

The Roman Way of Death - Ceremony

The Romans generally believed in an afterlife. This spirit world was neither heaven nor hell, merely the place where the spirits of the dead resided.

Failure to accord the dead their due and proper burial rites, *iusta facere*, would result in the spirit being denied entry to the underworld, compelling it to wander for eternity in limbo. It would become a malevolent force bringing unhappiness and misfortune to those who had denied it a proper burial.

If a Roman citizen was found unburied there was an obligation on the finder to perform the necessary rites or risk the consequences.

The earliest burial practice in Roman Britain was cremation. Some of the burnt bone was always buried after the cremation; it wasn't scattered as is sometimes the custom today.

By the middle of the 2nd century, about 150 AD, inhumation had largely replaced cremation as the preferred burial rite. Now the whole body was placed in the ground.

However the body was buried the process was accompanied by rituals and ceremony. Though we only have literary descriptions of the burial of high status individuals there is enough archaeological evidence to show that most people were accorded some ceremony.

Until about 200 AD Roman burials took place during the day; after this burial was usually at night. Where a family member died it was the duty of the oldest son to bend over the body and call them by name, as if trying to summon the spirit back.

The body would be arranged on a funeral couch where it would lie in state until the burial. Branches of pine or cypress would be set in front of the door to show that the house was polluted by death.

Family, friends and neighbours would be advised when the burial was to take place. The body would be carried on the shoulders of sons or friends in a procession. Musicians might accompany them along with professional mourners. Torches were carried even during daylight burials.

Ceremonies at the burial place varied according to time and custom but usually included three elements. The place was consecrated, earth would be cast onto the burial, and those polluted by the death would be purified.



After the burial ceremony was completed the mourners would return home. Here the house would be purified by an offering to the household gods, *Lares*, and the funeral rites would be complete.

Mourning went on for Nine Days of Sorrow after the funeral and for close family this continued for up to ten months in the case of an adult, less in the case of a child.

The dead were remembered by specific ceremonies known as 'days of obligation.' Some were public such as the *dies parentales* which lasted from the 13th to the 21st of February; private ceremonies might include the birthday or date of death of an individual. These were happy occasions and could include what was in effect a picnic by the graveside.