I

LAR(ES) / *GENIUS* AND *JUNO* / SNAKE(S)

vosque lares tectum nostrum qui funditus curant
—ENNIUS *ANNALES* FR. 619

The Romans imagined themselves, whether in town or in the countryside, as living in a world full of gods, which meant a world full of *lares*. From monumental temples to modest altars at street corners, from household shrines to tiny, portable bronze statuettes, inhabitants of Rome (and many other places in Italy and beyond) spent their days under the watchful care of a multitude of different *lares*. As the case of Pompeii, the best-preserved ancient city, reveals, the religious landscape of a Roman(ized) town consisted of a handful of temples in their own dedicated precincts balanced by dozens of street altars and hundreds of domestic shrines inside houses and places of business. The *lares* (and the snakes who so often accompany them on the Bay of Naples) far outnumbered the other, grander gods of civic cult, since they permeated both the various urban networks and individual domestic spaces. In simple visual terms, a person walking around the city streets in the first century AD and entering the houses, shops, or places of production was constantly encountering easily recognizable twin *lares* in similar iconographic patterns, many freshly (re)painted and often accompanied by visible signs of recent offerings. That is to say, the *lares* could be found in both civic and domestic contexts. But what kinds of deities were these *lares*? Why were there so many of them? What can we learn about them from the way they were represented and from the offerings they received?

This first part aims to address these fundamental questions about the nature of the *lares* and of the snakes by using a wide variety of extant ancient evidence that is relevant to these much disputed deities. There can be no doubt that *lares* were thought of as very ancient deities, who were ubiquitous in the home, on the farm, and at the street corner in a town, in a characteristically Roman pattern. In fact, their very names are often used as synonyms for the home in classical Latin. Beyond that, agreement has been hard to reach, since scholarly debates about their identity started in antiquity even in the lifetime of Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), our most important learned source for Roman religion. But how could educated Romans be in doubt about the character of such familiar gods? And how can we, in turn, negotiate their hesitations and inconsistencies in our own analysis?

The intricate debate about the nature of the *lares* that engaged learned Romans in the first century BC and, consequently, about the meaning of the rituals addressed to them or vice versa, depending on how the argument is framed, was itself a cultural product of the intellectual climate at the time.[1] Amid political strife and religious uncertainty, the years between 60 and 40 BC saw intense debate

1 See Rawson 1985 for an overview, with Fantham 2004 and Stroup 2010.

between Roman intellectuals about origins, meanings, and identity in their culture. Consequently, these men engaged in the avid collection of antiquarian information relevant to their own institutions. The political upheavals that attended the decay of republican government and the emergence of one-man rule, including a series of brutal civil wars, produced a sharp sense of loss and of nostalgia for past practices, especially but not exclusively among the elites. It is essential to keep in mind that republican political habits had been closely associated with traditional Roman religion and its central concept of a state of harmony with the gods that allowed the Roman community to survive, flourish, and take a role of leadership in the Mediterranean. There was much at stake for men like Varro, both personally and collectively.

Subsequently, this ancient discussion about the nature of the *lares* has been the source of modern disagreements over how to understand these deities within the general framework of Roman religious life. In order to come to terms with the debate between ancient writers, we need to understand its parameters and purpose within its original historical and intellectual context. A study of *lares* (together with their frequent companions, a *genius* and a pair of snakes) raises questions that are fundamental to an understanding of Roman religion at the level of its most frequently practiced rituals, those that shaped the everyday religious experience of ordinary Romans and their slaves at home and in the local neighborhood.

Over the last century, two interpretations of the *lares* by modern scholars of Roman religion have presented diametrically opposed readings: either the *lares* were guardian gods identified primarily with places (but, therefore, also with the roads between these different places) *or* they were the (potentially restless) spirits of deceased family members, which would make them underworld spirits.[2] Although the snakes are the most frequently depicted local deities in Pompeii, no extant literary source mentions them. Consequently, they have also been associated either with place, or with the head of the household, or with the dead, according to the view taken of the *lares* or of the *genius* (male protective spirit) who so often appear near them.[3]

But who were the gods who watched over the Roman home and local neighborhood? Were all these spaces really imagined as being inhabited by the spirits of the dead? Did Romans trust and celebrate their *lares* or fear and appease them? In order to find satisfactory answers, we must be logical and careful in our use of a wide range of sometimes completely contradictory ancient sources, which come from different time periods and places. Treating all ancient evidence as equally authoritative has produced a stalemate. In other words, it is not simply a question of theology but of methodology in studying religious practice, from the reading of a

2 For the extensive and heated debate on the nature of the *lares*, the following authors are of particular note. For the *lares* as gods of place: Wissowa 1912; Kunckel 1974; Bömer 1981; Scheid 1990, 587–98; Fröhlich 1991; Foss 1997; Van Andringa 2000; Lott 2004; and Forsythe 2005, 131 and 146. For the *lares* as deified mortals: Samter 1901; Tabeling 1932; Niebling 1956; Cornell 1975 and 1995, 75; Mastrocinque 1988; Carandini 1997; Coarelli 2003; Fraschetti 2005 (first published 1990); Tarpin 2002 and 2008; Scheid 2007; Bodel 2008; Giacobello 2008, 129; and Coarelli 2012, 174–85. Scullard 1981 and Wallace-Hadrill 2008 do not take a position. Robert Phillips in the *OCD*[4] claims it is impossible to choose between the two explanations. It is time to move beyond this dispute about the basic nature of the gods. In what follows, I hope to make a persuasive argument in favor of the *lares* as gods of place.

3 For the (similar) debate about the snakes, see section I.viii later.

text to the analysis of iconography to the understanding of the placement and cultivation of local shrines.

Much innovative and careful work on Roman religion over the last generation has insisted on the primacy of rituals themselves as generators both of experience and of meaning in a religious world that lacked official theological systemization and teaching.[4] A painstaking method of elucidating ritual gesture and action as described in texts can be complemented by the study of religious iconography, especially in cases where visual language is well attested and integrated into cult sites, as is the case for the *lares* and the snakes at Pompeii. Consequently, these approaches avoid the multiple explanations and convoluted combinations produced by syncretism, whether ancient or modern.

In accordance with this methodology, carefully chosen ancient sources must be scrutinized with great care in order to discover what they do and do not tell us about actual religious practices and, consequently, about the logic and significance behind the actions performed. Meanwhile, the debates of ancient authors (mostly antiquarians and learned theorizers) can and must not be confused with the real-life practices of actual participants in the rituals themselves.[5] That is to say, in a culture without an established religion defined by an authoritative book of scripture, theological exegesis was often a private matter and was pursued at will by learned men of leisure, who cultivated debate and dispute for their own intellectual purposes, with a special focus on the arcane and archaic. Their freedom of discussion was based on the fact that their interpretations had no general significance for or application to actual religious life, especially that of ordinary people.

Cicero and his friends were completely at liberty not only to debate the nature of the gods themselves and of man's relationship to them (at their villas in their spare time) but also to circulate the resulting thoughts in writing (often in the form of dialogues) without fear of seeming either ungodly or un-Roman.[6] Cicero's *de Natura Deorum* (45 BC) and *de Divinatione* (44 BC) are key texts that survive from this debate, written in the time of turmoil at the end of Julius Caesar's life and soon after his murder. These same elite Romans were (mostly) quite content to return to Rome from their vacation times and to participate in and even to preside over traditional religious observances in an orthodox manner. They did not worry about or perhaps even perceive a contradiction between their public lives, their official religious functions as magistrates and priests in state cults or as heads of households, and their intellectual debates about the divine and about what religion either had once been or should ideally be. Indeed, many of their learned writings were based either on explaining the venerable origin of various deities or cults or on advocating

4 See Scheid 2001a and 2005a and Prescendi 2007. Their reading of rituals can be complemented by the conceptual approach of Lipka 2009, adapted by O'Donnell 2015, 55–69.

5 Wissowa 1912, 174, already noted the creativity of the Romans in seeking deeper explanations of the *lares*. Almost a century later, Prescendi 2007, 7: "L'exemple des *Lares* et de leur mère montre qu'on ne peut pas entreprendre une recherche sur la pratique et la réalité cultuelle des religions anciennes en partant des réflexions des écrivains de l'Antiquité." [The example of the *lares* and of their mother shows that one cannot investigate the practice and reality of cult in ancient religions taking the reflections of ancient authors as a starting point.]

6 The principal antiquarian authors whose views we have access to are M. Terentius Varro (116–27 BC); Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79); Aulus Gellius (ca. AD 125– after AD 180); S. Pompeius Festus (later second century AD); Maurus Servius Honoratus (late fourth to early fifth century AD); and Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius (early fifth century AD). See Rawson 1985, 233–49, for an overview of such writing in the first century BC, with Beard, North, and Price 1998, 152–54.

for a completely new approach, albeit usually in a theoretical realm. Their aim was rarely to describe contemporary cult practices in a way that would be most useful for modern scholars.

Whatever the method employed by each writer, the nature of these ancient texts is scholarly, often divorced from actual practices, and essentially personal. Nor did they have a role in civic cult or discourse. These books did not represent the official views of any priestly college or prophetic religious leader, even when written by a Roman who also held a priestly office. We do not have access to a dossier of judgments of priestly colleges in response to individual consultants or to the senate. While the surviving texts obviously have a great deal to tell us about the intellectual climate of republican Rome, especially in the first century BC, they cannot serve either as catechisms or as ethnographic field guides for any Roman cult. Rather, Roman rituals can only really be understood by recovering (as far as possible) their practice, since the thoughts and emotions of the ancient participants are largely lost to us.

Such general considerations are especially applicable in the case of *lares*, since many of their shrines were cultivated primarily by ordinary Romans, and particularly by freedmen and slaves, who were mostly not the writers of academic discussions of religion or antiquarian treatises. By the first century BC, the *lares* cult was organized and overseen by freedmen and slaves or by Roman citizens of a very humble station, especially in its practice at the crossroads shrines (*compita*) in the local neighborhoods (vici).[7] In larger households, such as those of Varro or Cicero, the main focus of the cult was the shrine in or near the kitchen, which was to be found in the domestic realm of the slaves. In other words, Roman authors who were from the educated elite class may not have been as regularly involved in the cult of the *lares* as in many other rituals they chose to write about.

The close association, over time, of traditional Roman *lares* cults with slaves and freedmen can be connected with four interrelated historical factors, each relating to Rome's rapidly expanding empire: the enormous growth of domestic slavery as a result of Rome's victories in war, the Roman habit of freeing slaves (who became new citizens), the practice of absentee farming of estates in Italy (itself funded by the profits of war and based upon the labor of slaves who were prisoners of war), and the development of kitchens as separate rooms, once the houses of the affluent grew larger and more sophisticated in their layout and design. In earlier times, smaller and simpler Roman houses had focused on a central *atrium*, where cooking and eating happened close to a single, main hearth, the focal source of heat and light for everyone. In such a setting, lar(es) had always been present at the center of family life. The moving of food preparation to a designated cooking area, usually in the servants' quarters, resulted in the reconfiguration of the hearth, seat of the lar(es), to a new domestic context. The building of much bigger houses, with rooms for separate functions, was also funded by the increased wealth of the imperial elites and inspired by the Hellenized lifestyles these Roman leaders had encountered abroad.[8] Similarly, these large houses together with their domestic shrines were maintained and staffed by slaves, themselves the spoils of Rome's

7 For the cult of the *lares* as a religion of and for slaves, see esp. Bömer 1981 and Fröhlich 1991.

8 It is not within the scope of this discussion to offer a detailed history of the Roman house. For evidence about cooking and dining from Pompeii, see especially Foss 1994 and Kastenmeier 2007.

imperial wars. Those who gained their freedom remained active participants in the *lares* cult, especially at the compital shrines. Meanwhile, we have little access to the religious practices of the poor, whether freeborn or freed from slavery, many of whom will have lived in one room and perhaps even without a hearth.

* * *

The first part of this book is organized into nine interrelated sections. Since the evidence about the *lares* is so fragmented and disparate, each ancient text or image will be examined in its own right. In order to clear the ground for the discussion that follows, I will first address the debate in the antiquarian sources about the basic nature of *lares*, which may have originated with P. Nigidius Figulus and Varro himself in the first century BC. In this opening section (i), I argue against the interpretation of *lares* as spirits of the deceased and in favor of seeing them as benevolent deities of place and of travel. Moving on from the theoretical classification of these distinctly academic texts, sections ii and iii look at both literary and epigraphic evidence from the archaic Arval hymn onward, with a special focus on republican authors, including Naevius, Ennius, Cassius Hemina, Afranius, Laberius, and notably the well-preserved texts of Plautus and of Cato the Elder. Section iv considers which Latin authors, in both prose and verse, refer to twin *lares* as opposed to a single *lar*, or both configurations of deities.

The idealized description of the cult of the *lar* practiced at the hearth by the *vilica* (female farm manager) given by Cato the Elder in his *de Agricultura* of the mid-second century BC (section v) will then be juxtaposed and compared with the rich evidence provided by the *lares* paintings preserved in and around the kitchens of Pompeii, mostly from the 60s and 70s AD (sections vi and vii). In section viii, the serpents are discussed in their own right, in the characteristic setting of the "gardens" depicted by painters on the Bay of Naples. At the end, section ix draws together the evidence from painted iconography, written text, and ritual custom to suggest an overall interpretation of the *lares* and snakes as "gods of place," who receive gifts and honor from a *genius* (usually the protective spirit of the master of the house, the *paterfamilias*) on the Bay of Naples. The subject of this discussion is the fundamental character of the *lares* as deities (what *kind* of god is a *lar*?), not a search for a single, standard cult for all such deities. Rather many local variants of cultic practice, at different times and in different places, celebrated these cheerful dancing gods as central to the religious world as conceived by the Roman imagination.

I VARRO HESITATES . . .

> For the Romans, the greatest of their antiquarians was the first-century Varro . . .
>
> —BEARD, NORTH, AND PRICE 1998, 8

It is time now to turn with all due caution to the antiquarian texts and to see what they have to tell us about *lares*. Unfortunately, but hardly surprisingly, their explanations tend to be contradictory, confusing, and sometimes plainly at odds with older, more direct evidence. For example, Censorinus, writing a book about the birthday (*de Die Natali*) in the early third century AD, records an opinion of many earlier authors, including especially the scholar of law and religion Granius Flaccus (first century BC) in a work on prayer formulas that he had dedicated to Julius Caesar:

> Eundem esse genium et larem multi veteres memoriae prodiderunt, in quis etiam Granius Flaccus in libro, quem ad Caesarem de indigitamentis scriptum reliquit.
>
> Many ancients handed on the tradition that a *genius* and a *lar* are the same, among whom (is) also Granius Flaccus in a book dedicated to Julius Caesar, which he wrote about the names (and rituals) of the traditional gods (that is, those recognized by the *pontifices* in their technical writings).
>
> (Censorinus *de Die Natali* 3.2)

The notion that the *lar* and the *genius* are the same type of deity is at variance with nearly all our other evidence. A clear distinction between the two deities is demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt by the iconography of the many paintings from Campania that depict them together but as two quite differently rendered divinities, who are honored in different settings and with separate, distinct gifts.

As Censorinus himself goes on to show in detail in his birthday book, the *genius* is closely associated with each individual person, appearing at a birth and leaving the world at death, which is not at all the case with the *lares*.[1] It is highly suggestive, therefore, that he chooses to cite a commonly held view for which he even provides a source citation that is so completely at variance with the main argument of his own book about births and birthdays. Censorinus' strategy as an author includes such scholarly asides that he thinks his readers will be interested in. His purpose is variety and learning, not a strictly persuasive and logical argument for accepted or even acceptable doctrine. Rather he wants the reader to be aware that he has read widely and is correcting common mistakes. Citing a famous authority for an opposing view serves, therefore, to enhance Censorinus' own self-presentation as a scholar and expert.

Meanwhile, much debate, both ancient and modern, has hinged on a famous passage in Arnobius (ca. 290s AD, writing about 50 years after Censorinus), a learned

1 Censorinus, who was probably a descendant of the republican noble family of the Marcii Censorini, wrote his birthday book as a present for Q. Caerellius in AD 238. His most important source seems to have been Varro. The book's popularity is attested by many surviving manuscripts. See Sallmann 1983 and 1988, with the new English edition by Parker 2007.

convert to Christianity, whose books of attack on traditional religious practices (*Adversus Gentiles*) were specifically designed to demonstrate his allegiance to his new faith.[2] In this section, he draws on a variety of sources by the authoritative first-century scholars P. Nigidius Figulus and M. Terentius Varro, whose works are now largely lost.[3]

> Possumus, si uidetur, summatim aliquid et de Laribus dicere, quos arbitratur uulgus uicorum atque itinerum deos esse ex eo quod Graecia uicos cognominat λαύρας. In diuersis Nigidius scriptis, modo tectorum domumque custodes, modo Curetas illos, qui occultasse perhibentur Iouis aeribus aliquando uagitum, modo Digitos Samothracos, quos quinque indicant Graeci Idaeos Dactylos nuncupari. Varro, similiter haesitans, nunc esse illos Manes et ideo Maniam matrem esse cognominatam Larum, nunc aerios rursus deos et heroas pronuntiat appellari, nunc antiquorum sententias sequens Laruas esse dicit Lares, quasi quosdam genios, et functorum animas mortuorum.
>
> If it seems appropriate, we can also say something in brief about *lares*, whom the common people consider the gods of the streets and paths because in Greek the streets are called *lauras*. In various writings Nigidius (Figulus) calls them now the guardians of house and home, then those Curetes who once managed to conceal Jove's wailing with the clashing of their weapons, then the five Digiti from Samothrace, whom the Greeks tell us are named Idaei Dactyli. Varro is similarly hesitant, now saying they should be called *manes* (spirits of the kindly dead), which is why Mania is called mother of *lares*, then again gods of the air and heroes, now declaring the *lares* to be spirits of the restless dead (*larvae*), following the opinion of ancient writers, as if they were sorts of personal protective spirits (*genii*) and the souls of those who have died.
>
> (Arnobius *Adversus Gentiles* 3.41)

Interestingly, Arnobius starts by admitting that he knows perfectly well what the practitioners of the *lares* cult at the neighborhood altars themselves think, which is that the *lares* are gods of the streets or neighborhoods (vici) and roads (*itinera*). Not content with the opinion of the uneducated (*uulgus*), despite its being supported by a fanciful etymology from the Greek, he proceeds to collect a learned list of diverse explanations as to the nature of these gods, making a show of his own erudition and extensive research on this subject. Unfortunately, it is not possible

2 Arnobius the Elder, who died around AD 330, was a Christian rhetorician from Sicca in North Africa, who was writing around the turn of the fourth century AD. We know very little about his life, but see Jerome *Ep.* 70.5 and *vir ill.* 79. His work survives in a single ninth century AD manuscript in Paris. Although the sources he cites are often authoritative, we cannot know how accurately he reproduces what they said. Beard, North, and Price 1998, 8 n. 18, stress the fact that Arnobius and Augustine cite earlier authors for their own purposes and do not, therefore, even try to do justice to their arguments in their original contexts.

3 P. Nigidius Figulus was a naturalist and grammarian, a follower of Pythagoras (Kahn 2001, 91–92), who was praetor in 58 BC. He wrote a nineteen-book work on the gods. He appears as a speaker in Cicero's *Timaeus*. See Liuzzi 1983 (text with Italian translation) with della Casa 1962; Rawson 1985, 309–12; Turfa 2006; Engels 2007, 126–27; and Schmidt in *BNP*. For M. Terentius Varro, see the introduction by Sallmann in *BNP* (for a list of works and bibliography) with Rawson 1985, 312–16; Engels 2007, 165–72; and Wiseman 2009.

for us to judge how far Arnobius may himself be distorting what these earlier writers said.

P. Nigidius Figulus (ca. 98–45 BC), the slightly less eminent of his two chosen authorities, also recorded a version of *lares* as guardians of place, but in other passages seeks to equate the *lares* either with figures of Greek myth who helped Jupiter as an infant on Crete (Curetes) or with the Great Gods of Samothrace (Cabiri).[4] Yet he does not seem to have chosen between these options or put them into a clear relation with each other, at least according to Arnobius. However, ancient authors often cited from memory rather than having an array of texts open in front of them. Arnobius is just providing us with glimpses of what his sources said.

Arnobius then moves on to cite M. Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), the most learned scholar of Roman religion and culture in the mid-first century BC. Here, however, he draws attention to Varro's hesitation, which is not typical of the famous polymath but is described as being shared with Figulus in the case of the *lares*. Varro was well aware of his prominent status as a leading intellectual of his day. He wrote widely and prescriptively on many aspects of Roman history, religion, culture, and custom. In addition, he circulated his criticisms of contemporary politics, fashion, and habits in satirical form in a variety of genres. Varro was a public intellectual who boldly expressed his opinions both on historical matters and on contemporary issues.[5] It was simply not his habit or his intention to express doubt in his writings. Rather, it was part of his scholarly method to demonstrate his virtuosity in collecting the available material to produce an authoritative synthesis, which was usually followed by his own decisive contribution to the debate in question. Varro's hesitation should, therefore, make us realize that the explanations he records were highly debated and debatable even when he was writing. In this case, he was apparently unable to reach a conclusion that he himself found satisfactory, at least according to Arnobius.

Varro offers the following three options for explaining the *lares*: they are *manes* (spirits of the deceased) and that is why their mother is Mania; they are not gods of the underworld at all but of the sky who should be called "heroes" in Greek; their name *lares* should mean ghosts (*laruae*), which makes them souls of the dead (as if some kind of *genius*). Varro's indecision is logically caused by the fact that his three explanations are mutually exclusive, as he himself clearly realized. With very few exceptions, such as Persephone who regularly traveled between the underworld and the world of men, ancient gods belonged to particular spheres. Underworld gods were not and could not be the "same" as the gods of the sky or of the world of men.[6]

4 For the Curetes, young mythological beings who protected the infant Zeus in a cave at Dicte on Crete (or on Mount Ida), see Schwenn *RE* (Kureten); Gordon in *BNP* Curetes; and Burkert 1985 168, 202, 392. For the Great Gods of Samothrace, see Hyginus *Fab.* 139.4. Their sanctuary was well developed by 200 BC and had been recently patronized by Philip V. See Gordon in *BNP* and Cole 1984 and 1989 for an overview. The best recent discussion is Wescoat 2013. Yet each of these examples are collective groups of deities rather than identical twins. The latter explanation may perhaps have some relationship to the early second century BC temple of the *lares permarini* on the Campus Martius in Rome (which is discussed later in section II.xi). This temple has been interpreted by some as an assimilation of the *lares permarini* to the famous gods of Samothrace, although these were more usually identified with the *penates* brought from Troy by Aeneas.

5 Beard, North, and Price 1998, 153: "Varro was himself contributing to the history of religious thought as much as he was commenting on that history."

6 Scullion 1994 usefully clarifies the fundamental distinction between Olympian and Chthonian gods in Greek religion.

Moreover, Arnobius' paraphrase implies that Varro made a deliberate contrast between his first two alternatives, the *manes* and the "heroes." Similarly, although not as explicitly articulated here, *dii manes* (ordinary spirits of the deceased) were classified as being very different from *laruae* (ghosts who were restless and often characterized as malicious). The spirits of the dead (*manes*) were normally associated with their tombs outside the city, where Romans made annual offerings to family members.[7] By contrast, ghosts (*larvae*), described as the spirits of those not properly buried or of individuals who had died violently, wandered around and might even invade and take up residence in a house.[8] Such a house would then be regarded as "haunted," an undesirable condition that needed to be rectified through rituals of exorcism and purification.[9] Under normal circumstances, Roman houses were not imagined as being inhabited by malicious spirits or ghosts. In fact, every head of household took annual precautions, through a series of ceremonies and prayers on the festival of the Lemuria in May, to expel and repel any ghosts or evil spirits from his house.[10]

To sum up briefly: Arnobius cites two learned Romans of Cicero's day, Varro and Figulus, each of whom mentioned three separate but mutually exclusive explanations for the character and name of the *lares*, giving the reader a total of six distinct options. At the same time, Arnobius indicates that Nigidius Figulus and Varro did not themselves engage in another of their typical scholarly habits, that of equating different cult titles or attributes of a deity to produce a kaleidoscopic but syncretistic and unified picture. Rather, each author expressed equivalent reservations (*similiter haesitans*) precisely because the explanations were, in fact, completely at variance with each other within the logic of Roman religious thought.[11]

Varro knew that in the Roman concept of the cosmos a god could not belong both to the world above and to the underworld, just as most deities were not thought of as being both malicious and protective at the same time. Possibly for this very reason, Nigidius completely avoided mentioning associations of *lares* with the world of the dead (although he surely knew of these common ideas) in favor of a different contrast between either Greek myth or Roman local traditions. None of these three authors (Nigidius, Varro, or Arnobius himself) preferred the explanation of the *lares* as gods of place, despite the fact that this was the version associated with the cult practiced at the neighborhood shrines (*compita*) throughout Rome or with the *lar familiaris* at the hearth. The subsequent discussion about *lares* as spirits of the deceased seems to go back to Varro's treatment, as so much else does. The

7 See Cicero *de Leg.* 2.9.22. Prescendi in *BNP* gives a basic introduction to *manes*. Ducos 1995, 137, establishes that *di manes* are not the spirits of the unburied, the *insepulti*. For the cult at the tombs and the festival of Parentalia, see Cumont 1949; Toynbee 1971, 37–39; Lavagne 1987; and especially Scheid 1993.

8 For *larvae* and *lemures*, see Plautus *Capt.* 598 and *Aul.* 642 (spirits that cause madness), with Apuleius *de deo Socr.* 152–153 (*larvae* are dangerous, *lares* are peaceful) and Festus 25L, 77L, 114L. For discussion, see Wissowa 1912, 235–36; Toynbee 1971, 33–39; and Prescendi in *BNP*.

9 Pliny *Ep.* 7.27 is the classic source.

10 The Lemuria fell on 9, 11, and 13 May (Ovid *Fast.* 5. 431–44); Prescendi 2007, 199–200, and *ThesCRA* 2004, 280–81 and 290–91. See Wissowa 1912, 235–36; Toynbee 1971, 64; Scullard 1981, 74–76; and Wiseman 1995a, 71 and 174 n. 82. The offering of beans by the paterfamilias to the *lemures* suggests an offering of food, but one that was designed to include as little contact with the recipients as possible.

11 Rawson 1985, 316: "Nigidius' amalgam was no doubt largely his own. So, certainly, was Varro's combination of Greek philosophy and Roman antiquarianism."

very inability or unwillingness of Nigidius and Varro to define the *lares* precisely should make us wary of how we make use of these and other learned and antiquarian explanations. Rather, they demonstrate that *lares* were not easy to integrate into the world of myth or into a systematic picture of Hellenized religion.

I will now go on to present arguments against identifying *lares* with the dead or the underworld. In order to clear the ground, my discussion will deal with the main examples and arguments used to paint a picture of spooky *lares*. Our basic context for understanding *lares* must come from their ubiquitous presence in temple, local shrine, and domestic cult. *Lares* received simple offerings of ordinary food and flowers from humble people on an almost daily basis. Their iconography showed them as young, merry, dancing figures, in informal dress and without individuality, but regularly associated with the wine they pour in the paintings from Campania. Their annual midwinter festival of Compitalia (see section III.xvii) was a popular occasion of merrymaking, drinking, and the performance of comedies and other entertainments, all of which culminated in a banquet of roast pork supplied from the pigs sacrificed to them. Their iconography or ritual does not, therefore, evoke the underworld or the appeasement of dangerous spirits. Far from being ritually banished from the home along with the spirits of the restless dead, *lares* were the Roman house's most familiar and characteristic deities. Unlike underworld deities, whose offerings were burned as holocausts, *lares* shared the sacrificed pig in a common meal with everyone in the neighborhood.[12] Without antiquarian glosses and scholarly disputes based on dubious etymologies, no modern scholar of Roman religion would have connected *lares* with the dead or with the underworld based on the rituals or sites or occasions of their cult or on the iconography of the many paintings and statuettes that depict them.

Yet many discussions have adduced the words of Varro and Nigidius, in combination with antiquarian notices in Festus (drawing on the encyclopedist Verrius Flaccus), Macrobius, and Servius, as well as philosophical passages in Apuleius, to argue that *lares* were indeed worshipped as deified ancestors, both in the home and at the crossroads.[13] This interpretation is, however, methodologically completely at variance with the significant advances in approach made in the study of Roman religion over the last generation. At the same time, it leads to a curious picture of *lares* shrines throughout the Roman city as if these were all set up either to commemorate or to appease the dead on every street corner and even more implausibly in every kitchen.

In addition to sharing their sacrificial pig with the whole neighborhood at the Compitalia, lar(es) also had a part to play at the regular evening meal of Romans. Lar(es) received a libation between the two courses that were usual at an evening meal.[14] This practice, which is well attested in the first centuries BC and AD, also

12 For the question of whether or not the Romans thought of themselves as sharing a meal with the gods, see the debate between Scheid 2005 and Rüpke 2005.

13 See, for example, Tabeling 1932, 14–16, and Radke 1972, and the authors listed in note 2 at the beginning of part I. Macrobius *Sat.* 1.7.27–35 (early fifth century AD). See the new *OCT* text by Kaster (2011), as well as his 2011 Loeb edition, with an introduction (xi–lxii) and bibliography (lxiii–lxxiii). Festus 108L, 114L, 115L, 238L, 273L, with Glinister et al. 2007. It is notable that Festus gives two other interpretations of *manes* in other passages: 132L, 133L, 146L, 147L, 273L. Servius' commentary on *Aen.* 3.302 and 6.152. Apuleius *de Plat.* 1.12 and *de deo Socr.* 15.

14 A libation for the *lares* between courses at the evening meal is attested by Horace *Sat.* 2.6.66, Ovid *Fast.* 2.631, Petronius *Sat.* 60, and Servius on *Aen.* 1.730. For discussion, see Scheid 1990, 634–35, 639–40; *ThesCRA* 2 (2004) 273–74; and Rüpke 2005.

indicates that *lares* were household gods of the living family, who were associated with food preparation and consumption in a domestic setting. Underworld deities and ghosts were not invited to share a banquet with the living, let alone the family's supper every evening in the home.

We have good evidence for how elite Romans commemorated their deceased relatives who had held high office. These men were represented by wax masks (*imagines*) kept in cupboards in the atrium and labeled with inscriptions (*tituli*) that recorded their names and the highlights of their careers.[15] Unlike the *lares*, who did not have personal names and individual identities, these distinguished "ancestors" were remembered specifically as named individuals, whose deeds were rehearsed with care and elaboration in eulogies at family funerals and in inscriptions at their tombs. Also in contrast to the *lares*, no cult is attested for them within the home (or indeed at the street corner). Streets and neighborhoods in Rome were not named for individuals, living or deceased. Rather families honored their dead, whether famous or obscure, annually with the adornment of their tombs outside the city where offerings were made.[16]

The iconography of *lares*, with their long hair and short tunics, as they danced and poured wine for a feast, suggests nothing of the military and civic achievements associated with the famous Romans celebrated and recalled by the leading political families (*nobiles*) of republican Rome.[17] No *lar* is ever depicted in a toga or in military dress with weapons. In other words, *lares* do not look or behave like Roman "ancestors." Nor is it either attested or credible that wealthy Romans, whether of the political class or not, entrusted the cultivation of their own ancestors to slaves in the kitchen or freedmen at the crossroads. Rome was a society that set great store by traditional gentilicial cults being maintained by blood relatives in each successive generation.[18] Meanwhile, *lares* played no role of substance at a Roman funeral. Rather they were honored precisely at the Caristia, the February festival that celebrated the community of living family members after the completion of their annual visits to the graves to honor the dead. *Lares* are, therefore, specifically designated as members and protectors of the living household.[19]

It has been claimed by some (both ancient and modern writers) that the crossroads themselves were by nature spooky places and that the rituals of the annual winter festival of *lares* called Compitalia, which included the hanging of woolen dolls (*effigies*) and balls (*pilae*) at these compital shrines, suggest an appeasement of threatening spirits.[20] Again, we need to ask ourselves whether every street corner,

15 See Flower 1996, 185–222, esp. 206–10.

16 For annual visits to tombs, see Toynbee 1971, 61–64, and Graf 1997, 29.

17 See already a brief version of this argument in Flower, 1996, 210–11.

18 For gentilicial cults and blood relatives, see Plautus *Merc.* 834, Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.67.3, and Servius *Aen.* 2.514, with Linderski in *BNP*. For a detailed treatment of *penates*, see Dubourdieu 1989.

19 *Lares* at the Caristia (22nd February): Ovid *Fast.* 2.617–38. For discussion, see Baudy in *BNP* (Parentalia); Giacobello 2008, 44–45; and Robinson 2011 ad loc. Ovid stresses the character of the festival day as turning from the dead honored during the Parentalia immediately before to the living family and community. This explains both the libation to the *lares* and the prayers for the good health of the living emperor. For more discussion, see section IV.xxiv later. The next day celebrates Terminalia, in honor of boundaries and their god Terminus, another theme related to *lares*, who also protected boundaries of properties and of transitions in the life cycle.

20 Smith 1991 sees the *lares* as affected by the spooky nature of crossroads. But see Johnston 1991, who explains the nature of crossroads in town and outside. For dolls in Roman culture, see

or at least the major ones, could really be sinister for a Roman (let alone every household shrine in or near a kitchen!). This festival will be discussed in more detail later (part III).

The spooky crossroads, associated with witches and magic, certainly existed within the Roman thought world, but these places were to be found outside the city gates. It was not the neighborhood shrine, where busy streets intersected near the local water fountain, that was a place for dark spells and curses. Rather Hecate and her followers were sought out in remote places, far from civilized life and outside the civic world of Greek and Roman cities. It was at such a wild and ill-omened crossing of paths that Oedipus had famously met and killed the man he came later to recognize as his own father, Laius.[21] But such bad luck and the fear of unspeakable transgression did not characterize the bustling intersections of Roman cities.

Similarly, the woolen dolls and balls of the Compitalia cannot have represented a substitute for a putative human sacrifice, as some claimed, precisely because one was hung to represent each person in the neighborhood.[22] Figurines were certainly used in some magical spells and for curses, but that does not make every doll of any kind a sinister sign of dark rites. What deities would demand that all their worshippers be killed to satisfy them (let alone on an annual basis)? On the contrary, the representation of each living person invites and symbolizes divine protection on the part of benevolent deities for the coming year rather than signifying expiation or appeasement through the blood of a scapegoat. These dolls were hung up the night before the festival, when people were free from their daily work, so that they would be ready for the following day of celebration, not in some nighttime ritual for an underworld deity. Beyond its religious function, the assembly of woolen images can be clearly interpreted as a traditional means of counting the population on a local level (see section III.xix and xx later).

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, there were some Romans who tried to understand *lares* as ghosts or spirits of the dead. Why would they do so? The representation of *lares* as ghosts or underworld forces suggests a reaction to their apparently archaic nature, unusual impersonal names, and special rituals (such as the dolls). Their very lack of individual identity and explanatory narratives allowed ample space for speculation, especially at a time when Roman intellectuals were seeking to rationalize and systematize their rituals.

Similarly, debate tends to circle around how to render "*lares*" in Greek. As Arnobius shows, Varro himself adduced the translation *hero* to suggest that the *lares* were not underworld deities: some modern scholars have argued the exact opposite based on this same Greek word. Varro appears the more reliable authority in this case. Meanwhile, Cicero tentatively suggests the translation *daimon*, but also

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Fittà 1998 and D'Ambra 2014, who discusses the well-preserved, jointed doll found in the tomb of Crepereia Tryphaena in Rome.

21 Sophocles *OT* 800–813.

22 See Varro *Men.* fr. 463; Festus 108L, 228L, and 273L, with Macrobius *Sat.* 1.7.27–35 (the only source to name Mania as mother of the *lares*). Ramos Crespo 1988 interprets the dolls as apotropaic. Prescendi 2007, 23, sees no evidence for the Roman gods ever eating human flesh, let alone in the shared banquet setting that was usual for animal sacrifice. See also Prescendi 2007, 199–202, on substitutions for human sacrifice, and 178–88, where she traces the whole notion of such substitutions to the antiquarian writings of L. Manilius in the 90s BC.

expresses his own doubts.[23] On Delos, the *lares* seem simply to have been designated as *theoi* (gods) in Greek in the inscriptions put up by those in charge of the compital cults (who called themselves *kompetaliastai*) on the island, who were mostly slaves with Greek names.[24] In our extant evidence, this more neutral but also more honorific name, therefore, predates the rendering as either *hero* or *daimon*. Roman *lares* did not have an obvious Greek equivalent.

The simple nature of their cult could indeed be hard to understand and to explain, especially for newcomers and for those who had grown up in other cultures such as the many slaves in republican Rome. Meanwhile, ancient explanations tended to fasten onto a single, anomalous aspect such as their name or the woolen dolls at the compital shrines, rather than attempting a more holistic interpretation of their role in Roman religious culture and in everyday life.[25] False etymologies for names and misreadings of rituals flourished in an age of antiquarian speculation and theological questioning of traditional practices. The fact that antiquarian writers were not themselves the main practitioners of the cult, especially in its form at the local crossroads, will not have helped to make them more informed interpreters. Subsequently, modern scholars have added their own speculative misinterpretations of ancient evidence, based upon a search for deified ancestors or restless ghosts.

A good example of a problematic misreading applies to a much-cited notice in Pliny the Elder about Roman attitudes toward food that has been inadvertently dropped on the floor.[26] What should happen to such a piece of food, which has fallen during a meal? According to Pliny (writing in the 70s AD):

> Cibus etiam e manu prolapsus reddebatur utique per mensas, vetabantque munditiarum causa deflare, et sunt condita auguria, quid loquenti cogitantive id acciderit, inter execratissima, si pontifici accidat dicis causa epulanti. In mensa utique id reponi adolerique ad larem piatio est.
>
> Also any food that fell from the hand used to be put back at least during courses, and it was forbidden to blow off (any dirt) for cleanliness sake; auguries have been recorded from the words or thoughts of the person who did so, a very dreadful omen being if a *pontifex* (priest) should do so at a formal dinner. In any case putting it back on the table and burning it for (or before) the *lar* counts as an expiation (of the omen).
>
> (Pliny *Nat.* 28.27)

23 Cicero *Tim.* 11 (45–43 BC): *Reliquorum autem, quos Graeci δαίμοναϛ appellant, nostri, opinor, Lares, si modo hoc recte conversum videri potest, et nosse et enuntiare ortum eorum maius est, quam ut profiteri nos scribere audeamus* (As regards the remaining [deities], whom the Greeks call *daimones*, but we [call] *lares*, I think, if this seems to be the right translation, to know and narrate their origin is a greater task than I would dare to undertake).

24 *Theoi* on Delos: *ID* 1745 (fig. III.4 later) with erased relief of dancing *lares* with Mavrojannis 1995, 119, and Hasenohr 2003, 169. Cf. *ID* 1761, 1762, 1769 for inscriptions of those calling themselves *kompetaliastai* (celebrators of Compitalia). For Delos, see section III.xviii later.

25 The issue of how to read the antiquarian sources for Roman religion is concisely discussed by Wardle 2006, 17–18, who quotes Gradel (2002, 3) at v: "Only with extreme caution should philosophical treatises such as Cicero's *de Natura Deorum* or *de Divinatione* be employed in the study of Roman religion, and as far as its interpretation, they are best left out of account altogether."

26 Pliny *Nat.* 28.27.

It is, therefore, unlucky to drop a piece of food, at least directly from the hand, onto the floor; alternatively, Pliny may actually be saying that blowing on the food was the dire gesture. However that may be, a standard remedy is to burn the food as an offering of expiation to the *lar* (of the household) on the table. Pliny does not, however, make clear how common the ritual of burning such a piece of food off the floor really was. Since he makes no mention of ghosts here, there is really no reason to introduce them. Indeed, the very idea that ghosts were imagined as regular inhabitants of Roman dining areas, waiting like household pets or scavengers around the couches or under the tables for scraps of food to fall, is evidently implausible. Furthermore, it would go against usual Roman practice to share food, especially a piece of food that has been touched and is now on the table, with an underworld deity. Rather, because the *lar* acts as a natural protector of the household and its inhabitants from evil omens and potential prodigies of any kind, he is the recipient of the unlucky piece of food in his role as the general guarantor of good luck.

Another practice suggests that food scraps were regularly offered up as a sacrifice at the end of a formal meal rather than being saved for another occasion or donated. Macrobius refers to this tradition in a section on jokes:

> Flavianus subiecit: "sacrificium apud veteres fuit quod vocabatur 'propter viam.' in eo mos erat ut si quid ex epulis superfuisset, igne consumeretur."
>
> Flavianus added: "There was an offering that the ancients called 'for the road.' According to this custom, anything left over from a banquet was burned (as an offering)."
>
> (Macrobius *Saturnalia* 2.2.4)

This habit is also referred to in passing by Plautus, Laberius, and Festus.[27] While the recipients of the food are not specified and could perhaps be chosen according to the occasion, the lar(es) are also obvious candidates, especially for a sacrifice made "for the road"—in other words, for security and prosperity on the way home from the banquet or on behalf of a longer journey that lies ahead.

In addition, a single republican inscription has been used to support the view that a *lar* could be positively identified as a deceased ancestor. The inscription is on a small perperino stone *cippus*, set up as a modest altar, which was discovered at Tor Tignosa (northeast of Lavinium) in 1958.[28] (See figure I.1.) It was found in the same area as the slightly earlier discovery of three larger *cippi* in a similar style dedicated to individual Fates, as well as some pottery, votives, and architectural fragments.[29] The whole assemblage indicates a religious site with material from the late fourth century BC onward.

27 Plautus *Rud.* 148–50; Laberius 87–88; Festus 254.12–14L.

28 The famous Tor Tignosa inscription: *MNR* inv. 135847 = *CIL* 1^2 2843 = *ILLRP* 1271 = *AE* 1960, 138 = EDCS 26200348. Degrassi *Imagines* A3 reproduces a classic black-and-white photograph. The stone was found at Tor Tignosa, about 8 km northeast of Lavinium. It measures 33×19–25×17–19 cm with letters 2 cm tall. See Guarducci 1956–58; Schilling 1984; Hartmann 2005, 411–15; and now La Regina 2014 for earlier discussions.

29 For the three dedications to the Fates, see *CIL* 1^2 2844–46 = EDCS-15000118, EDCS-15000136, EDCS-15000135 with Nonnis in Friggeri, Granino Cecere, and Gregori 2012, 163–65.

I.1. Inscribed *cippi* from Tor Tignosa, as displayed in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Terme di Diocleziano, inv. 135847. The small, tapered *cippus* on the right bears an inscribed dedication to a *lar*, next to the larger dedications to three Fates. Peperino stone, late third to early second century BC?, 33×19–25×17–19 cm.

The inscription is very hard to read, both because the surface of the stone is uneven and the letters are very worn. It was originally rendered as *LARE AENIA d(onom)* ("a gift for Aeneas the *lar*"). This much discussed reading is reproduced in the 2001 and 2012 catalogues for the epigraphic collection of the Museo Nazionale Romano at the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, where the *cippus* is now on display next to the three larger ones.[30] However, several experts on archaic Latin have rejected this reading on the grounds that it is linguistically impossible.[31] Other readings have also been put forward over the years.[32] I myself was able to read only the first word as *LAR . . .* but very little else.[33] Recently, an argument has been made for the following revised version:[34]

They measure about 90×60–70×59–66 cm, with letters about 3 cm high. In other words, they are about three times the size of the dedication to the *lares*.

30 See Friggeri 2001, 36 (with a color photo), and Nonnis in Friggeri, Granino Cecere, and Gregori 2012, 162–63, for this altar (*MNR* inv. 135847) in its new installation in the epigraphic collection of the Museo Nazionale delle Terme at the Baths of Diocletian. It is notable that these catalogues do not discuss the variant readings. This reading is also cited as the only possible one by Coarelli 2012, 177.

31 Wachter 1987, 373–75, argues that the inscription is illegible and that Guarducci's reading does not make sense. Vine 1993, 88–89, dates the inscription to the late fourth or early third century BC. This is the wrong period for the AE diphthong that has been proposed. He reads the first letter of the second word as an inverted V.

32 Hartmann 2005, 411–15, gives an overview and a diagram of the suggested variants up to 2005.

33 Most recently, I also found the text on the stone to be illegible in May 2015.

34 La Regina 2014 is detailed and very persuasive, basing his reading on a thorough reexamination of the stone.

Lare(bus) A. Venia Q(uinti) f(ilia)

A(ula) Venia, daughter of Quintus, (dedicated this) to the *lares*
(*CIL* 1^2 2843)

This new reading, based on a careful reexamination of the stone, would make the inscription the earliest surviving dedication to twin *lares* (or alternatively perhaps a single *lar*?), in this case in the context of a venerable, local sanctuary where they had also been welcomed as guests. Further interest is obviously added by the dedicant herself, who is a freeborn Roman woman, possibly with an unusual personal name (the *praenomen* Aula) or perhaps called Avenia.[35] The dating of the *cippus* has been much discussed and ranges from late fourth to the early second century BC, with a lower date now finding renewed support. A date in the late third to early second century BC would make this inscription contemporary with the evidence from Cato and Plautus discussed later.

This little altar with its shallow inscription on friable stone, which is of strikingly modest dimensions in comparison with the three impressive and clearly labeled *cippi* for the Fates, cannot, therefore, be used as evidence for a cult of a *lar* as equivalent to a specific deified hero of a previous age (Aeneas is the usual candidate). Rather, *lares* were consistently deities without personal names or individual identities or life stories, even when worshipped in the singular, such as a *lar familiaris* in Plautus. Their epithets nearly all referred to a place—for example, *viales, semitales, compitales, curiales, vicinales, permarini, familiares, domestici* (road, path, crossroads, meeting house or district, neighborhood, throughout the seas, household, domestic). This naming pattern is another obvious indicator that they were indeed gods who protected places, and the boundaries of those places. These little *lares* lived in and protected (the boundary of?) a local sanctuary in Latium, where their profile was low, and where they probably received regular offerings on a small scale.

To sum up the argument of this section: the mistaken view that *lares* were (sometimes malevolent) spirits of the dead has been supported by modern scholars on the basis of five distinct types of arguments: antiquarian exegesis (largely invented etymologies and fictitious etiologies), translation into Greek (specifically a particular translation of *hero*), misinterpretation of rituals (dolls at the crossroads and scraps of food on the dining room floor), the topographical character of the crossroads themselves (which are wrongly connected with the underworld), and a single inscription with a mostly illegible text (restored to name Aeneas as a *lar*). In the course of this elaborate debate, antiquarian glosses provided by scholars such as Macrobius or Servius have been amplified by modern researchers playing similar games of reinterpretation as their ancient predecessors. Their arguments tend to be speculative and simplified. Meanwhile, the assertion that *lares* can be simultaneously deceased spirits and guardian gods of place as a result of some late republican syncretism is refuted by Varro himself (even in a paraphrase) and is in any case fundamentally untenable in Roman thought.[36]

35 For female *praenomina*, see Kajava 1994 for a full discussion.

36 Smith 2009 gives a reading based on the highly problematic premise that all ancient texts provide equally valid information and interpretation.

Ultimately, an ancient worshipper needed to know how, when, and where to perform rituals to the deities he or she was addressing. Underworld deities were addressed differently, often at night, and received separate offerings, usually in the form of holocausts (offerings that were completely burned). The cult of the *lares* at the hearth and the street corner, as well as their highly stereotyped depiction in art, indicates their character as protective gods of place, integral to the world of mortals and to its everyday activities of cooking, eating, drinking wine, and traveling. Varro himself seems to have posed this same complete dichotomy between the diametrically opposed interpretations of *lares* he found in his sources. By contrast, Nigidius avoided mention of ghosts or the underworld. Unlike either of these ancient authors, we can be more confident about using detailed analysis of cult practice and iconography, combined with a commonsense approach, to describe the basic character and function of *lares* in a Roman context.