

**FLOWER, HARRIET. THE DANCING LARES AND THE SERPENT IN THE GARDEN: RELIGION AT THE ROMAN STREET CORNER. PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. 416 P. ISBN: 0691175004**

Jonathan da Cruz Moreira<sup>1</sup>

In her most recent work, Harriet I. Flower is devoted to the study of *lares*, deities usually represented in party moods in pairs; dancing with their short tunics and *rhyton* pouring wine. The cult of these cheerful protectors of the places serves, in this book, as a background for an instigating investigation about the sense of community within the Roman subaltern groups, with religious practice as an important support.

Harriet I. Flower graduated in ancient history and classical literature at Oxford University (1983) and postgraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania (1993); has taught classical antiquity since 2003 at Mathey College Princeton University. Her publications focus on the areas of religion, culture and memory in ancient Rome, and have published works like *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford, 1996), *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2006), and *Roman Republics* (Princeton, 2010).

According to Flower, this book aims to understand religion as an integral and ubiquitous part of Roman common life at the most basic levels, especially for subaltern groups, slaves, freed men and women. For this, Flower discusses the different ways in which *lares*, defined as gods of places, were represented and worshiped in different places and temporalities. Absolutes in the lives of ordinary citizens, *lares* were part of the rituals of passage, such as marriages, or transition to adulthood; and protected the home, the neighborhood, the city walls, or the farm borders.

In its more than 430 pages, the work is divided into 4 parts, subdivided into 7 to 10 chapters. With a clear language and easy reading, all chapters are finished with an objective sum up of the themes proposed and discussed, using extensive and varied sources. The sources for popular religious practices are sparse in time and space, which asks for special attention. In *Lares and the Serpent in the Garden*, however, Harriet I. Flower

---

<sup>1</sup> M.A. in History, Federal University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. E-mail: [jonathan.cruzmoreira@gmail.com](mailto:jonathan.cruzmoreira@gmail.com)

*Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.4, n.1 - 2019.1. p. 433-437

DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2019.v4.10133

places each specific source typology in its own perspective, respecting its specificities. Poems, treatises, plays, ancient historiography, are meticulously contrasted with religious iconography and practices that can be discerned in the visual language found mainly in the sites of Pompeii and Delos. The comparative approach between spaces of Roman influence allows us to observe how this Roman cult could adapt to the characteristics of the local communities.

In the first part, **Lar (es) / Genius and Juno / Snake (s)**, the author is dedicated to the debate about the nature of these deities. Several authors since the days of Cicero had already put into question the true origin of *lares*, and their voices echoed in modern works. Were they, gods of the underworld or spirits of ancestors whose worship pacified the world of the dead and the living? Flower strongly disagrees with these conceptions. Based on the contradiction between the different hypotheses of the ancient scholars for the genesis and the essence of the *lares*, the author defends a clear distinction between the *lares* and other gods and protective spirits present in the Roman houses, such as *manes*, *penates* or the *genius*. Flower argues that both practices and home-related iconography do not allow us to associate these cheerful dancing deities with the underworld or with the dead: The authors, always from the elites, knew little about religious practices closer to the kitchen.

Sometimes, *lares* were referred to in ancient historiography and literature in the singular, others in the plural, while in the iconography both of the Bay of Naples and Delos, they were usually portrayed in pairs, identified closely as gods protecting the spaces. Plauto's piece, *Aulularia*, portrays this feature well. Staged for the first time around 195 BC, the play analyzed by the author brings the *lar familiaris* presenting himself as protector of the residents and assets entrusted to him. Before the vertiginous growth of the *urbs*, when the houses had fewer divisions, a single focus gave light and warmth to the house and in them the *lares* were adored (the author points out the difficulty in determining for sure how this cult was given, whether with images or paintings behind the flame). As many houses gain new dimensions and new rooms with specific functions, the cult of *lares* moves to the kitchen, accompanying the place of the slaves in charge of preparing food, and also to worship these protective gods.

Outside the houses, the *compitum* was the shrine of the protective *lares* of the neighborhood, the *lares compitales*. Both in the domestic and the urban environment, the site of Pompeii still offers exceptional opportunities to study the iconography and the disposition of objects and places of worship in space. Still in this first part, the author is dedicated to a careful reading of the household altars dedicated to the *lares* in Pompeii, most often in the

*Heródoto, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.4, n.1 - 2019.1. p. 433-437*

DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2019.v4.10133

kitchen and *compita* found in situ, always in places of crossing between two or three streets, usually near of water fountains. The disposition of strongly standardized iconography allows us to analyze the main elements of the ritual: human figures with the pig brought to the sacrifice (represented sometimes only in pork cuts), the flute that gives the music, the genius of the family father and the *lares* itself pouring wine; also the serpent, apparently exclusive of the Bay of Naples, which leaves its natural environment, the garden, to participate in the sacrifice.

The second part, **Shrines for *Lares* in Rome**, explores in more detail the sacred spaces dedicated to *lares*. In Rome, great temples linked to the official religion were erected in honor of the *lares*, such as that of the *Lares Permarini*, in thanksgiving for the maritime victory over Seleucid King Antiochus III; in the *sacra via*, the temple of the *lares* in *summa sacra via* had an even older cult, linked to the protection of the Roman territory. Sea and land were, in these temples (*aedes*), protected by *lares*. In smaller shrines, such as the *ara*, *sacellum* and *fanum*, other named *lares* were revered, each with its own protective function; some of them, such as *quaerquetulani* and *grundiles*, are almost inaccessible to us given the scarcity of references, but are closely related to the mythology around the founding of the city. *Lares praestites*, on the other hand, have their iconography preserved in a 112 BC Denarius by L. Caesius, with two standing gods with their guard dog on the obverse prepared to defend the walls of the city.

These named *lares* worshiped in their shrines throughout the city, according to the author, should not be confused with the *compitales* or *lares familiares*, whose impersonality of their names reflects the mission of protection of the community as a whole. They are dedicated to the passages of adult life, such as marriage. The bride brought with her a coin for the bridegroom, symbolically buying her space in the new houses, a coin for the *lar familiaris*, asking for permission of the protector of the house and, finally, the nearest *compitum*, symbolically sacramenting her position as a newcomer in the community under its protection. Still about the *compita*, the author returns to the urban space of Pompeii for a study of the provisions of these altars in the city. Its proximity to water sources and its central position in the *vici* made the *compitum* a meeting point, forming in its surroundings an organic community.

The third part, **Celebrating *Lares***, concentrates on the analysis of worship practices and associations formed between popular groups in Rome and elsewhere with the aim of worshiping the *lares*. The main festivity that involved the cult of the *lares* and that mobilized the magistrates of the community was the *Compitalia*. *Compitalia* was celebrated on the altars of the crossroads dedicated to the *lares* on variable dates, usually coinciding

*Heródoto, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.4, n.1 - 2019.1. p. 433-437*

DOI: 10.34024/herodoto.2019.v4.10133

with the end of December and the beginning of January. On this day, the lares were honored with honey cakes offered by each house, garlands in the *compita*, much wine and the pork that was sacrificed in the altar. For the author, the tradition of hanging wool dolls (representing the freeborn and freedmen of the community) and wool balls (representing the slaves) on the altar allowed them to know exactly how many individuals belonged to the local community and their status. Each *vicus* organized around its magistrates, the *vicomagistri* (in Rome, generally freed), assisted by *ministri* (often slaves), who were the central figures in the celebrations.

In the same space there were the *collegia*, associations that united individuals belonging to the same cult or to the same commercial or professional activity. To Flower, the participation of the *collegia* in the events of the *compitalia* was related mainly to the games that took place during the parties, the *ludi compitalici*, and not to the celebration itself. According to the author, they would have been banned in 64 BC because of their involvement in alleged political movements.

Still in this third part, the author brings us the case study of Delos. The Hellenistic city of Delos received between the 2nd and 1st centuries BC a great number of merchants from all parts of Italy and, with them, their slaves. This community of Italian influence was formed keeping some of its traditions, among them the worship to the *lares* and the festival of the *compitalia*, as portrayed in the frescoes of the site of Delos analyzed by the author and the inscriptions showing the existence of a group formed between freedmen and slaves for the promotion of the *compitalia*, the *kompetalistai*. Even without *compitum* delimiting the urban space, the *lares* were in the kitchens and the *compitalia* was celebrated, demonstrating how these deities linked to the community were adapted according to the local characteristics.

Finally, the fourth part, **Augustus and Lares**, concentrates on the religious reforms undertaken during the first decades of the government of Augustus, as it was consolidated as the greatest power over Rome on the way to the principate. Before the introduction of the *lares Augusti*, the first emperor donated small images of *lares*, the *lares publici*, to be worshiped within the local communities, paid with the values collected from gifts (stips) that he received from the Roman plebs in the new year. From 7 BC, along with the reform that divided the city into 14 regions, these subdivided into *vici* administered by the *vicomagistri*, revived the *ludi compitalici*, in addition to introducing the *lares augusti*. At this point, the author reflects on the theological nature of the *lares augusti*, often described by historiography as a cult of the genius of Augustus or else the extension

of the household worship of the *lares* of Augustus and his house to the altars at the crossroads.

To Flower, there is no evidence that can relate the cult to the *lares augusti* introduced in 7 BC, the genius of Augustus and the distinction between genius and *lares* is made quite clearly already in the first part of the work. Secondly, the *lar* cannot leave the domestic altar and dwell elsewhere. Tossing the *lar* from home was even a sign of despair. Augustus' reforms brought the emperor and Roman plebe closer to the more subtle and personal aspects of the community, which began to count the years in the dedications of the altars, starting with the reforms of the vici, beginning a new era.

*The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden: Religion at the Roman Street Corner* invites the reader to see a world that has often been eclipsed by both modern historiography and ancient literature, the world of the common Romans, presenting the cult of *lares* as an integral part of a traditional religiosity that did not depend on the great temples and complex mythological narratives but which were, in fact, deeply linked to a sense of community and belonging that allowed also the variety of representations and religious performances between the three places in which the studies concentrated: Rome, Delos and Pompeii. Perhaps the main critic to the work is precisely the absence of a comparative perspective beyond these three case studies. The question of how (and if) *lares* were worshiped in other Roman provinces remains unanswered, which is perfectly justified by the scope of the project, manifestly interested in the religious practices in the *urbs*. It is a detailed work, easy to read and fluid and courageous, which undoubtedly contributes very much to the study of late republican Roman religiosity and in the days of Augustus, as well as to the studies of the subaltern groups of the Roman world in general.

## Reference

FLOWER, Harriet. *The dancing Lares and the serpent in the garden: religion at the Roman street corner*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.