of, or very early on in, their development, the Lares became attached to places. In this way, the Lares are similar to other Roman gods because, as Dumézil notes about the gods in the city of Rome, “one cannot imagine a god who does not have ‘his place’.”<sup>44</sup> The cult of *Iuppiter Stator* provides an exceptionally

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<sup>42</sup> Lott (2004) 108.

<sup>43</sup> Lott (2004) 109.

<sup>44</sup> Dumézil (1970) 115.

clear example: this manifestation of Jupiter symbolizes standing firm in the face of military disaster. Traditionally, Romulus dedicated this temple to Jupiter on the very location where the Romans stopped their flight and turned back to make their stand against the Sabines.<sup>45</sup> It is not possible to explain so easily all the physical locations of the gods' cults, such as the shrine to *Iuppiter Tonans*, which was located on the Capitoline in Rome, but was vowed by Augustus while he was in Cantabria in Spain.<sup>46</sup> Still, the Romans supposed the gods to inhabit physical locations, particularly shrines and temples, and so *Iuppiter Tonans* was considered to be in his temple in Rome and not in Spain. Furthermore, the statue of a god could in fact be considered the god itself. Seneca relates, as preserved in Augustine, that Romans would talk to and adorn the gods of the Capitoline Triad, even holding up a mirror so that "Minerva" would be able to admire herself.<sup>47</sup> The statue of the divinity does not occasionally contain the power or manifestation of the god, but rather the "the power of the god has become such an integral part of its representation that the two cannot be named as linguistically separate entities."<sup>48</sup> Since there is no difference between calling upon the goddess Minerva and calling upon the statue of Minerva, the gods and their statues are functionally the same. Therefore, to the Romans, the statue of the god is in fact that god, in the manifestation of its epithet, at its designated location.

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<sup>45</sup> Liv. 1.12.3-6.

<sup>46</sup> Several ancient historians record the story, among them, Suet. *Aug.* 29.

<sup>47</sup> Sen. apud Aug. *civ* 6.10.

<sup>48</sup> Corbeill (2004) 28.

The ritual of *evocatio*, the summoning of the god from its traditional resting place, further expresses the correlation between gods and places. Beard, North, and Price describe the connection: “the best known recorded occasion of this practice was the *evocatio* of the goddess Juno, patron of Veii, who deserted the Veians for the Romans in 396 (thus ensuring Rome’s victory), and who was worshipped thereafter at Rome with a famous temple on the Aventine Hill.”<sup>49</sup> The Romans not only asked Juno to remove herself from her temple, and hence from patronage of the Veians, and to join their side; but they also found it necessary to supply the goddess with a physical location in Rome, her new temple. The principles of the *evocatio* are applicable to a domestic setting as well. “When private persons wished to free a *sacrarium* (a storage place for sacred objects) in their home from the bonds of religion, they would ‘call forth’ (*evocare*) the sacred objects housed within it.”<sup>50</sup>

Since the *evocatio* is applicable to both the major city gods and to religious domestic objects, it seems likely that the ritual could also be used on the Lares. Just as the major gods were connected to a particular place and domestic objects were stored in a certain spot, so too the Lares were thought to inhabit specific physical locations and therefore they were likewise able to move from one location to another through an *evocatio* ritual. Through these parallels, the Lares seem similar to other Roman gods. The Lares by their very nature, however, and not by circumstance, are intrinsically bound to places. A brief survey of the epithets given to the Lares

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<sup>49</sup> Beard, North, and Price (1998) 1:133. The story is recorded by Livy (5.21.1-7).

<sup>50</sup> Bodel (2008) 253, following Ulp. *Dig.* 1.8.9.2.

demonstrates that these spirits are defined by and receive their essence from their physical locations.

The most well known category of Lares is the *Lares Familiares* (Lares of the household). Technically the term *familiaris* refers to the people and not the place, but “a *familia* was a household in that it comprised all those who resided within a single house, the *domus*.”<sup>51</sup> The Lar in Plautus’ prologue, as cited above, expresses similar sentiments about the bond between the family and the house itself. The close relationship between the concepts of *familia* and *domus* explains why the word “Lares” becomes a metonymy for “home.”<sup>52</sup> The word “home” expresses the idea of the tangible location as well as the more general concept of the family members and the domestic slaves. Likewise, the occasional use of the epithet *domestici* with the noun *Lares* or even a personal name used as an epithet, like *Hostilii*, seems to refer back to the physical space inhabited by the family.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, John Bodel, by comparing the worship of the Lares in a domestic setting with that of the Penates, argues that the relationship between the Lares and the place is not as important as the connection between the spirits and the human inhabitants:

Unlike the *Penates*, however, which were normally cultivated at a single location within the house, *lararia* might be painted up in more than one location within a single house, suggesting a multiplicity of *foci* of worship. The implication seems to be that the *Lares* were more closely tied to the concept of “home” than to “house” and more closely associated with the idea of community than with place.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bodel (2008) 248.

<sup>52</sup> For example Hor. *carmin.* 1.12.44, among many others.

<sup>53</sup> Harmon (1978) 1593-1594.

<sup>54</sup> Bodel (2008) 264-265.

Yet, the community and the place are so interconnected as to make the distinction inconsequential, since a home is comprised of a family within a house. Additionally, there are alternative explanations as to why there are multiple *foci*. The Roman gods are connected to certain places, but it seems that Lares are more integrally associated with a physical location; not only to one spot, but rather to the entire space within a bounded area. If true, then the multiple *foci* for worship may be a representation of how the Lares are infused throughout the house rather than confined to the hearth as the Penates are. Regardless of whether the Lares were more closely coupled with the place or the people of that place, it is clear that the Romans considered the *Lares Familiares*, defined by that very epithet, as attached, at least in some way, to the house.

The *Lares Praestites* are guardians of the city, and their epithet reflects their physical location. These Lares stand before (*prae – stare*) the city since their temple is on the height of the *Via Sacra* and was on the edge of the original pomerium.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the Lares, situated in front of Rome, protect the entire city. Likewise the *Lares Permarini* are gods of sea travel; the epithet “throughout the sea” indicates that these Lares are specialized spirits in marine localities. In the same manner, the *Lares Viales* are directly connected to the physical roads (*viae*).<sup>56</sup> As with the *Lares Familiares*, the Lares with these various epithets are connected to the people in those

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<sup>55</sup> Platner and Ashby (1929) 314-315. It is unclear if these are two separate shrines or are the same; see below. Lott (2004) 34 understands *praestites* to come from *prae-stare* (to stand before), which derivation I accept here.

<sup>56</sup> Both these types of Lares are rarely mentioned in our sources. A temple to the *Lares Permarini* was dedicated by M. Aemilius Lepidus, following a vow by L. Aemilius Regillus for a naval victory (Liv. 40.52). Plautus and Varro both mention the *Lares Viales* (Plaut. *Merc.* 865 and Varro *ling.* 6.25). It is unclear whether the *Lares Viales* were significantly different from the *Lares Compitales*.

locations: the citizens of Rome, sailors, and travelers. By far, the significant factor is the physical location ascribed to the Lares by the epithet.

Location is equally important for the cult of the *Lares Compitales* (Lares of the Crossroads). The Romans erected shrines, similar to those dedicated to the *Lares Familiares*, to the *Lares Compitales* at the crossroads. These were highly visible shrines and in some ways acted as a social or political gathering place of each neighborhood, as John Fine explains:

The *compita* in the various *vici* [neighborhoods] became natural gathering places for the slaves and freedmen and other lowly men to whom this worship particularly appealed. Ambitious politicians found that these societies could be exploited to great profit, and as a result it became necessary for more scrupulous statesmen to pay heed to them. ... But the disorders arising from these clubs became so flagrant that in the year 64 B.C., by a decree of the Senate, the *collegia compitalicia* [compitalian colleges] were abolished.<sup>57</sup>

The shrines of the *Lares Compitales* offered a physical focus for both religious and political activities. After 64 B.C. the colleges and the festivals were reestablished and they retained their status as a communal focal point, which likely explains why Augustus chose to use the *Lares Compitales* as part of his own campaign to reestablish traditional religious activities.

### **Contagious Diffusion: The Lares and Hecate**

Although the physical location of their worship is essential to the identity of the Lares, those places are not restricted to the veneration and influence of only the Lares. The multiplicity of gods in a single location is not unusual; one may compare the Capitoline Triad, where three distinct gods, Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva are

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<sup>57</sup> Fine (1932) 268.

worshiped together.<sup>58</sup> As discussed above, these main Roman gods become syncretized with foreign gods based on similarities in function and personality. Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva on the Capitoline are equated with comparable foreign gods, particularly those of the Etruscans and Greeks, but their distinct identities keep them from being conflated with each other. Lares, in part because they are tied to places and in part because their functions are dependent upon those locations, do not become associated with other gods in the traditional syncretic way. The fact that the Greeks do not have a precise equivalent for the Lares also contributes to the lack of syncretism. The Lares become identified with and eventually take up the functions of other gods, but the Lares do not simply become equivalent counterparts to those other gods. Rather, an exchange of functions, that I shall refer to as contagious diffusion, occurs between the Lares and other spirits, particularly Hecate (Greek Hekate), snakes, and Mercury, that are located near the Lares' two major areas of worship (the crossroads and in houses).<sup>59</sup>

The shrines of the *Lares Compitales* are on the crossroads, where ghosts and Hecate are also supposed to lurk.<sup>60</sup> The presence of Hecate, a direct Greek import, reinforces the association of the crossroads with the dead, and by contagion the Lares

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<sup>58</sup> *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, Iuno Regina*, and Minerva.

<sup>59</sup> The term "contagious diffusion" is used in Geography to refer to an exchange which takes place through physical proximity and contact.

<sup>60</sup> The *Di Manes* (ghosts), like the Lares, are entities without personalities but, unlike the Lares, they are without fixed locations. Yet, Roman folklore and superstition indicates that the crossroads are a major intersection between the living and the dead, and therefore, one was more likely to encounter ghosts there than elsewhere. For Apuleius, who understands the Lares to be a type of ghost, location is the major difference between the various types of ghosts (collectively the *Di Manes* or *Lemures*): benevolent Lares inhabit houses, *Larvae* wander and are dangerous to the living (Apul. *Socr.* 15). Other authors, such as Horace, consider the *Lemures* to be malicious like the *Larvae* (Hor. *epist.* 2.2.209). Also see Thaniel (1973).



also become identified with the dead. Hecate is originally an agrarian great mother goddess, who becomes associated with magic and the underworld, particularly by Roman times.<sup>61</sup> To the Greeks, as recorded in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Hecate is a powerful deity who is honored by the other gods.<sup>62</sup> Her abilities are not geographically constrained since she has influence in each of the three realms of the heavens, the sea, and the underworld, and so has an effect on Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades respectively.<sup>63</sup> Her place in the realm of Hades, however, becomes the most important for the Romans. Hecate's association with Hades and the underworld is reinforced by her syncretism with Enodia, a native Thessalian goddess.<sup>64</sup> The word ἐνόδιος, meaning "at the cross-roads" or "of the roadways," becomes an epithet of Hecate.<sup>65</sup> By the time Hecate is imported into the Roman world, she is predominantly a dangerous chthonic deity, sometimes located in the underworld, and sometimes in the liminal space of the crossroads, where she appears with a pack of hounds and in the company of ghosts.<sup>66</sup>

The close physical proximity of the Lares and Hecate at the crossroads allows for Hecate's chthonic connotations to be transferred to the *Lares Compitales*. Yet since the Lares are indefinite personalities and do not share other important attributes with Hecate, they cannot be syncretized and directly correlated with her. This lack of

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<sup>61</sup> See Rabinowitz (1998).

<sup>62</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 412-420.

<sup>63</sup> Rabinowitz (1998) 22.

<sup>64</sup> Rabinowitz (1998) 36, following Wilamowitz (1931) 165-173, notes that all mentions of Hecate were positive until the fifth century B.C. when she became identified with Enodia.

<sup>65</sup> LSJ *s.v.* This epithet is most commonly used with Hecate, but also occurs with Persephone and Hermes.

<sup>66</sup> OCD *s.v.* *Hecate*.

syncretization is evident in the epithets of the deities; both *Compitales* and *Enodia* refer to the shared location of the crossroads, but *Hekate Enodia* is translated into Latin as *Hecate Trivia*, emphasizing her three forms.<sup>67</sup> Instead of being closely associated with the Lares, around the first century B.C. Hecate becomes syncretized with Juno, who is herself a distinct character. According to Rabinowitz, the syncretization is able to occur as a result of their shared triple identity.<sup>68</sup> The relationship between the Lares and Hecate is only based on the physical closeness of their worship, and so while they are not identified with each other, the Lares are able to adopt Hecate's chthonic nature. Since, as guardians of places, they are originally benevolent spirits, the Lares are comparable to deified ancestors, the *di Manes*, rather than malevolent chthonic specters like the *Larvae* or *Lemures*. However, through continual association and reinforcement with the crossroads and with the other divine chthonic forces located there, which are not always themselves benevolent, the Lares, by the time of Macrobius and Festus, may be interpreted as dangerous.<sup>69</sup> The gradual shift of the Lares from place guardians to benevolent chthonic ancestors to malevolent spirits can be seen in Plutarch's *Roman Questions*.<sup>70</sup> Plutarch asks why the *Lares Praestites* are depicted as wearing dog skins or as accompanied by dogs.<sup>71</sup> One answer he provides is that the Lares were like the Furies, "hence they are clothed

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<sup>67</sup> Rabinowitz (1998) 37.

<sup>68</sup> See Rabinowitz (1997) particularly 537-541. Juno's three identities are as Preserver, Mother, and Queen.

<sup>69</sup> See above. Analogously, Hecate herself becomes more nefarious as her association with witches increases.

<sup>70</sup> Plut. *Quest. Rom.* 51.

<sup>71</sup> Plutarch's question concerns the *Lares Praestites* in particular, which are the only Lares depicted with dogs, yet it seems likely that Plutarch is conflating the *Lares Praestites* and *Compitales*. Compare Ov. *fast.* 5.137-142.

in the skins of dogs and a dog is an attendant [for them], since they are quite capable of tracking and pursuing the wicked” (διὸ καὶ κυνῶν δέρμασιν ἀμπέχονται, καὶ κύων πάρεδρός ἐστιν, ὡς δεινοῖς οὖσιν ἐξιχνεῦσαι καὶ μετελθεῖν τοὺς πονηροῦς.)<sup>72</sup> The direct equation of the Lares with the Furies is otherwise unattested.<sup>73</sup> It seems reasonable instead to explain the Lares’ canine iconography by their association with Hecate since she appears at the crossroads with her own hounds and ghosts.<sup>74</sup> Eli Edward Burriss postulates:

I believe the association of the dog with the witches at the crossroads is the key to the understanding of their association with the Lares Praestites which were clothed in dogs' skins and had a figure of a dog at their feet. The Lares Praestites were the legitimate guardians of the boundaries; Hecate and her hounds were their illegitimate counter-part.<sup>75</sup>

Plutarch, however, does not suggest that the Lares and Hecate are two expressions of the same idea, nor does he mention Hecate. Yet by proposing that the Lares are fully underworld deities because of their appearance with dog related iconography, Plutarch does implicitly connect the Lares to Hecate. Since the Lares cannot be directly equated with Hecate, they are instead associated with correspondingly indistinct chthonic gods, the Furies.<sup>76</sup> It is important to note that the Furies

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<sup>72</sup> The other possibility is that dogs, like Lares, make good guardians. Hecate is also considered a guardian, at least in the Greek world, particularly at Athens where she protected houses and travelers, another parallel with the functions of the Lares. See Rabinowitz (1998) 59-61.

<sup>73</sup> However, the Furies are connected with the threshold, “just as the threshold was the proper seat in Hades of the Furies, so when they visited the living, they took their seat upon the threshold” Ogle (1911) 260; the Lares are associated with boundaries, like the threshold, as well (see below).

<sup>74</sup> It is unclear where the iconography of the dogs comes from for the Lares. It may be directly as a result of being associated with Hecate, or it may have existed previously. Nevertheless, it already existed by 112/111 B.C. when the *Lares Praestites* appear with a dog on the Denarius of Lucius Caesius (LIMC s.v. *Lar* 89).

<sup>75</sup> Burriss (1935) 39.

<sup>76</sup> The Furies themselves are sometimes compared to dogs; see Aesch. *Cho.* 924, 1054 and *Eum.* 132, 253.

themselves are not connected with the crossroads or any of the other locations that the Lares guard. Without Hecate and the crossroads, there is no link between the Lares and the Furies. It is the shared location which allows for the contagious diffusion of religious aspects to take place; here the crossroads is the location and the chthonic nature the aspect.

### **Contagious Diffusion: The Lares and Snakes**

The same types of amalgamation that I have proposed as happening between Hecate and the Lares occur between snakes and the Lares, both *Compitales* and *Familiares*. The parallels between the Lares and snakes are in fact more compelling than the similarities between the Lares and Hecate because Lares and snakes are frequently depicted together on shrines in both the crossroads and in houses.<sup>77</sup> The close pairing, not only conceptually but visually, allows the Lares more easily to absorb the chthonic and ancestral connotations of the snakes. Snakes are chthonic animals, closely connected to ancestor worship: “from archaic Greek times snakes had been believed to embody, or at least to be the close attendant on, the spirits of the dead.”<sup>78</sup> While the animals themselves are not always considered to be deities or spirits, the snakes which are depicted on shrines certainly have a sacred identity.

Both Lares and snakes (usually in pairs) frequently appear on the *lararia*, as the domestic shrines of the *Lares Familiares* are called by modern scholars.<sup>79</sup> These shrines are not uniform in either location or appearance: they occur in various areas of

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<sup>77</sup> There is no iconographic difference between the snakes on the household shrines and the crossroads shrines; Boyce (1942) 15.

<sup>78</sup> Toynbee (1973) 224.

<sup>79</sup> The first ancient use of the word *lararium* is in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, Orr (1978) 1575.

the house, sometimes more than once within the same house, and they are decorated with illustrations of an assortment of gods. The Lares and snakes are depicted along with other deities such as the Genius, Mercury, Fortuna/Isis, Vesta, and Bacchus.<sup>80</sup> While the Lares and the Genius tend to take precedence in modern studies of *lararia*, snakes are in fact the most commonly portrayed spirits on the shrines from Campania, appearing more often than the Genius or even the Lares themselves.<sup>81</sup> The snakes appear in painted *lararia*, but since wall paintings rarely survive elsewhere in the Roman empire, it is impossible to know for certain if the popularity of snakes was particular to Pompeii and Herculaneum or part of a more general trend. Yet it seems likely that the deities represented by the snakes were generally important to the Romans throughout the Roman world.<sup>82</sup>

As with the Lares, there is disagreement as to what the snakes represent. Some modern scholars say they denote the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* (spirit of the head of the household), others the *genius loci* (guardian spirit of a place).<sup>83</sup> The ancient Romans are equally unsure about the significance of snakes. For example, in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas encounters a snake at the tomb of his father, but does not quite know what to make of it: "he [Aeneas] was uncertain whether he should think it to be the *genius* of the site or the attendant of his father" (*incertus geniumne loci*

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<sup>80</sup> Orr (1978) 1580-1582 and Kaufmann-Heinimann (1998) 193, figures 138-139.

<sup>81</sup> Boyce (1942) 13.

<sup>82</sup> Other gods that appear on the Campanian shrines also have been found in domestic contexts in other locations in the Roman Empire, and so it seems reasonable to suppose that the snakes do not represent an exception and are rather part of the general trend. For the presences of snakes in domestic contexts in Augusta Raurica, see Kaufmann-Heinimann (1998).

<sup>83</sup> Boyce (1942) 15-18 summarizes the discussion.

*famulumne parentis / esse putet*).<sup>84</sup> Perhaps Aeneas's uncertainty reflects Vergil's own, since the question is never resolved in the poem. In any case, the two possibilities that Aeneas offers are strikingly analogous to the division over the origins of the Lares, as related to the guardians of places or ancestral spirits, and both reveal the close connection between the snakes and the Lares. Both possible alternatives also display the chthonic nature of the snake. As the servant of the dead Anchises, the serpent would certainly be connected to the underworld. Likewise, as a guardian of place, the snake appeared from the innermost recesses of the tomb, capitalizing on the inherent nature of an animal that lives underground. Therefore, the visual pairing with snakes, which are certainly chthonic spirits of some sort, strengthens the underworld associations of the Lares.<sup>85</sup> As we shall see, this link is reinforced by the pairing of the Lares with Mercury and Mercury's own connection with snakes.

### **Contagious Diffusion: The Lares and Mercury**

Depictions of Mercury frequently appear in the context of domestic religion. The visitors to Trimalchio's house in Petronius' *Satyricon* are greeted by, among other things, an elaborate wall painting including an image of Mercury and a *lararium*. The painting depicts Trimalchio's divinely guided success story:

There was, moreover, a slave market depicted with captions, and Trimalchio, with long hair, himself held the caduceus and was entering Rome with Minerva leading. ...But then at the end of the portico Mercury was carrying

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<sup>84</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 5.95-96. Servius suggests several possibilities to explain the *famulus*, all of which center around a type of dead or reincarnated spirit, Serv. *Aen.* 5.95.

<sup>85</sup> The snakes may also symbolize a regenerative nature, due to the fact that they shed their skins, since they frequently appear along with representations of abundance. This too may be considered chthonic, as the representations of abundance are largely agriculturally based.

[Trimalchio] lifted up by his chin onto the lofty tribunal. ... In addition I saw a large cabinet in the corner, in the shrine of which silver Lares were placed and a marble statue of Venus and a not at all small gold box, in which they said that the beard of [Trimalchio] himself was kept safe. (*erat autem venalicium <cum> titulis pictum, et ipse Trimalchio capillatus caduceum tenebat Minervaque ducente Romam intrabat. ...in deficiente vero iam porticu levatum mento in tribunal excelsum Mercurius rapiebat. ... praeterea grande armarium in angulo vidi, in cuius aedicula erant Lares argentei positi Venerisque signum marmoreum et pyxis aurea non pusilla, in qua barbam ipsius conditam esse dicebant.*)<sup>86</sup>

The inclusion of Mercury and his attribute of the caduceus in Trimalchio's autobiographical portrait highlights Trimalchio's financial, and by extension social, success, particularly since it is Trimalchio and not Mercury who holds the caduceus. Near the painting, and nearly the next thing the narrator notices, is the *lararium*, complete with silver Lares, a marble statue of Venus, and a box containing Trimalchio's first beard.<sup>87</sup> The proximity in space and in the narrative between the wall painting and the *lararium* conceptually relates the two. In the material remains of *lararia* a representation of the *paterfamilias* frequently graces the wall paintings, but in the form of the Genius of the household.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps we should understand Trimalchio's representation of himself as a successful, and divinely inspired, business man as a depiction of his Genius. The entire wall painting does seem to be relevant to the *lararium*, although it spans a much larger physical space than extant examples of *lararia* and Petronius' fictional account is certainly exaggerated for comic effect,

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<sup>86</sup> Petron. 29.3-6. Also present at Trimalchio's triumph are Fortuna and the Fates. A pack of runners is also depicted.

<sup>87</sup> Petron. 29.8. The depiction of Minerva and Mercury spans the entryway, with Mercury right at the edge of the portico. The *lararium* is in a corner of the portico, but the narrator sees it right after (quickly) observing a painting of a teacher and his students.

<sup>88</sup> Orr (1978) 1569-1574.

since Trimalchio so blatantly and unabashedly includes himself in the painting as the slave-boy prodigy of Mercury and Minerva.

Nevertheless, the conceptual pairing of the Lares and Mercury is supported by the physical evidence, in which Mercury plays a large part in domestic sacred space. David Orr observes that Mercury most notably “appears in many of the household shrines of freedmen and tavern owners” in Pompeii.<sup>89</sup> Although the *lararia* and wall paintings of Pompeii are the most well known examples of Roman domestic worship, evidence does also exist outside of Campania. By looking at the material remains from other locations, such as Gaul and Germania, it becomes evident that Mercury’s appearance in domestic religion is not particular to Pompeii. Notably, Mercury also appears in domestic religious contexts in Augusta Raurica, located in modern-day Switzerland, where a number of bronze statuettes depicting him survive from the third century A.D. or before. In Augusta Raurica in particular and Gaul and Germania in general, statuettes of Mercury are the most common of all identifiable gods appearing in *lararia* assemblages. Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann offers an explanation for this predominance of Mercury: “In agreement with the textual evidence, ... Mercury, the principal god of the Gauls and Germans, is by far the most frequently represented.”<sup>90</sup> Yet, as Birgitta Hoffmann notes in her review of Kaufmann-Heinimann’s monograph, other figures “show that Mercury is the most common deity (after the lares) in Campanian assemblages, too. ... [This may] reflect

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<sup>89</sup> Orr (1978) 1581. Mercury’s connection with the non-mercantile class is not as clear.

<sup>90</sup> Kaufmann-Heinimann (1998) 163, with figure 111. (“In Übereinstimmung mit den Schriftquellen ... ist Merkur, der wichtigste Gott der Gallier und Germanen, weitaus am häufigsten vertreten”).



a more general pattern in Roman private religion, rather than a purely regional preference.”<sup>91</sup> It seems likely that Mercury is part of the acceptable group of gods that can be featured in *lararia* since he appears in this context in Roman Britain, North Africa, and Ostia.<sup>92</sup>

The Lares-Mercury connection is commonplace by the time of Augustus, especially in Ovid’s *Fasti*. Ovid relates the story of the goddess Tacita or Muta, once known as Lara, whom he alone identifies as the mother of the Lares.<sup>93</sup> Jupiter punishes her with silence for betraying him to Juno. Furthermore, Jupiter orders Mercury to “take her to the dead [the underworld]: that place is suitable for the silent ones” (*duc hanc ad manes: locus ille silentibus aptus*).<sup>94</sup> Mercury, in his capacity as the guide to the underworld, obeys the order and also rapes Lara, becoming the father of the Lares. Ovid says that these Lares watch over the crossroads but Mercury is not depicted on the Compitales shrines, although there is a surviving statue base for Mercury from a dedication by Augustus at a crossroads on the Esquiline.<sup>95</sup> The connection to Mercury is the strongest with the *Lares Familiares*, and Ovid most likely transfers the association to the *Lares Compitales*. It seems, then, that by Ovid’s time the connection between the Lares and Mercury was well established. Furthermore, Ovid’s Lares, born in the underworld and fathered by Mercury as *Psychopompus* (guide of souls), are securely identified as chthonic.

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<sup>91</sup> Hoffmann (2001). The figures in question are Kaufmann-Heinimann (1998) 193, figures 138 and 139, and they relate to statuettes only.

<sup>92</sup> Orr (1978) 1589-1590 and Bakker (1994) 109.

<sup>93</sup> Ov. *fast.* 2.571-616.

<sup>94</sup> Ov. *fast.* 2.609.

<sup>95</sup> Ov. *fast.* 2.615. For discussion about the Mercury statue base see Lott (2004) 73-80.

The Roman Mercury himself was not always chthonic, but rather was initially a god of commerce and trade, his name possibly derived from the word *merx* (commodity).<sup>96</sup> It is in this capacity that the Mercury of Plautus' *Amphitruo* introduces himself with a pun on his name in the opening lines of the prologue: "As you wish in acquiring and selling your **merchandise** that I favorably influence the profits and help in all things" (*ut vos in vostris voltis mercimoniis / emundis uendundisque me laetum lucris / adficere atque adiuuare in rebus omnibus*).<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Plautus' Lar in the *Aulularia*, who also gives the prologue, has a mercantile-related function at the beginning of the play; he watches over hidden gold. To Plautus's audience household profits provide a common point of reference for the Lares and Mercury although the Lares are only interested in the goods within the house, because they watch over the space in general, and Mercury is involved with all types of business. Nevertheless, when the *lararia* are situated in taverns, where business is the main concern, or atria, where the family coffers are on display, the monetary aspects of the physical locations are shared by both deities.<sup>98</sup> The Lares, however, never become truly associated with Mercury's financial functions, as would occur in a more direct case of syncretism, but the monetary link between the two allows for other comparisons to be strengthened.

While Mercury never loses his identity as the god of trade and business, which allows for the initial connection with the Lares, he does become associated with the

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<sup>96</sup> Phillips (2006) 710-711 notes this etymology from Festus (111,1) along with other possibilities.

<sup>97</sup> Plaut. *Amph.* 1-2.

<sup>98</sup> Freedmen may have been more preoccupied with their financial status, as Trimalchio was, and so Mercury appears on their *lararia* more frequently.

identities and aspects of other foreign gods. When Mercury is syncretized by the second century B.C. with the Greek Hermes, who himself lacks a definite mercantile function, he acquires the roles of messenger, guide, and orator.<sup>99</sup> These roles are also visible in the *Amphitruo* where Plautus retells the Greek myth, substituting Mercury for Hermes.<sup>100</sup> By the Augustan period, Mercury has also picked up Hermes' identity of *Psychopompus*.<sup>101</sup> The Lares become associated with Mercury, as with Hecate and the snakes, through continual conceptual and visual pairing. Not all of the roles, however, are shared since the Lares are not thought by the Romans to be orators or messengers like Mercury. Rather, the Lares become associated principally with Mercury's underworld role because it better complements their already preexisting functions.

As a herald, Mercury carries the caduceus, a staff entwined by two snakes. In the context of a domestic religious setting, the snakes of the staff are similar to the snakes on the *lararia*, which often appear in pairs. Therefore it is likely that, as Mercury becomes more like Hermes, the chthonic nature of the *lararia* snakes reinforces Mercury's role as an underworld god. Through the snake connection, which already held chthonic connotations for the Lares, Mercury, in his capacity as a god of the underworld and boundary crossing, becomes associated with the Lares as well.

### **Ancestors Revisited**

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<sup>99</sup> Phillips (2006) 711-712.

<sup>100</sup> While Mercury fills the role of orator/messenger in the prologue, in so far as he is delivering instructions to the audience, he still identifies himself as the merchant Roman god.

<sup>101</sup> It has been suggested that Mercury was syncretized with the Etruscan Turnus who was also *Psychopompus*, but this is unlikely due to the Augustan date of the association; Phillips (2006) 711.

As the Lares become chthonic through contagious diffusion with Hecate, snakes, and Mercury, they also become further united with the concept of ancestors. This repeated identification of the Lares with chthonic deities, which leads the Lares to be considered ancestors, also helps to illuminate one of the two Greek translations of the term. Ancient sources use two Greek words, δαίμων and ἥρωσ, to distinguish different aspects of the Lares. As argued above, the word δαίμων corresponds to the Lares' indistinct and inexact nature. Translations using the word ἥρωσ, however, are more complicated and have been used by previous scholars to support the ancestral connotations of the Lares. The Greek ἥρωσ usually refers to a somewhat divine and mythical man, the most outstanding example being Herakles. Figures of this status were also frequently claimed as the progenitor of important family lines. The term could also be applied, however, to real "historical persons to whom divine honours were paid" and to "local deities – founders of cities, patrons of tribes."<sup>102</sup> Here again is the suggestion of an ancestor, particularly as a founder who may also have been the "father" of the city in the true genetic sense of the word. Nevertheless, the more important consideration is the connection between a ἥρωσ and his community or physical place (such as a city). Lott suggests that the common translation of Lar into ἥρωσ relies "on the fact that Greek heroes, like Roman Lares, regularly watched over a bounded physical domain."<sup>103</sup> Perhaps, then, it is not the potential of being an ancestor that initially united the Greek and Roman concepts, but the tutelary duties that the spirit owes to a particular physical place. Once the parallel was established,

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<sup>102</sup> LSJ *s.v.*

<sup>103</sup> Lott (2004) 33-34.

the translation using ἥρωϛ may have become more common as the Lares themselves became conceptualized as ancestors.

In this light, it is necessary to reconsider the fourth century B.C. inscription from Latium: *Lare Aineia D(onom)*. Weinstock may be correct in his grammatical interpretation of the inscription, that the dedication is to the Lar Aeneas, where “Lar” is a title of sorts. More than just a title, Weinstock claims that the word Lar serves to identify Aeneas as a divine ancestor and is equivalent to the term ἥρωϛ in the technical ancestral sense.<sup>104</sup> Yet, the supposition does not necessarily follow, since it may be that the title of Lar simply indicates that the locality is protected by the divine Aeneas.<sup>105</sup> Regardless of Aeneas’s familial connections to Latium, he safeguards the area in the same way as any other local deity would. Similarly, in the same area as the Lar Aeneas inscription is the tomb of Aeneas, where, according to Livy, Aeneas is honored as Indigenous Jupiter (*Iuppiter Indiges*).<sup>106</sup> Weinstock concludes that “*Lar* and *Indiges* must have been identical or at least related terms” and both refer to divine ancestors.<sup>107</sup> There does seem to be a correspondence between the words *Lar* and *Indiges*, but once again it is not the ancestral nature that forms the basis of comparison, but rather their connections to physical spaces. The epithet *Indiges* emphasizes the native local nature of the god – that the deity belongs to a particular

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<sup>104</sup> Weinstock (1960) 114-118.

<sup>105</sup> The word Lar seems to appear in Etruscan simply to mean something approximate to “king,” as with Lars Porsenna and Lars Tolumnius.

<sup>106</sup> Liv. 1.2. Other sources give *Aeneas Indiges* or *Indiges pater*, which Weinstock understands as “clearly another ἥρωϛον [(hero shrine)].” Weinstock (1960) 117, especially n. 58.

<sup>107</sup> Weinstock (1960) 117.

place and a particular group of people.<sup>108</sup> It is the bond between deity and physical place that allows for the comparisons between *Lar*, *Indiges*, and *heros*; any ancestral association is secondary.

Still, as the Lares become equated with ancestors, the Romans reinterpret their own evidence. The philosophical writers, such as Apuleius, call the Lares ancestor-ghosts in order to make a distinction between the soul while it inhabits a live body and the soul once the body has died.<sup>109</sup> Similarly Servius says that the Lares are the ancestors that were buried inside the house. “All were buried in their own homes, from which it proceeded that the Lares were worshipped in houses: and from there we even call the shades *larvae* from the Lares, for the others are the *di Penates*” (*omnes in suis domibus sepeliebantur, unde ortum est ut lares colerentur in domibus: unde etiam umbras larvas vocamus a laribus, nam dii penates alii sunt*).<sup>110</sup> By Servius’s time, the Lares have become so conflated and confused with other spirits, such as the *larvae*, through the process of contagious diffusion that the Romans fully identify the Lares as ancestors. The conflation and confusion continue to Macrobius and Festus, who no longer even understand the festivals of the Lares. However, despite the later confusion about the festivals, the preeminence of boundary-related customs and worship illuminates the fact that the Lares were boundary gods.

### **The Lares’ Role as Gods of Physical Boundaries**

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<sup>108</sup> OLD *s.v.*

<sup>109</sup> Apul. *Socr.* 15.

<sup>110</sup> Serv. *Aen.* 6.152. The Cumaean Sibyl tells Aeneas that he must bury his companion Palinurus; Servius seems here to gloss the phrase *sedibus suis*.

The Lares were a part of Rome's boundaries from the city's founding.

Tacitus, in his *Annales*, records a shrine to the Lares, most likely the *Lares Praestites*, as one of the notable points on the original *pomerium* (sacred boundary) of Rome.

But I [Tacitus] think that it is hardly inappropriate to investigate the beginning of the founding and what *pomerium* Romulus established. Therefore, from the cattle market, where we observe the bronze statue of the bull, because that kind of animal is yoked to the plow, the furrow was begun to designate the town, and it was laid out so that it would include the great altar of Hercules; from there stones were spaced at fixed intervals through the lowest parts of the Palatine to the altar of Consus, next then to the old Curiae, then to the shrine of the Lares, from there to the Roman Forum. (*sed initium condendi, et quod pomerium Romulus posuerit, noscere haud absurdum reor. igitur a foro boario, ubi aereum tauri simulacrum aspiciamus, quia id genus animalium aratro subditur, sulcus designandi oppidi coeptus ut magnam Herculis aram amplecteretur; inde certis spatiis interiecti lapides per ima montis Palatini ad aram Consi, mox curias veteres, tum ad sacellum Larum, inde forum Romanum.*)<sup>111</sup>

The *ara maxima* (the great altar of Hercules) predates Rome, but Romulus was sure to include it within the city limits. Therefore, it is doubtful that the inclusion of the shrine of the Lares in the *pomerium* is merely a matter of convenience; rather it is more likely that the shrine was a deliberate incorporation. The most natural place for the early Lares, gods of places and the boundaries of those places, is on the *pomerium* as one of the essential landmarks which distinguished the original Roman city from the surrounding rural area.<sup>112</sup> A *sacellum Larum* in the northwest corner of Rome, where it would create a theoretical quadrangle with the other landmarks listed by Tacitus, has not yet been discovered. It has been suggested, however, that the *Aedes Larum*, located on the *Via Sacra*, may be the same as Tacitus' *sacellum Larum*, one

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<sup>111</sup> Tac. *ann.* 12.24.

<sup>112</sup> Coarelli (2003) 53.

possible explanation being that it was “mentioned because of the change in level, rather than any great change in direction.”<sup>113</sup> Platner and Ashby are more conservative, believing the identification unlikely, but if the two shrines are the same, then “for some unknown reason [Tacitus] preferred to mark the *pomerium* at this point rather than at the northwest corner.”<sup>114</sup> If the *sacellum Larum* of Tacitus is ever proven to be the *Aedes Larum*, then Tacitus’s inclusion of it in his description of the *pomerium* becomes all the more striking – perhaps Tacitus mentioned the shrine because of its inherent connection to the borders of Rome.

Furthermore, there are several tantalizing hints that the Lares are critically involved with the founding of Rome. Cassius Hemina records in his foundation tale that a shrine was founded to the *Lares Grudiles* (*Grudiles* is an adjective from *grundilo*, the grunting noise which a pig makes) following the portentous birth of thirty piglets.<sup>115</sup> While other foundation stories do not mention these same foundational Lares, Livy’s account may contain an oblique reference. When Romulus and Remus are preparing for augury to decide the name of their new city, they pray to the gods who watch over the location of future Rome.<sup>116</sup> These tutelary deities are too indistinct to name, or perhaps are nameless until the city is officially founded; nevertheless, they are sacred to the physical site and may perhaps be Lares without an epithet. After asking these tutelary gods for their help in the contest, each twin then proceeds to set up his own *templum* in order to take the auspices. As in

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<sup>113</sup> Richardson (1992) 232.

<sup>114</sup> Platner and Ashby (1929) 315.

<sup>115</sup> Cass. Hemina fr. 11, from Diom. 1.384K, Peter (1967) 98-99. The legend of the sow and her piglets underwent many variations; see Eden (1975) 27-28, commentary on Vergil. *Aen.* 8.43-45.

<sup>116</sup> Liv. 1.6. *ut di quorum tutelae ea loca essent auguriis legerent.*



Livy's story, the *templum* is primarily used transiently for the purpose of augury, although the concept is later expanded "to refer to a place that was perceived to be in a special relationship with the gods."<sup>117</sup> By definition, a *templum* is a sacred area with clearly defined boundaries, like the *pomerium*. The ideas of the two bounded sacred spaces, *templum* and *pomerium*, become even more closely connected through municipal augury:

one of [the augurs'] most important lines of division was the *pomerium*, the sacred and augural boundary of the city; it was only within this boundary that the 'urban auspices' (*auspicia urbana*) were valid; and magistrates had to be careful to take the auspices again if they crossed the *pomerium* in order to re-establish correct relations with the gods.<sup>118</sup>

As shown above, the Lares are placed on the original *pomerium* through the *sacellum Larum* and the twin brothers pray to the local place gods before setting up the *templum*, which serves the same basic function as the *pomerium* before the *pomerium* can exist. Therefore, the Lares seem to be equivalent to Livy's tutelary gods, called upon as much for their blessings concerning the land that they protected as for their role in marking the boundaries for the auspices. Livy continues his tale with an account of Remus' death, after jumping over the new city walls, at the hands of his brother Romulus. The story contains at its source a "primitive belief in the sanctity of the walls."<sup>119</sup> This wall seems to be sacred in the same way that the *templum* and

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<sup>117</sup> Beard, North, and Price (1998) 2:86, citing Varro *ling.* 2.8-10, who gives an example of how a *templum* is demarcated.

<sup>118</sup> Beard, North, and Price (1998) 1:23.

<sup>119</sup> Ogilvie (1965) 54.

*pomerium* are, and the story lends further credence to the idea that the Lares may have been involved in Rome's founding.<sup>120</sup>

Just as the *sacellum Larum* marked the original *pomerium*, the shrines of the *Lares Compitales* act as boundary markers for a *vicus* (neighborhood). "A *vicus* was a localised spatial division that was defined by the shrines of the *Lares Compitales* upon the boundaries of the *vicus*."<sup>121</sup> Although the *Compitales* shrines appear at the crossroads, they are not located there because of the crossroads. Their placement is determined solely by their function: to mark the boundaries of the *vici*. The rural *Lares Compitales* were much the same and their shrines were located on the boundary, also frequently a road, between two fields. "Thus from their seats in *compita* [crossroads] Lares watched over the territory of farms in the countryside and neighborhoods in the city."<sup>122</sup>

The case for a tangible boundary placement is less clear-cut for the *Lares Familiares*, but there is some indication that they too could be located on a physical boundary. Frequently, at Pompeii and Herculaneum, the shrine of the Lares within the house is in a corner of the *atrium*, along the outside wall.<sup>123</sup> This placement

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<sup>120</sup> Wiseman suggests that the Romulus and Remus story may be based on an early story of the Lares, and has radically reinterpreted an Etruscan mirror, usually identified as the story of Romulus and Remus, as support. Wiseman connects the scene depicted on the mirror with the story related by Ovid in his *Fasti*. If this interpretation is correct, then the Lares were connected with both the underworld and Hermes at a very early date and Ovid's account is all the more compelling. See Wiseman (1995) 65-71.

<sup>121</sup> Laurence (1991) 145.

<sup>122</sup> Lott (2004) 35, also see page 33 for the presence of rural *Compitalia* in agricultural treatises, citing Cato *agr.* 5.3, 57.1 and Colum. 1.8.6-20, 11.1.22-23.

<sup>123</sup> Other locations include courtyards, kitchens, and bedrooms. Statistically, *lararia* seem to occur most often in kitchens and gardens, see below. Frazer (1929) *ad* 1.119-144, says that the fact that Janus sees the Lares does not mean that the shrine was right on the other side of the door; however, we

recalls that of the *Lares Praestites* on the boundary line of the city. Ovid, through the character of Janus, offers a glimpse of the boundary between outside and inside the house: “all doors, on this side and that, have twin faces, from which this side sees the populus, but the other side sees the Lar” (*omnis habet geminas, hinc atque hinc, ianua frontes, / e quibus haec populum spectat, at illa Larem.*)<sup>124</sup> Here it is Janus himself who represents the boundary line, symbolized by the two-faced door, but the Lar’s domain extends up to and encloses all of the space circumscribed by Janus’ border.

### **The Lares’ Role as Gods of Initiation Rites and Boundary Ceremonies**

At the *Compitalia* festival the entire community celebrated the end of one harvest year and the start of another. Therefore, the Lares, like Janus, were gods presiding over an important boundary in time. Louise Holland suggests that the shrine of the *Lares Compitales* may have taken the form of a gateway. Holland’s conclusion is based on a re-reading of a passage in Persius and the relevant scholium.<sup>125</sup> Persius writes about the *Compitalia* festival celebrated by a miserly rich man, “who groans, whenever he fixes the yoke to the perforated *compita* shrine, fearing to scrape off the old silt of the jar” (*qui, quandoque iugum pertusa ad compita figit, / seriolae veterem metuens deradere limum / ingemit.*)<sup>126</sup> The scholiast explains that the shrine was perforated (*pertusa*) because it was open in all four directions, but also claims that “on these [shrines] broken yokes are set up by the farmers as an

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do know that *lararia* can be situated in *atria*. See below for further discussion on the location of *lararia* within the public areas of the *domus*.

<sup>124</sup> Ov. *fast.* 1.135-136.

<sup>125</sup> Holland (1937) 430-432. Pers. 4.26-32.

<sup>126</sup> Pers. 4.28-30.

indication of their completed service and careful work” (*in his fracta iuga ab agricolis ponuntur velut emeriti et elaborati operis indicium*).<sup>127</sup> Holland believes that the yoke could not have been a broken one, since yokes rarely break, nor that it would have been affixed to the shrine, since offerings are usually suspended (*suspendo*) not affixed (*figo*).<sup>128</sup> Rather than a literal yoke, Holland suggests that *iugum* should be understood as a crossbeam held up by two posts, noting that “a gate seems a natural form for a monument primarily intended to mark the end of one estate or district and the beginning of another.”<sup>129</sup> Therefore the *Compitalia* may have evoked the metaphor of the ending of the year with the literal representation of the gate. Holland’s understanding of the yoke is supported by other transition ceremonies involving a wooden crossbar, either a *tigillum* or *iugum*, as in the festivals of *Iuno Sororia* and *Ianus Curiatius*.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, it seems plausible to understand Persius’ *iugum* as a crossbeam for a new year festival.

Slaves were included in the *Compitalia* and “like the better-known Saturnalia, *Compitalia* was a holiday primarily organized and celebrated by Rome’s lowest classes, slaves and freedmen.”<sup>131</sup> During the festival, one woolen doll was suspended from the shrine for every free family member, one woolen ball for each slave. The *vilicus* (farm manager), who was often a slave and forbidden from participating in

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<sup>127</sup> Schol. Pers. 4.28.

<sup>128</sup> Holland (1937) 430-431.

<sup>129</sup> Holland (1937) 432. Alternatively, it is intriguing to consider if there may be some connection between the yoke in the passage of Persius and the yoke used in plowing the *pomerium*.

<sup>130</sup> Ogilvie (1965) 117.

<sup>131</sup> Lott (2004) 35.

other religious events, directed the celebrations.<sup>132</sup> Slaves were bound to their masters and their masters' properties and so "the slaves' annual sacrifice to the Lares Compitales [at the *Compitalia*] may be a constantly renewed pledge of loyalty to the limits within which all their duty lies."<sup>133</sup> The celebration of one boundary reinforces another.

Metaphorical boundaries are also the province of the *Lares Familiares*. These Lares were involved with coming of age rituals, which initiate young men and women to their adult lives. Boys dedicate their *bullae* (amulets) and the shavings of their first beards to the *Lares*. Propertius mentions this episode in a narrative about his life: "next when the gold amulet was dismissed from the young neck, and the man's toga was taken up before the gods of your mother" (*mox ubi bulla rudi dimissast aurea collo, / matris et ante deos libera sumpta toga*).<sup>134</sup> The gods watching over this ritual are the Lares, as seen by a similar line in Persius: "when the guardian first granted the purple [striped toga] to me, frightened, and the amulet hung having been dedicated to the girdled Lares..." (*cum primum pavido custos mihi purpura cessit / bullaque subcinctis Laribus donata pependit...*).<sup>135</sup> The fictional Trimalchio in Petronius' novel keeps the shavings from his first beard in a gold box in his *lararium*.<sup>136</sup> While certainly ostentatious, the display does reflect actual Roman practices.

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<sup>132</sup> Waites (1920) 247.

<sup>133</sup> Holland (1937) 438. Also Lott (2004) 35: "Dionysius tells us that in the city slaves participated in the rites dressed not as slaves but as free men, and that by this annual act of generosity they were rendered more obedient to their masters throughout the year." Slaves, upon their manumission or escape, may have also dedicated their chains to the Lares, see Hor. *sat.* 5.65.

<sup>134</sup> Prop. 4.1B.131-132. It seems that the gods are the mother's since the father is deceased.

<sup>135</sup> Pers. 5.30-31.

<sup>136</sup> Petron. 29.8.

Girls undergo their initiation rite the day before they are married. During the ceremony, “the bride-to-be would dedicate those objects which symbolized girlhood.”<sup>137</sup> Varro says, as preserved by Nonius Marcellus, that “the girl offers dolls, soft balls, hairnets, and breast bands to the Lares” (*suspendit Laribus manias, mollis pilas, reticula, ac strophia.*)<sup>138</sup> The girls’ ritual is equivalent to their male counterparts’.

Both the *Lares Familiares* and the *Lares Compitales* participated in the marriage ritual itself. The rituals surrounding the marriage rites took place in the *atria* of the two houses, where the *Lares Familiares* often were situated. During the course of the procession, the bride gave a copper penny to each type of Lar as she went from her father’s house to her husband’s.<sup>139</sup> In the marriage ceremony, then, it is very clear that the bride is crossing over from the jurisdiction of one set of *Lares Familiares* to another. The *imagines* (images) of the bride’s ancestors “are not attested as having a role to play in the bridal procession, although a wife’s *imagines* were also set up in the *atrium* of her new home.”<sup>140</sup> Therefore, in this ritual the Lares seem not to function as ancestors. The role of the ancestors within the marriage ceremony is played by the *imagines*, which are portable. The Lares are distinct from the *imagines* since the Lares serve to indicate the passage of the bride from her father’s house to her husband’s; remaining at the boundary lines, they do not move with her. Just as they chart the progress of the bride, the Lares also mark the change

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<sup>137</sup> Harmon (1978) 1598.

<sup>138</sup> Varro *frag. Non.* 863.15L.

<sup>139</sup> Frazer (1929) 464 *ad* 2.571 and Flower (1996) 201. The bride would also decorate her husband’s door with wool; perhaps this is connected to the wool used in the *Compitalia*.

<sup>140</sup> Flower (1996) 201-202.

of the young girl to bride and to new wife inaugurated in her new home and with new Lares.

### **The Visibility of the Lares – Public vs. Private**

Even after Lares have become thoroughly identified as ancestors, they continue to maintain their connection to particular places, most notably houses. Apuleius, in his philosophical writings, classifies the Lares as a type of *Lemur* (ghost); both Lares and *Larvae* (malevolent ghosts) are *Lemures*, but Lares peacefully inhabit houses whereas the *Larvae* wander uncertainly. The *Lares Familiares* still retain the importance of their physical placement even after absorbing the characteristics of so many other deities. We now turn to how the visible manifestation of the Lares further illuminates the Roman conception of them.

Augustus capitalized on the visibility of the *Lares* when he reinvigorated the cult of the *Lares Compitales*. The cult had suffered, being abolished in 64 B.C., reinstated in 56 B.C., and possibly suppressed under Caesar.<sup>141</sup> During this politically and socially tumultuous time, the *Compitalia* festival became very political and “the entertainments (*ludi Compitalicii*) [were] associated with the *Compitalia* as occasions for insurrection.”<sup>142</sup> However, Augustus chose to revitalize the cult and celebrations by providing new statues to all of the neighborhoods.<sup>143</sup> In doing so, Augustus recalled the earlier associations of the *Lares Compitales* with community, family, and

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<sup>141</sup> See Fine (1932).

<sup>142</sup> Lott (2004) 35. See 44-51 for particular political uses of the *Compitalia*.

<sup>143</sup> Lott (2004) 104-105.

religious piety – his own political ideology. He did this quite visibly, and all throughout the city of Rome.

The shrines within the house, the *lararia*, provide the majority of our material evidence about the private religious and social aspects of the *Lares Familiares*. Consequently, most of the evidence for the appearance and placement of *lararia* comes from the remains in Pompeii and Herculaneum.<sup>144</sup> These two cities offer a wide variety of high quality and well preserved *lararia*.<sup>145</sup> In spite of the wealth of physical remains from Pompeii, the interpretation of *lararia* remains difficult, particularly in regards to their location. For example, Pedar Foss, emphasizing that most *lararia* are placed in kitchens, argues for the connection between *lararia* and food preparation.<sup>146</sup> Conversely, Penelope Allison warns against the over-identification of niches in kitchens as *lararia*: “It is generally assumed that many of the niches associated with cooking hearths served as shrines in the kitchen; however, none in this sample actually had any evidence of associated *lararium* paintings.”<sup>147</sup> David Orr grants that statistically, most *lararia* are in kitchens and gardens, but also concedes that a purely statistical evaluation of the shrines is not necessarily useful.<sup>148</sup> Entering into the fray, Alastair Small places the majority of the grand *lararia* in the *atria*, noting that “they were intended for display, and were often set in the *atrium*

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<sup>144</sup> Pompeii and Herculaneum may or may not have been typical Roman cities, since we do not have any other so well-preserved towns outside of Campania to compare them to, and practices there may have been different from other cities. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Pompeii and Herculaneum would be complete anomalies, and so it is possible to use them to investigate the domestic religion practices of some Romans.

<sup>145</sup> Orr (1973) 85.

<sup>146</sup> Foss (1997).

<sup>147</sup> Allison (2004) 48; also see 100-103.

<sup>148</sup> Orr (1988) 295.



where the visitors would be expected to venerate the images on entering and leaving the house.”<sup>149</sup>

It seems clear that the *lararia* were placed in any number of locations within the house, including the *atrium*, courtyard or garden, kitchen, and bedroom. Furthermore, the *lararia* are classified into three different types, according to George Boyce: the wall painting, the niche, and the *aedicula*, although sometimes several types appear in combination. The niche can simply be a recess cut into the wall, but is often decorated in some way – with painting, either with solid colors or more pictorial figures, and frequently tiles are used to create shelves, and some niches even have the façade of a shrine. The wall painting type of shrine usually occurs in combination with a niche, although not always, and the placement of the niche in relation to the painting varies. Commonly depicted in wall paintings are the *Lares*, *Penates*, *Genii*, altars, and serpents. The *aedicula* type resembles a miniature temple, which is situated on top of a masonry podium, and may also be decorated with painting. Other embellishments for all of these types of shrines include altars and statuettes.<sup>150</sup> It seems that any type of *lararium* could occur in any location within the house.<sup>151</sup> If the placement was prescribed by some type of religious protocol, then we should expect houses to be built with this tenet in mind; however, the position of the *lararium* does not seem to be taken into account during the design and construction of the houses.

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<sup>149</sup> Small (2007) 191.

<sup>150</sup> Boyce (1937) 10-18. The fourth and rare category of *lararium* is the *sacellum*, a separate room set aside for use in the domestic cult only.

<sup>151</sup> For example, House VI 15,5 has three niches, House VI 16,26 has a wall painting, and the Casa del Menandro has an *aedicula* all located within the *atria*.

The placement of *lararia*, however, is not completely random. The *lararia* that are in the *atria* are predominantly on the right-hand side as one enters the room, usually in the near corner.<sup>152</sup> The consistency of the placement of the shrine on the right-hand side highlights the visibility of the *lararia*. The *aedicula* in the Casa del Menandro (I 10,4), is one of the most well-known *lararia* from Pompeii. The masonry podium still supports the columns, which are enclosed by a wooden lattice, and the pediments of the shrine. At one time the *lararium* was decorated with painting, and some traces remain, but the shrine does not have an associated wall painting. It stands in the northwest corner, the near right-hand corner, as one enters the *atrium*.<sup>153</sup> Similarly the shrines located in and around gardens tend to be on the right or straight-ahead as one enters the garden area. In the Casa degli Amorini Dorati, the garden can be approached in two directions; nevertheless, the *lararium* is still on the right regardless of which doorway is used. The house has another shrine in the garden, one dedicated to Egyptian deities. This shrine is straight-ahead from one doorway, but to the left of the other. The more socially important shrine, however, is the Roman one with the Roman deities including the *Lares*, and therefore it is placed in the well-omened right-handed location.<sup>154</sup> Both of these locations,

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<sup>152</sup> This observation is based on a case study of all the *lararia* in the *atrium* style houses in Allison's database, available on her website. There is only one exception to the right-hand placement in the Casa dell'Efebo, where a staircase takes up the right wall. Additionally, Clarke (1991) 9 noted that domestic religion "rituals [were] localized in specific spaces in the *domus*. Usually located in a corner of the *atrium*...or in the kitchen area."

<sup>153</sup> The descriptions of the shrines come from Boyce (1937) and Allison (Online companion) and my own observations from photographs.

<sup>154</sup> However, the inclusion of the snakes on the Egyptian *aedicula* is interesting because of their close association with *lararia* in general, and it would benefit from further study. See above for the relationship between the *Lares* and snakes, and Boyce (1942) for the importance of the snakes depicted in *lararia*.

*atria* and gardens, are somewhat accessible to the public: in Roman society *atria* are open, not only to the entire household, but to all fellow citizens coming to visit the *paterfamilias*.<sup>155</sup> Gardens would also be visited by close friends and clients. The *lararia* in these locations are intended to be seen by invited guests and clients, as Trimalchio's is seen by his dinner guests in the *Satyricon*. I suggest that the *lararia* are placed on the right-hand side, if possible, as a matter of convention and good omen, and so that guests are able to locate the display easily. These *lararia* are not merely decorative; most include altars, or have them nearby, for offerings. The presence of an altar along with the *lararia* publicly and visibly conveys to the visitors the idea that the family takes its religious obligations seriously.

Further evidence for visibility being a factor in the placement of *lararia* comes from Ostia. The houses in Ostia, dating to a hundred years or more after the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, moved away from the *atrium* style towards a type of house consisting of a courtyard encircled by articulated rooms.<sup>156</sup> The *lararia* are situated in both parts of the houses, but are placed near the center of a wall. The consistent central placement seems to serve the same function as locating the *lararia* in the right-hand corner in Pompeii. The focus on making the shrines observable that the consistent location causes, is seen most clearly in one Ostian house, where the *lararium* is directly opposite the entranceway:

The pseudo-*aedicula* in the Domus della Fortuna Annonaria is almost in the centre of the south wall of the courtyard and almost opposite the centre of the main entrance to the building. ... However, the central pair of columns in the

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<sup>155</sup> See Allison (2007) 271-273.

<sup>156</sup> Bakker (1994) 27.

north side of the first-century colonnade of the courtyard is almost, but not exactly, opposite the much later main entrance: it is a little to the east. Because the pseudo-*aedicula* is a little to the east as well, there is an uninterrupted line of view from the entrance through the central pair of columns to the pseudo-*aedicula*.<sup>157</sup>

By rebuilding the entrance in this peculiar way, it appears that the owners of the house made a concerted effort in order to keep the *lararium* visible to visitors to the house and to casual observers walking by the door.

### **Silence and Concealment**

Despite the high visibility of the Lares, the Romans also treated them with reserve – the Lares are shrouded by silence and secrecy. The *lararia* shrines themselves are prominently displayed in the public parts of Roman houses, but parts of the worship of the Lares are obscured. Similarly, several authors discuss the Lares, but do so in the context of silence. The range of evidence connecting the Lares to silence and concealment seems to indicate that these features, like their visibility, were enduring qualities of the Lares. Nevertheless, they too are connected to boundaries and subject to influence through contagious diffusion.

In his *Fasti*, Ovid provides our only extant mythological story for the birth of the Lares, identifying their mother as Muta, once called Lara, their father as Mercury. The name Muta and the following tale seem to be Ovid's invention because "no other ancient writer [except Lactantius, who is likely following Ovid] speaks of Muta."<sup>158</sup> As Christopher McDonough advocates, perhaps the purpose of the story is not to give an aetiology for the Lares, but to explore the concept of silence, highlighted by the

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<sup>157</sup> Bakker (1994) 38.

<sup>158</sup> Frazer (1929) 446, *ad* 2.571.

semantically transparent name of an otherwise unknown goddess.<sup>159</sup> The tale begins on the *Feralia* (a festival for the dead) with an old woman performing magical rites to the goddess Tacita (Silence).<sup>160</sup> The goddess is aptly called upon. Using what seems to be sympathetic magic, “[the old woman] roasts in the fire the sewn up head of a small sea fish, which she sealed with pitch, which she pierced with a bronze needle” (*quodque pice adstrinxit, quod acu traiecit aena, / obsutum maenae torret in igne caput*) so that, as she declares, “we have bound hostile tongues and inimical mouths” (*hostiles linguas inimicaque vinximus ora*).<sup>161</sup> John Miller rationalizes the fish’s role in the ritual since “fish were proverbial for their silence,” a trait which is then supposedly compounded by sewing the mouth shut.<sup>162</sup> After clearly defining the function of a goddess with a rather transparent name, Ovid then explains who this goddess is, this time calling her Muta (Mute). McDonough suggests that Ovid is playing with the two nearly synonymous words and that “in exploiting the imprecision of her name, Ovid robs the goddess of the power to enforce silence, and so leaves her powerless and silent.”<sup>163</sup> There is a slight difference between the words *muta* and *tacita*, though. The adjective *mutus* does not necessarily mean silent, it can mean the inarticulate noises made by animals or people, whereas *tacitus* denotes total

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<sup>159</sup> McDonough (2004).

<sup>160</sup> Frazer (1929) 446, *ad* 2.571 notes that “clearly the rites in question were unofficial and partook of the nature of magic rather than of religion.” See McDonough (2004) for an exposition as to how the Tacita/Muta tale fits into the larger narrative of the *Fasti*.

<sup>161</sup> *Ov. fast.* 2.577-578 and 581.

<sup>162</sup> Miller (1985) 81 *ad* 2.578.

<sup>163</sup> McDonough (2004) 359.

silence.<sup>164</sup> The variety, however, may also serve to indicate that the general concept expressed by the names is the salient point. The pairing of *tacita* and *muta* also occurs in a curse tablet that seeks to afflict a certain Quartus with speechlessness.<sup>165</sup> The notion of silence pervades the rest of Ovid's tale as well. *Muta* was originally a nymph named *Lara* (Chatterer), so named because of her talkative nature. The names are intentionally transparent; *Lara*, ignoring the admonition of her father about gossiping, tattles on Jupiter to Juno and becomes *Muta* when Jupiter punishes her by ripping out her tongue.<sup>166</sup> The idea of silence is further compounded by the placement of *Muta* in the underworld, among the ghosts. It is the "place suitable for silence" (*locus ille silentibus aptus*).<sup>167</sup> Once made mute, and ensconced in the place of silence, the goddess becomes Silence herself: *Tacita*. Ovid, telling the story backwards, narrates the progression from talkative, to inarticulate mumblings, to complete silence.

Since this story is about the manifestation of silence and its role in a magical ritual, and since only Ovid records this birth story with these parents, why does he include the Lares at all? I suggest that in addition to being the gods of bounded physical places, the Lares were also associated with silence and things being concealed or shrouded from view. The story of *Muta* expresses both the ideas of silence, as we have seen, and of concealment. Following her defiance of Jupiter and

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<sup>164</sup> OLD *s.v.* An uncommon meaning of *tacitus* is "quiet, low, hushed" but Ovid does not seem to imply that meaning.

<sup>165</sup> *AE* 1958, no. 150 [p.38]). The exact grammar is unclear; the tablet may reference the Mute Goddess of silence, the Silent Goddess of muteness, or the Mute Silent Goddesses (*mutae tacitae*). Nevertheless, the pairing occurs three times, *mutae* appears independently another six times.

<sup>166</sup> *Ov. fast.* 2.599-608.

<sup>167</sup> *Ov. fast.* 2.609.

her rape by Mercury, Muta is hidden away in the underworld. It is in this location, which represents and complements their mother's enforced silence, that the twin Lares are born.<sup>168</sup> Therefore Lares, who are present and visible throughout the city at the crossroads, have their mythological origin in a concealed and silent place. While it seems clear that by Ovid's time the Lares had started to become associated with dead ancestors, since he identifies their father as Mercury in his capacity of *Psychopompus* (guide of souls) and locates their birth place among the *Manes*, the Lares are still distinct from the *Manes* and they retain their specific function of protecting places. Ovid very clearly states that the Lares guard the crossroad boundaries. Just as the associations of the Lares with physical places are preserved despite their connections with other gods and ancestors, the Lares' identification with silence is likewise sustained. The birthplace of the Lares is significant because of its silence, and its connection to the *Manes* only reinforces that silence.

Although Ovid is our only source for the tale and possibly the creator of it, he did not invent the Lares' connection to concealment or silence. The association is already present in Plautus. The Lar who delivers the prologue in the *Aulularia* appears in the play as the guardian of a buried treasure. "The grandfather of this man, beseeching me, committed to me a treasure of gold, secretly from all: he buried it in the middle of the hearth, venerating me so that I would guard it for him" (<Sed> *mihi avus huius obsecrans concredidit / thesaurum auri clam omnis: in medio foco defodit*,

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<sup>168</sup> In particular these are the *Lares Compitales*, as Ovid (*fast.* 2.615-616) says, the twins are "those Lares who guard the crossroads and always watch over our city" (*qui compita servant / et vigilant nostra semper in urbe Lares*).

*venerans me ut id servarem sibi*).<sup>169</sup> The Lar guards the treasure, placed within his bounded jurisdiction, just as Ovid's Lares guard the city.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, the grandfather acts secretly (*clam*) and asks for secrecy, a request which Plautus' Lar honors. The actions are carried out so secretly, in fact, that the grandfather's son and grandson are unaware of the treasure. The Lar has the power over the revelation of the hidden gold; the son does not know about it because the Lar does not want him to have it. The grandfather requested that his son be ignorant of the treasure, but it is also within the Lar's power to divulge something secret. In fact, the Lar chooses not to reveal the treasure to the son, because he does not properly worship the Lar; but the god does disclose the location of the gold to the grandson because the great-granddaughter deserves it. "She always daily supplicates me either with incense or with wine or in some other way. She gives me garlands. In acknowledgement of her respect, I have arranged it so that Euclio discover the treasure" (*ea mihi cottidie / Aut ture aut vino aut aliqui semper supplicat; / Dat mihi coronas. Eius honoris gratia / feci thesaurum ut hic reperiret Euclio*).<sup>171</sup> The Lar is able to negotiate the boundary between when something is concealed and when it is not. It seems likely that this boundary crossing characteristic of the Lar is why Plautus has him deliver the prologue.

The concept of concealment also exists outside of the literary evidence. One of the shrines of the Lares in the House of Menander in Pompeii may be a physical

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<sup>169</sup> Plaut. *Aul.* 6-8.

<sup>170</sup> The verb is *servare* in both cases.

<sup>171</sup> Plaut. *Aul.* 23-26.



representation of the Lares' silent and hidden nature. The *aedicula* in the *atrium* is closed off by a wooden lattice.<sup>172</sup> The large size and prominent location of the *lararium* indicates that the owners of the house wished to visibly express their domestic religious sensibilities; and yet they desired to keep the exact nature of that worship, the Lares included, obscured.<sup>173</sup> It is also possible that the owners were not even aware of why they hid their Lares, but they were merely following the longstanding tradition of shrouding religious objects, just as the *cella* of a public temple contains the most sacred objects, from public view.

Likewise, the *lararium* in Petronius' freedman's house is not completely open for display. The guests to Trimalchio's dinner can see his statues and a golden box "in which they said his first beard is preserved" (*in qua barbam ipsius conditam esse dicebant*).<sup>174</sup> The report about what is in the box is, however, no more than rumor. Additionally, the verb *condere* may mean simply "to store" but it can also have a more mysterious meaning of "to put out of sight (without any intention of keeping secret)" or even "to put away for concealment."<sup>175</sup> The shavings of a beard could not simply be open for display because they would decay if not taken care of and preserved; nevertheless, the fact that the unexplained box is placed with the Lares strengthens the connection between the Lares and concealment.

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<sup>172</sup> Boyce (1937) 27.

<sup>173</sup> There are no remains of statues of the Lares or other religious paraphernalia in or near the shrine; it is generally believed that the occupants removed the Lares before or during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Ling (1997) 48, in his volume on the *Insula of the Menander*, says the shrine in the *atrium* "presumably served the cult of the Lares and Penates." I have not found any scholar who contradicts the identification of the shrine as a *lararium*.

<sup>174</sup> Petron. 29.8.

<sup>175</sup> OLD *s.v.*

The association of silence and concealment with the Lares persists, just as the boundary associations do, when the Lares are fully identified with ancestors. Apuleius, in his philosophical works, identifies the Lares as a certain type of ghostly spirit, but offers a different view of them in the *Apology*, his defense speech against the charge of magic.<sup>176</sup> One of the accusations against Apuleius is that he had “certain things wrapped up in a handkerchief among the Lares of Pontianus” (*quaedam sudariolo inuoluta apud lares Pontiani*).<sup>177</sup> Although the term Lares can be used as a metonymy for home, it is unlikely to be the case here. There is no parallel for the phrase *apud Lares* being used in conjunction with a person’s name as a circumlocution to mean that person’s house. Rather, the meaning is literal and the prosecution argues that Apuleius physically hid something among the Lares belonging to Pontianus, most likely near the statues or in the shrine. The accusers presumably have some sort of evidence that the charge is true; however, they are unsure as to what exactly was contained within the handkerchief that was placed among the Lares, since it was only briefly seen; Apuleius ridicules their vagueness. We may compare the *lararia* in the House of Menander and in Trimalchio’s house, where the worship of the Lares is on display and yet hidden. The prosecution is aware of the location of Pontianus’ Lares and that there was a handkerchief there as well, they just do not happen to know the precise contents. Similarly, Trimalchio’s guests saw the *lararium* and the golden box, but there was only a rumor about what was contained within the box.

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<sup>176</sup> Apul. *Socr.* 15 explains Apuleius’ philosophical views of the Lares.

<sup>177</sup> Apul. *apol.* 53.

Apuleius eventually relents and admits that the mysterious handkerchief was in fact placed among the Lares and that it contains sacred objects used in mystery cults.<sup>178</sup> The pairing of the Lares and the sacred objects is not coincidental. The main characteristic of mystery cults is their silence about their rites to the uninitiated. Therefore, it seems likely that Apuleius placed his sacred objects among the Lares not because it was simply a convenient location, but because the Lares themselves are connected to silence. The sacred objects and rites of the mystery cult cannot be discussed, and so Apuleius deposits the objects with the Lares, who hold their silence.<sup>179</sup>

### **The Process of Contagious Diffusion Continues**

The same process that connected the Lares with ancestors by Apuleius' time continues to be in effect as they start to become associated with mystery cults. The Lares' identity as boundary gods is not as crucial, but their silence and concealment serves to connect them with the mystery gods. Just as the Lares gradually became chthonic through contact with other gods in their places of worship, so too do the Lares become aligned with the mysteries. The shrine to the Egyptian Isis, in the garden of the Casa degli Amorini Dorati, is near the *lararium*, showing that the Lares and at least one mystery cult god, Isis, were worshiped in the same locations.

Additionally, snakes continue to serve as a point of comparison: "it was, indeed, as a symbol of eternal rebirth that the snake, which renews its skin every year, played an

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<sup>178</sup> Apul. *apol.* 55.

<sup>179</sup> One of the other charges against Apuleius is that he purchased fish, allegedly in order to use in a magic rite. Perhaps there is some connection to Ovid's old woman who uses a fish to silence enemies in honor of Tacita or Muta, the mother of the Lares. See Hunink (1997) 97-98 for an overview of the magical uses of fish, which presumably Apuleius would have known about.

important role in the iconography of those mystery-cults that promised immortality and victory over death to their adherents.”<sup>180</sup> The Lares, frequently depicted with snakes, and themselves associated with death, continue to cross boundaries and become associated with a variety of thoughts and concepts. By the time of Macrobius and Festus, and in a Christian context, the Lares had continued to evolve and were seen as malevolent spirits of the dead, and their celebration as a type of magical rite.

### **Conclusion**

The Lares are not static beings, but conception and the worship of them develop over the course of the Roman Republic and Empire just as other gods and religious practices do. The debate over the origin of the Lares, whether they were originally ancestors or tutelary gods of the fields, obscures our understanding of the maturation of the Lares and refuses to recognize how Roman conception of these spirits changes over time. Through this neglect, the connections between the Lares and other Roman gods are lost. However, the Lares are affected by their placement near Hecate in the crossroads, near Mercury within domestic and mercantile settings, and near the representations of divine snakes in all of these locales. The close physical proximity of the Lares to other gods creates an atmosphere that allows for characteristics and traits to be transferred between the deities, in much the same way that syncretization works, but without ever identifying the Lares precisely with those nearby gods.

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<sup>180</sup> Toynbee (1973) 234.

I have argued that Lares began as protective gods of certain places and gradually gained their ancestral identity over time and through proximity to other spirits. This progression seems to be the most logical in accordance with the evidence. However, even enduring proponents of the ancestor theory still must find the contagious diffusion theory valid. Whichever traits are considered to be the basis for transmission, the resulting synthesis is the same. Regardless of the direction, the amalgamation that takes place between the Lares and other deities is integral to the flexible identity of the Lares.

The fact that the Lares are never truly syncretized with other gods reveals that the Lares belong to a distinct class of deity that is different from the kind that makes up the major Roman pantheon. Nevertheless, their ability to absorb traits from other gods shows that the Lares are not as completely vague and unstructured as other gods lacking personalities like the *Manes*. The Lares began as general and multifaceted deities, but they had a very specific function, to protect physical places. The nature of the Lares, centered on bounded physical locations, produces the foundation for them to gain distinct characteristics while never acquiring individual personalities.

The physical nature of the Lares also gave them their first functions – to protect locations within a clearly demarcated boundary. The concept of boundaries is prevalent throughout the Roman worship of the Lares. The Lares are venerated as boundary gods in their placement on boundary lines, such as the pomerium and the crossroads, and during ceremonies celebrating the passage over a boundary, such as the agrarian new year or a coming of age rite. They retain this function as boundary

gods, even as the Lares become connected with the chthonic associations of other divinities. When the Lares are identified as ancestors, they still negotiate a boundary – the one between the living and the dead.

The insistence on adhering to one side or the other of the origin debate without consideration beyond that point also ignores the other major ideas that the Romans had about the worship of the Lares: visibility and silence. These concepts must have been a part of the Lares' identity from nearly the beginning since they persist so strongly throughout time. Even through all the changes that the Lares undergo as they become connected with ancestors and with mystery cults, these two concepts, like that of boundaries, remain. They are as overlooked but just as integral to the understanding of the Lares as comprehending how the Lares pick up new traits through contagious diffusion. Understanding these qualities and processes allows us to gain new insight concerning the Romans' use of the Lares, from Plautus to Apuleius to Macrobius, on crossroads and in the houses. The approach allows us to move beyond a simplistic definition of the Lares, opening the way for a more dynamic understanding of these gods, and encourages us to take a fresh look at other aspects of private religion.

## Abbreviations

- AE *L'Année épigraphique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1888-.
- LIMC *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*. Zürich: Artemis, 1981-.
- LSJ *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 9<sup>th</sup> ed.
- OCD *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.
- OLD *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- TLL *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1900-.

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