

The Ancient City

A Study on the Religion, Laws,
and Institutions of Greece and Rome

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Introduction.

The Necessity of Studying the Earliest Beliefs of the Ancients in Order to Understand Their Institutions

It is proposed here to show upon what principles and by what rules Greek and Roman society was governed. We unite in the same study both the Greeks and the Romans, because these two peoples, who were two branches of a single race, and who spoke two idioms of a single language, also had the same institutions and the same principles of government, and passed through a series of similar revolutions.

We shall attempt to set in a clear light the radical and essential differences which at all times distinguished these ancient peoples from modern societies. In our system of education, we live from infancy in the midst of the Greeks and Romans, and become accustomed continually to compare them with ourselves, to judge of their history by our own, and to explain our revolutions by theirs. What we have received from them leads us to believe that we resemble them. We have some difficulty in considering them as foreign nations; it is almost always ourselves that we see in them. Hence spring many errors. We rarely fail to deceive ourselves regarding these ancient nations when we see them through the opinions and facts of our own time.

Now, errors of this kind are not without danger. The ideas which the moderns have had of Greece and Rome have often been in their way. Having imperfectly observed the institutions of the ancient city, men have dreamed of reviving them among us.

They have deceived themselves about the liberty of the ancients, and on this very account liberty among the moderns has been put in peril. The last eighty years have clearly shown that one of the great difficulties which impede the march of modern society is the habit which it has of always keeping Greek and Roman antiquity before its eyes.

To understand the truth about the Greeks and Romans, it is wise to study them without thinking of ourselves, as if they were entirely foreign to us; with the same disinterestedness, and with the mind as free, as if we were studying ancient India or Arabia.

Thus observed, Greece and Rome appear to us in a character absolutely inimitable; nothing in modern times resembles them; nothing in the future can resemble them. We shall attempt to show by what rules these societies were regulated, and it will be freely admitted that the same rules can never govern humanity again.

Whence comes this? Why are the conditions of human government no longer the same as in earlier times? The great changes which appear from time to time in the constitution of society can be the effect neither of chance nor of force alone.

The cause which produces them must be powerful, and must be found in man himself. If the laws of human association are no longer the same as in antiquity, it is because there has been a change in man. There is, in fact, a part of our being which is modified from age to age; this is our intelligence. It is always in movement; almost always progressing; and on this account, our institutions and our laws are subject to change. Man has not, in our day, the way of thinking that he had twenty-five centuries ago; and this is why he is no longer governed as he was governed then.

The history of Greece and Rome is a witness and an example of the intimate relation which always exists between men's ideas and their social state. Examine the institutions of the ancients without thinking of their religious notions, and you find them obscure, whimsical, and inexplicable. Why were there patricians and plebeians, patrons and clients, eupatrids and theses; and whence came the native and ineffaceable differences which we find between these classes? What was the meaning of those Lacedaemonian institutions which appear to us so contrary to nature? How are we to explain those unjust caprices of ancient private law; at Corinth and at Thebes, the sale of land prohibited; at Athens and at Rome, an inequality in the succession between brother and sister? What did the jurists understand by *agitation*, and by *gens*? Why those revolutions in the laws, those political revolutions? What was that singular patriotism which sometimes effaced every natural sentiment? What did they understand by that liberty of which they were always talking? How did it

happen that institutions so very different from anything of which we have an idea to-day, could become established and reign for so long a time? What is the superior principle which gave them authority over the minds of men?

But by the side of these institutions and laws place the religious ideas of those times, and the facts at once become clear, and their explanation is no longer doubtful. If, on going back to the first ages of this race — that is to say, to the time when its institutions were founded — we observe the idea which it had of human existence, of life, of death, of a second life, of the divine principle, we perceive a close relation between these opinions and the ancient rules of private law; between the rites which spring from these opinions and their political institutions.

A comparison of beliefs and laws shows that a primitive religion constituted the Greek and Roman family, established marriage and paternal authority, fixed the order of relationship, and consecrated the right of property, and the right of inheritance. This same religion, after having enlarged and extended the family, formed a still larger association, the city, and reigned in that as it had reigned in the family. From it came all the institutions, as well as all the private law, of the ancients. It was from this that the city received all its principles, its rules, its usages, and its magistracies. But, in the course of time, this ancient religion became modified or effaced, and private law and political institutions were modified with it. Then came a series of revolutions, and social changes regularly followed the development of knowledge.

It is of the first importance, therefore, to study the religious ideas of these peoples, and the oldest are the most important for us to know. For the institutions and beliefs which we find at the flourishing periods of Greece and Rome are only the development of those of an earlier age; we must seek the roots of them in the very distant past. The Greek and Italian populations are many centuries older than Romulus and Homer. It was at an epoch more ancient, in an antiquity without date, that their beliefs were formed, and that their institutions were either established or prepared.

But what hope is there of arriving at a knowledge of this distant past? Who can tell us what men thought ten or fifteen centuries before our era? Can we recover what is so intangible and fugitive — beliefs and opinions? We know what the Aryas of the

East thought thirty-five centuries ago: we learn this from the hymns of the Vedas, which are certainly very ancient, and from the laws of Manu, in which we can distinguish passages that are of an extremely early date. But where are the hymns of the ancient Hellenes? They, as well as the Italians, had ancient hymns, and old sacred books; but nothing of these has come down to us. What tradition can remain to us of those generations that have not left us a single written line?

Fortunately, the past never completely dies for man. Man may forget it, but he always preserves it within him. For, take him at any epoch, and he is the product, the epitome, of all the earlier epochs. Let him look into his own soul, and he can find and distinguish these different epochs by what each of them has left within him.

Let us observe the Greeks of the age of Pericles, and the Romans of Cicero's time; they carry within them the authentic marks and the unmistakable vestiges of the most remote ages. The contemporary of Cicero (I speak especially of the man of the people) has an imagination full of legends; these legends come to him from a very early time, and they bear witness to the manner of thinking of that time. The contemporary of Cicero speaks a language whose roots are very ancient; this language, in expressing the thoughts of ancient ages, has been modelled upon them, and it has kept the impression, and transmits it from century to century. The primary sense of a root will sometimes reveal an ancient opinion or an ancient usage; ideas have been transformed, and the recollections of them have vanished; but the words have remained, immutable witnesses of beliefs that have disappeared.

The contemporary of Cicero practiced rites in the sacrifices, at funerals, and in the ceremony of marriage; these rites were older than his time, and what proves it is that they did not correspond to his religious belief. But if we examine the rites which he observed, or the formulas which he recited, we find the marks of what men believed fifteen or twenty centuries earlier.

Book First: Ancient Beliefs.

Chapter I: Notions about the Soul and Death

Down to the latest times in the history of Greece and Rome we find the common people clinging to thoughts and usages which certainly dated from a very distant past, and which enable us to discover what notions man entertained at first regarding his own nature, his soul, and the mystery of death.

Go back far as we may in the history of the Indo-European race, of which the Greeks and Italians are branches, and we do not find that this race has ever thought that after this short life all was finished for man. The most ancient generations, long before there were philosophers, believed in a second existence after the present. They looked upon death not as a dissolution of our being, but simply as a change of life.

But in what place, and in what manner, was this second existence passed? Did they believe that the immortal spirit, once escaped from a body, went to animate another? No; the doctrine of metempsychosis was never able to take root in the minds of the Greco-Italians; nor was it the most ancient belief of the Aryas of the East; since the hymns of the Vedas teach another doctrine. Did they believe that the spirit ascended towards the sky, towards the region of lights Not at all; the thought that departed souls entered a celestial home is relatively recent in the West; we find it expressed for the first time by the poet Phocylides. The celestial abode was never regarded as anything more than the recompense of a few great men, and of the benefactors of mankind. According to the oldest belief of the Italians and Greeks, the soul did not go into a foreign world to pass its second existence; it remained near men, and continued to live under ground.¹

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3 They even believed for a very long time that, in this second existence, the soul
4 remained associated with the body; born together, they were not separated by death,
5 and were buried together in the grave.

6 Old as this belief is, authentic evidences of it still remain to us. These evidences are
7 the rites of sepulture, which have long survived this primitive belief, but which
8 certainly began with it, and which enable us to understand it.

9 The rites of sepulture show clearly that when a body was buried, those ancient
10 peoples believed that they buried something that was living. Virgil, who always
11 describes religious ceremonies with so much care and precision, concludes the
12 account of the funeral of Polydorus in these words: "We enclose the soul in the
13 grave." The same expression is found in Ovid, and in Pliny the Younger; this did not
14 correspond to the ideas which these writers had of the soul, but from time
15 immemorial it had been perpetuated in the language, attesting an ancient and
16 common belief.²

17 It was a custom, at the close of a funeral ceremony, to call the soul of the deceased
18 three times by the name he had borne. They wished that he might live happy under
19 ground. Three times they said to him, Fare thee well. They added, May the earth rest
20 lightly upon thee.³ Thus firmly did they believe that the person would continue to live
21 under ground, and that he would still preserve a sense of enjoyment and suffering.
22 They wrote upon the tomb that the man rested there — an expression which survived
23 this belief, and which has come down through so many centuries to our time. We still
24 employ it, though surely no one to-day thinks that an immortal being rests in a tomb.
25 But in those ancient days they believed so firmly that a man lived there that they
26 never failed to bury with him the objects of which they supposed he had need —
27 clothing, utensils, and arms. They poured wine upon his tomb to quench his thirst,
28 and placed food there to satisfy his hunger. They slaughtered horses and slaves with
29 the idea that these beings, buried with the dead, would serve him in the tomb, as they
30 had done during his life. After the taking of Troy, the Greeks are about to return to
31 their country; each takes with him his beautiful captive; but Achilles, who is under
32 the earth, claims his captive also, and they give him Polyxena.⁴

33 A verse of Pindar has preserved to us a curious vestige of the thoughts of those

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3 ancient generations. Phrixus had been compelled to quit Greece. and had fled as far
4 as Colchis. He had died in that country; but, dead though he was, he wished to return
5 to Greece. He appeared, therefore, to Pelias, and directed him to go to Colchis and
6 bring away his soul. Doubtless this soul regretted the soil of its native country, and
7 the tomb of its family; but being attached to its corporeal remains, it could not quit
8 Colchis without them.⁵

9 From this primitive belief came the necessity of burial. In order that the soul might
10 be confined to this subterranean abode, which was suited to its second life, it was
11 necessary that the body to which it remained attached should be covered with earth.
12 The soul that had no tomb had no dwelling-place. It was a wandering spirit. In vain
13 it sought the repose which it would naturally desire after the agitations and labor of
14 this life; it must wander forever under the form of a larva, or phantom, without ever
15 stopping, without ever receiving the offerings and the food which it had need of.
16 Unfortunately, it soon became a malevolent spirit; it tormented the living; it brought
17 diseases upon them, ravaged their harvests, and frightened them by gloomy
18 apparitions, to warn them to give sepulture to its body and to itself. From this came
19 the belief in ghosts. All antiquity was persuaded that without burial the soul was
20 miserable, and that by burial it became forever happy. It was not to display their grief
21 that they performed the funeral ceremony, it was for the rest and happiness of the
22 dead.⁶

23 We must remark, however, that to place the body in the ground was not enough.
24 Certain traditional rites had also to be observed, and certain established formulas to
25 be pronounced. We find in Plautus an account of a ghost;⁷ it was a soul that was
26 compelled to wander because its body had been placed in the ground without due
27 attention to the rites. Suetonius relates that when the body of Caligula was placed in
28 the earth without a due observation of the funeral ceremonies, his soul was not at
29 rest, and continued to appear to the living until it was determined to disinter the body
30 and give it a burial according to the rules. These two examples show clearly what
31 effects were attributed to the rites and formulas of the funeral ceremony. Since
32 without them souls continued to wander and appear to the living, it must have been
33 by them that souls became fixed and enclosed in their tombs; and just as there were

formulas which had this virtue, there were others which had a contrary virtue — that of evoking souls, and making them come out for a time from the sepulchre.

We can see in ancient writers how man was tormented by the fear that after his death the rites would not be observed for him. It was a source of constant inquietude. Men feared death less than the privation of burial; for rest and eternal happiness were at stake. We ought not to be too much surprised at seeing the Athenians put generals to death, who, after a naval victory, had neglected to bury the dead. These generals, disciples of philosophers, distinguished clearly between the soul and the body, and as they did not believe that the fate of the one was connected with the fate of the other, it appeared to them of very little consequence whether a body was decomposed in the earth or in the water. Therefore they did not brave the tempest for the vain formality of collecting and burying their dead. But the multitude, who, even at Athens, still clung to the ancient doctrines, accused these generals of impiety, and had them put to death. By their victory they had saved Athens; but by their impiety they had lost thousands of souls. The relatives of the dead, thinking of the long-suffering which these souls must bear, came to the tribunal clothed in mourning, and asked for vengeance. In the ancient cities the law condemned those guilty of great crimes to a terrible punishment — the privation of burial. In this manner they punished the soul itself, and inflicted upon it a punishment almost eternal.

We must observe that there was among the ancients another opinion concerning the abode of the dead. They pictured to themselves a region, also subterranean, but infinitely more vast than the tomb, where all souls, far from their bodies, lived together, and where rewards and punishments were distributed according to the lives men had led in this world. But the rites of burial, such as we have described them, manifestly disagree with this belief — a certain proof that, at the epoch when these rites were established, men did not yet believe in Tartarus and the Elysian Fields. The earliest opinion of these ancient generations was, that man lived in the tomb, that the soul did not leave the body, and that it remained fixed to that portion of ground where the bones lay buried. Besides, man had no account to render of his past life. Once placed in the tomb, he had neither rewards nor punishments to expect. This is a very crude opinion surely, but it is the beginning of the notion of a future life.

The being who lived under ground was not sufficiently free from human frailties to have no need of food; and, therefore, on certain days of the year, a meal was carried to every tomb. Ovid and Virgil have given us a description of this ceremony. The observance continued unchanged even to their time, although religious beliefs had already undergone great changes. According to these writers, the tomb was surrounded with large wreaths of grasses and flowers, and cakes, fruits, and flowers were placed upon it; milk, wine, and sometimes even the blood of a victim were added.⁸

We should greatly deceive ourselves if we thought that these funeral repasts were nothing more than a sort of commemoration. The food that the family brought was really for the dead — exclusively for him. What proves this is, that the milk and wine were poured out upon the earth of the tomb; that the earth was hollowed out so that the solid food might reach the dead; that if they sacrificed a victim, all its flesh was burnt, so that none of the living could have any part of it; that they pronounced certain consecrated formulas to invite the dead to eat and drink; that if the entire family were present at the meal, no one touched the food; that, in fine, when they went away, they took great care to leave a little milk and a few cakes in vases; and that it was considered gross impiety for any living person to touch this scant provision destined for the needs of the dead.⁹

These usages are attested in the most formal manner. “I pour upon the earth of the tomb,” says Iphigenia in Euripides, “milk, honey, and wine; for it is with these that we rejoice the dead.”¹⁰ Among the Greeks there was in front of every tomb a place destined for the immolation of the victim and the cooking of its flesh.¹¹ The Roman tomb also had its *culina*, a species of kitchen, of a particular kind, and entirely for the use of the dead.¹² Plutarch relates that after the battle of Plataea, the slain having been buried upon the field of battle, the Plataeans engaged to offer them the funeral repast every year. Consequently, on each anniversary, they went in grand procession, conducted by their first magistrates to the mound under which the dead lay. They offered the departed milk, wine, oil, and perfumes, and sacrificed a victim. When the provisions had been placed upon the tomb, the Plataeans pronounced a formula by which they called the dead to come and partake of this repast. This ceremony was

still performed in the time of Plutarch, who was enabled to witness the six hundredth anniversary of it.¹³ A little later, Lucian, ridiculing these opinions and usages, shows how deeply rooted they were in the common mind. "The dead," says he, "are nourished by the provisions which we place upon their tomb, and drink the wine which we pour out there; so that one of the dead to whom nothing is offered is condemned to perpetual hunger."¹⁴

These are very old forms of belief, and are quite groundless and ridiculous; and yet they exercised empire over man during a great number of generations. They governed men's minds; we shall soon see that they governed societies even, and that the greater part of the domestic and social institutions of the ancients was derived from this source.

Chapter II: The Worship of the Dead.

This belief very soon gave rise to certain rules of conduct. Since the dead had need of food and drink, it appeared to be a duty of the living to satisfy this need. The care of supplying the dead with sustenance was not left to the caprice or to the variable sentiments of men; it was obligatory. Thus a complete religion of the dead was established, whose dogmas might soon be effaced, but whose rites endured until the triumph of Christianity. The dead were held to be sacred beings. To them the ancients applied the most respectful epithets that could be thought of; they called them good, holy, happy. For them they had all the veneration that man can have for the divinity whom he loves or fears. In their thoughts the dead were gods.¹⁵

This sort of apotheosis was not the privilege of great men; no distinction was made among the dead. Cicero says, "Our ancestors desired that the men who had quitted this life should be counted in the number of the gods." It was not necessary to have been even a virtuous man: the wicked man, as well as the good man, became a god; but he retained in the second life all the bad inclinations which had tormented him in the first.¹⁶

The Greeks gave to the dead the name of subterranean gods. In Æschylus, a son thus invokes his deceased father: "O thou who art a god beneath the earth." Euripides says, speaking of Alcestis, "Near her tomb the passer by will stop and say, 'This is

now a thrice happy divinity.”¹⁷

The Romans gave to the dead the name of Manes. “Render to the manes what is due them,” says Cicero; “they are men who have quitted this life; consider them as divine beings.”¹⁸ The tombs were the temples of these divinities, and they bore the sacramental inscription, *Dis Manibus*, and in Greek, $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\mu\alpha\varsigma\ \chi\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\mu\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma$. There the god lived beneath the soil, *manesque sepulti*, says Virgil. Before the tomb there was an altar for the sacrifices, as before the temples of the gods.¹⁹

We find this worship of the dead among the Hellenes, among the Latins, among the Sabines,²⁰ among the Etruscans, we also find it among the Aryas of India. Mention is made of it in the hymns of the *Reg-Veda*. It is spoken of in the *Laws of Manu* as the most ancient worship among men. We see in this book that the idea of metempsychosis had already passed over this ancient belief, even before the religion of Brahma was established; and still beneath the worship of Brahma, beneath the doctrine of metempsychosis, the religion of the souls of ancestors still subsists, living and indestructible, and compels the author of the *Laws of Manu* to take it into account, and to admit its rules into the sacred book. Not the least singular thing about this strange book is, that it has preserved the rules relative to this ancient belief, whilst it was evidently prepared in an age when a belief entirely different had gained the ascendancy. This proves that much time is required to transform a human belief, and still more to modify its exterior forms, and the laws based upon it. At the present day, even, after so many ages of revolutions, the Hindus continue to make offerings to their ancestors. This belief and these rites are the oldest and the most persistent of anything pertaining to the Indo-European race. This worship was the same in India as in Greece and Italy. The Hindu had to supply the manes with the repast, which was called *sraddha*. “Let the master of the house make the *sraddha* with rice, milk, roots, and fruits, in order to procure for himself the good-will of the manes.”

The Hindu believed that at the moment when he offered this funeral repast, the manes of his ancestors came to seat themselves beside him, and took the nourishment which was offered them. He also believed that this repast afforded the dead great enjoyment. “When the *sraddha* is made according to the rites, the ancestors of the one who offers it experience unbounded satisfaction.”²¹

Thus the Aryas of the East had, in the beginning, the same notions as those of the West, relative to man's destiny after death. Before believing in metempsychosis, which supposes an absolute distinction between the soul and the body, they believed in the vague and indefinite existence of man, invisible, but not immaterial, and requiring of mortals nourishment and offerings.

The Hindu, like the Greek, regarded the dead as divine beings, who enjoyed a happy existence; but their happiness depended on the condition that the offerings made by the living should be carried to them regularly. If the sraddha for a dead person was not offered regularly, his soul left its peaceful dwelling, and became a wandering spirit, who tormented the living; so that, if the dead were really gods, this was only whilst the living honored them with their worship.

The Greeks and Romans had exactly the same belief. If the funeral repast ceased to be offered to the dead, they immediately left their tombs, and became wandering shades, that were heard in the silence of the night. They reproached the living with their negligence; or they sought to punish them by afflicting them with diseases, or cursing their soil with sterility. In a word, they left the living no rest till the funeral feasts were re-established. The sacrifice, the offering of nourishment, and the libation restored them to the tomb, and gave them back their rest and their divine attributes. Man was then at peace with them.²²

If a deceased person, on being neglected, became a malignant spirit, one who was honored became, on the other hand, a tutelary diety. He loved those who brought him nourishment. To protect them he continued to take part in human affairs, and frequently played an important part there. Dead though he was, he knew how to be strong and active. The living prayed to him, and asked his support and his favors. When any one came near a tomb, he stopped, and said, "Subterranean god, be propitious to me."²³

We can judge of the power which the ancients attributed to the dead by this prayer, which Electra addresses to the manes of her father: "Take pity on me, and on my brother Orestes; make him return to this country; hear my prayer, O my father; grant my wishes, receiving my libations." These powerful gods did not give material aid only; for Electra adds, "Give me a heart more chaste than my mother's, and purer

hands.”²⁴ Thus the Hindu asks of the manes “that in his family the number of good men may increase, and that he may have much to give.”

These human souls deified by death were what the Greeks called demons, or heroes.²⁵ The Latins gave them the name of Lares, Manes, Genii. “Our ancestors believed,” says Apuleius “that the Manes, when they were malignant, were to be called *larvae*; they called them *Lares* when they were benevolent and propitious.”²⁶ Elsewhere we read, “Genius and Lar is the same being; so our ancestors believed.”²⁷ And in Cicero, “Those that the Greeks called demons we call Lares.”²⁸

This religion of the dead appears to be the oldest that has existed among this race of men. Before men had any notion of Indra or of Zeus, they adored the dead; they feared them, and addressed them prayers. It seems that the religious sentiment commenced in this way. It was perhaps while looking upon the dead that man first conceived the idea of the supernatural, and began to have a hope beyond what he saw. Death was the first mystery, and it placed man on the track of other mysteries. It raised his thoughts from the visible to the invisible, from the transitory to the eternal, from the human to the divine.

Chapter III: The Sacred Fire.

In the house of every Greek and Roman was an altar; on this altar there had always to be a small quantity of ashes, and a few lighted coals.²⁹ It was a sacred obligation for the master of every house to keep the fire up night and day. Woe to the house where it was extinguished. Every evening they covered the coals with ashes to prevent them from being entirely consumed. In the morning the first care was to revive this fire with a few twigs. The fire ceased to glow upon the altar only when the entire family had perished; an extinguished hearth, an extinguished family, were synonymous expressions among the ancients.³⁰

It is evident that this usage of keeping fire always upon an altar was connected with an ancient belief. The rules and the rites which they observed in regard to it, show that it was not an insignificant custom. It was not permitted to feed this fire with every sort of wood; religion distinguished among the trees those that could be employed for this use from those it was impiety to make use of.³¹

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3 It was also a religious precept that this fire must always remain pure;³² which
4 meant, literally, that no filthy object ought to be cast into it, and figuratively, that no
5 blameworthy deed ought to be committed in its presence. There was one day in the
6 year — among the Romans it was the first of March — when it was the duty of every
7 family to put out its sacred fire, and light another immediately.³³ But to procure this
8 new fire certain rites had to be scrupulously observed. Especially must they avoid
9 using flint and steel for this purpose. The only processes allowed were to concentrate
10 the solar rays into a focus, or to rub together rapidly two pieces of wood of a given
11 sort.³⁴ These different rules sufficiently prove that, in the opinion of the ancients, it
12 was not a question of procuring an element useful and agreeable; these men saw
13 something else in the fire that burnt upon their altars.

14 This fire was something divine; they adored it, and offered it a real worship. They
15 made offerings to it of whatever they believed to be agreeable to a god — flowers,
16 fruits, incense, wine, and victims. They believed it to have power, and asked for its
17 protection. They addressed fervent prayers to it, to obtain those eternal objects of
18 human desire — health, wealth, and happiness. One of these prayers, which has been
19 preserved to us in the collection of Orphic Hymns, runs thus: “Render us always
20 prosperous, always happy, O fire; thou who art eternal, beautiful, ever young; thou
21 who nourishes”, thou who art rich, receive favorably these our offerings, and in
22 return give us happiness and sweet health.”³⁵

23 Thus they saw in the fire a beneficent god, who maintained the life of man; a rich
24 god, who nourished him with gifts; a powerful god, who protected his house and
25 family. In presence of danger they sought refuge near this fire. When the palace of
26 Priam is destroyed, Hecuba draws the old man near the hearth. “Thy arms cannot
27 protect thee,” she says; “but this altar will protect us all.”³⁶

28 See Alcestis, who is about to die, giving her life to save her husband. She
29 approaches the fire, and invokes it in these terms: “O divinity, mistress of this house,
30 for the last time I fall before thee, and address thee my prayers, for I am going to
31 descend among the dead. Watch over my children, who will have no mother; give to
32 my boy a tender wife, and to my girl a noble husband. Let them not, like me, die
33 before the time; but let them enjoy a long life in the midst of happiness.”³⁷

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3 In misfortune man betook himself to his sacred fire, and heaped reproaches upon
4 it; in good fortune he returned it thanks. The soldier who returned from war thanked
5 it for having enabled him to escape the perils. Æschylus represents Agamemnon
6 returning from Troy, happy, and covered with glory. His first act is not to thank
7 Jupiter; he does not go to a temple to pour out his joy and gratitude, but makes a
8 sacrifice of thank-offerings to the fire in his own house.³⁸ A man never went out of
9 his dwelling without addressing a prayer to the fire; on his return, before seeing his
10 wife or embracing his children, he must fall before the fire, and invoke it.³⁹

11 The sacred fire was the Providence of the family. The worship was very simple.
12 The first rule was, that there should always be upon the altar a few live coals; for if
13 this fire was extinguished a god ceased to exist. At certain moments of the day they
14 placed upon the fire dry herbs and wood; then the god manifested himself in a bright
15 flame. They offered sacrifices to him; and the essence of every sacrifice was to
16 sustain and reanimate the sacred fire, to nourish and develop the body of the god.
17 This was the reason why they gave him wood before everything else; for the same
18 reason they afterwards poured out wine upon the altar, — the inflammable wine of
19 Greece, — oil, incense, and the fat of victims. The god received these offerings, and
20 devoured them; radiant with satisfaction, he rose above the altar, and lighted up the
21 worshipper with his brightness. Then was the moment to invoke him; and the hymn
22 of prayer went out from the heart of man.

23 Especially were the meals of the family religious acts. The god presided there. He
24 had cooked the bread, and prepared the food;⁴⁰ a prayer, therefore, was due at the
25 beginning and end of the repast. Before eating, they placed upon the altar the first
26 fruits of the food; before drinking, they poured out a libation of wine. This was the
27 god's portion. No one doubted that he was present, that he ate and drank; for did they
28 not see the flame increase as if it had been nourished by the provisions offered? Thus
29 the meal was divided between the man and the god. It was a sacred ceremony, by
30 which they held communion with each other.⁴¹ This is an old belief, which in the
31 course of time, faded from the minds of men, but which left behind it, for many an
32 age, rites, usages, and forms of language of which even the incredulous could not free
33 themselves. Horace Ovid, and Petronius still supped before their fires, and poured out

libations, and addressed prayers to them.⁴²

This worship of the sacred fire did not belong exclusively to the populations of Greece and Italy. We find it in the East. The Laws of Manu, as they have come to us, show us the religion of Brahma completely established, and even verging towards its decline; but they have preserved vestiges and remains of a religion still more ancient, — that of the sacred fire, — which the worship of Brahma had reduced to a secondary rank, but could not destroy. The Brahmin has his fire to keep night and day; every morning and every evening he feeds it with wood; but, as with the Greeks, this must be the wood of certain trees. As the Greeks and Italians offer it wine the Hindu pours upon it a fermented liquor, which he calls soma. Meals, too, are religious acts, and the rites are scrupulously described in the Laws of Manu. They address prayers to the fire, as in Greece; they offer it the first fruits of rice, butter and honey. We read that “the Brahmin should not eat the rice of the new harvest without having offered the first fruits of it to the hearth-fire; for the sacred fire is greedy of grain, and when it is not honored, it will devour the existence of the negligent Brahmin.” The Hindus, like the Greeks and the Romans, pictured the gods to themselves as greedy not only of honors and respect, but of food and drink. Man believed himself compelled to satisfy their hunger and thirst, if he wished to avoid their wrath.

Among the Hindus this divinity of the fire is called Agni. The Rig-Veda contains a great number of hymns addressed to this god. In one it is said, “O Agni, thou art the life, thou art the protector of man. In return for our praises, bestow upon the father of the family who implores thee glory and riches. Agni, thou art a prudent defender and a father; to thee we owe life; we are thy family.” Thus the fire of the hearth is, as in Greece, a tutelary power. Man asks abundance of it: “Make the earth ever liberal towards us.” He asked health of it: “Grant that I may enjoy long life, and that I may arrive at old age, like the sun at his setting.” He even asks wisdom of it: “O Agni, thou placest upon the good way the man who has wandered into the bad. If we have committed a fault, if we have gone far from thee, pardon us.” This fire of the hearth was, as in Greece, essentially pure: the Brahmin was forbidden to throw anything filthy into it, or even to warm his feet by it. As in Greece, the guilty man could not

approach his hearth before he had purified himself.

It is a strong proof of the antiquity of this belief, and of these practices, to find them at the same time among men on the shores of the Mediterranean and among those of the peninsula of India. Assuredly the Greeks did not borrow this religion from the Hindus, nor the Hindus from the Greeks. But the Greeks, the Italians, and the Hindus belonged to the same race; their ancestors, in a very distant past, lived together in Central Asia. There this creed originated and these rites were established. The religion of the sacred fire dates, therefore, from the distant and dim epoch when there were yet no Greeks, no Italians, no Hindus; when there were only Aryas. When the tribes separated, they carried this worship with them, some to the banks of the Ganges, others to the shores of the Mediterranean. Later, when these tribes had no intercourse with each other, some adored Brahma, others Zeus, and still others Janus; each group chose its own gods; but all preserved, as an ancient legacy, the first religion which they had known and practiced in the common cradle of their race.

If the existence of this worship among all the Indo-European nations did not sufficiently demonstrate its high antiquity, we might find other proofs of it in the religious rites of the Greeks and Romans. In all sacrifices, even in those offered to Zeus or to Athene, the first invocation was always addressed to the fire.⁴³ Every prayer to any god whatever must commence and end with a prayer to the fire.⁴⁴ At Olympia, the first sacrifice that assembled Greece offered was to the hearth-fire, the second was to Zeus.⁴⁵ So, too, at Rome, the first adoration was always addressed to Vesta, who was no other than the hearth-fire. Ovid says of this goddess, that she occupied the first place in the religious practices of men. We also read in the hymns of the Rig-Veda, "Agni must be invoked before all the other gods. We pronounce his venerable name before that of all the other immortals. O Agni, whatever other god we honor with our sacrifices, the holocaust is always offered to thee."⁴⁶ It is certain, therefore, that at Rome in Ovid's time, and in India in the time of the Brahmins, the fire of the hearth took precedence of all other gods; not that Jupiter and Brahma had not acquired a greater importance in the religion of men, but it was remembered that the hearth-fire was much older than those gods. For many centuries he had held the first place in the religious worship, and the newer and greater gods could not

dispossess him of this place.

The symbols of this religion became modified in the course of ages. When the people of Greece and Italy began to represent their gods as persons, and to give each one a proper name and a human form, the old worship of the hearth-fire submitted to the common law which human intelligence, in that period, imposed upon every religion. The altar of the sacred fire was personified. They called it *Ecrnma*, Vesta; the name was the same in Latin and in Greek, and was the same that in the common and primitive language designated an altar. By a process frequent enough, a common noun had become a proper name. By degrees a legend was formed. They pictured this divinity to themselves as wearing a female form, because the word used for altar was of the feminine gender. They even went so far as to represent this goddess in statues. Still they could never efface the primitive belief, according to which this divinity was simply the fire upon the altar; and Ovid himself was forced to admit that Vesta was nothing else than a "living flame."⁴⁷

If we compare this worship of the sacred fire with the worship of the dead, of which we have already spoken, we shall perceive a close relation between them.

Let us remark, in the first place, that this fire, which was kept burning upon the hearth, was not, in the thoughts of men, the fire of material nature. What they saw in it was not the purely physical element that warms and burns, that transforms bodies, melts metals, and becomes the powerful instrument of human industry. The fire of the hearth is of quite another nature. It is a pure fire, which can be produced only by the aid of certain rites, and can be kept up only with certain kinds of wood. It is a chaste fire; the union of the sexes must be removed far from its presence.⁴⁸ They pray to it not only for riches and health, but also for purity of heart, temperance, and wisdom. "Render us rich and flourishing," says an Orphic hymn; "make us also wise and chaste." Thus the hearth-fire is a sort of a moral being; it shines, and warms, and cooks the sacred food; but at the same time it thinks, and has a conscience; it knows men's duties, and sees that they are fulfilled. One might call it human, for it has the double nature of man; physically, it blazes up, it moves, it lives, it procures abundance, it prepares the repast, it nourishes the body; morally, it has sentiments and affections, it gives man purity, it enjoins the beautiful and the good, it nourishes

the soul. One might say that it supports human life in the double series of its manifestations. It is at the same time the source of wealth, of health, of virtue. It is truly the god of human nature. Later, when this worship had been assigned to a second place by Brahma or by Zeus, there still remained in the hearth-fire whatever of divine was most accessible to man. It became his mediator with the gods of physical nature; it undertook to carry to heaven the prayer and the offering of man, and to bring the divine favors back to him. Still later, when they made the great Vesta of this myth of the sacred fire, Vesta was the virgin goddess. She represented in the world neither fecundity nor power; she was order, but not rigorous, abstract, mathematical order, the imperious and unchangeable law, *avayx*¹, which was early perceived in physical nature. She was moral order. They imagined her as a sort of universal soul, which regulated the different movements of worlds, as the human soul keeps order in the human system.

Thus are we permitted to look into the way of thinking of primitive generations. The principle of this worship is outside of physical nature, and is found in this little mysterious world, this microcosm — man.

This brings us back to the worship of the dead. Both are of the same antiquity. They were so closely associated that the belief of the ancients made but one religion of both. Hearthfire demons, heroes, Lares, all were confounded.⁴⁹ We see, from two passages of Plautus and Columella, that, in the common language, they said, indifferently, hearth or domestic Lares; and we know that, in Cicero's time, they did not distinguish the hearth-fire from the Penates, nor the Penates from the Lares.⁵⁰ In Servius we read, "By hearth the ancients understood the Lares;" and Virgil has written, indifferently, hearth for Penates and Penates for hearth.⁵¹ In a famous passage of the *Æneid*, Hector tells Aeneas that he is going to intrust to him the Trojan Penates, and it is the hearth-fire that he commits to his care. In another passage *Æneas*, invoking these same gods, calls them at the same time Penates, Lares, and Vesta.⁵²

We have already seen that those whom the ancients called Lares, or heroes, were no other than the souls of the dead, to which men attributed a superhuman and divine power. The recollection of one of these sacred dead was always attached to the

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3 hearth-fire. In adoring one, the worshipper could not forget the other. They were
4 associated in the respect of men, and in their prayers. The descendants, when they
5 spoke of the hearth-fire, recalled the name of the ancestor: "Leave this place," says
6 Orestes to his sister, "and advance towards the ancient hearth of Pelops, to bear my
7 words."⁵³ So, too, Ameas, speaking of the sacred fire which he transports across the
8 waters, designates it by the name of the Lar of Assaracus, as if he saw in this fire the
9 soul of his ancestor.

10 The grammarian Servius, who was very learned in Greek and Roman antiquities
11 (which were studied much more in his time than in the time of Cicero), says it was
12 a very ancient usage to bury the dead in the houses; and he adds,

13 "As a result of this custom, they honor the Lares and Penates in their houses."⁵⁴ This
14 expression establishes clearly an ancient relation between the worship of the dead
15 and the hearth-fire. We may suppose, therefore, that the domestic fire was in the
16 beginning only the symbol of the worship of the dead; that under the stone of the
17 hearth an ancestor reposed; that the fire was lighted there to honor him, and that this
18 fire seemed to preserve life in him, or represented his soul as always vigilant.

19 This is merely a conjecture, and we have no proof of it. Still it is certain that the
20 oldest generations of the race from which the Greeks and Romans sprang worshipped
21 both the dead and the hearth-fire — an ancient religion that did not find its gods in
22 physical nature, but in man himself, and that has for its object the adoration of the
23 invisible being which is in us, the moral and thinking power which animates and
24 governs our bodies.

25 This religion, after a time, began to lose its power over the soul; it became
26 enfeebled by degrees, but it did not disappear. Contemporary with the first ages of
27 the Aryan race, it became rooted so deeply in the minds of this race that the brilliant
28 religion of the Greek Olympus could not extirpate it; only Christianity could do this.
29 We shall see presently what a powerful influence this religion exercised upon the
30 domestic and social institutions of the ancients. It was conceived and established in
31 that distant age when this race was just forming its institutions, and determined the
32 direction of their progress.

Chapter IV: The Domestic Religion.

We are not to suppose that this ancient religion resembled those founded when men became more enlightened. For a great number of centuries the human race has admitted no religious doctrine except on two conditions: first, that it proclaimed but one god; and, second, that it was addressed to all men, and was accessible to all, systematically rejecting no class or race. But this primitive religion fulfilled neither of these conditions. Not only did it not offer one only god to the adoration of men, but its gods did not accept the adoration of all men. They did not offer themselves as the gods of the human race. They did not even resemble Brahma, who was at least the god of one whole great caste, nor the Panhellenian Zeus, who was the god of an entire nation. In this primitive religion each god could be adored only by one family. Religion was purely domestic.

We must illustrate this important point; otherwise the intimate relation that existed between this ancient religion and the constitution of the Greek and Roman family may not be fully understood.

The worship of the dead in no way resembled the Christian worship of the saints. One of the first rules of this worship was, that it could be offered by each family only to those deceased persons who belonged to it by blood. The funeral obsequies could be religiously performed only by the nearest relative. As to the funeral meal, which was renewed at stated seasons, the family alone had a right to take part in it, and every stranger was strictly excluded.⁵⁵ They believed that the dead ancestor accepted no offerings save from his own family; he desired no worship save from his own descendants. The presence of one who was not of the family disturbed the rest of the manes. The law, therefore, forbade a stranger to approach a tomb.⁵⁶ To touch a tomb with tile foot, even by chance, was an impious act, after which the guilty one was expected to pacify the dead and purify himself. The word by which the ancients designated the worship of the dead is significant; the Greeks said *nanpmasEmw*, the Romans said *parentare*. The reason of this was because the prayer and offering were addressed by each one only to his fathers. The worship of the dead was nothing more than the worship of ancestors.⁵⁷ Lucian, while ridiculing common beliefs, explains them clearly to us when he says the man who has died without leaving a son, receives

no offerings, and is exposed to perpetual hunger.⁵⁸

In India, as in Greece, an offering could be made to a dead person only by one who had descended from him. The law of the Hindus, like Athenian law, forbade a stranger, even if he were a friend, to be invited to the funeral banquet. It was so necessary that these banquets should be offered by the descendants of the dead, and not by others, that the manes, in their resting-place, were supposed often to pronounce this wish: "May there be successively born of our line sons who, in all coming time, may offer us rice, boiled in milk, honey, and clarified butter."⁵⁹

Hence it was, that, in Greece and Rome, as in India, it was the son's duty to make the libations and the sacrifices to the manes of his father and of all his ancestors. To fail in this duty was to commit the grossest act of impiety possible, since the interruption of this worship caused the dead to fall from their happy state. This negligence was nothing less than the crime of parricide, multiplied as many times as there were ancestors in the family.

If, on the contrary, the sacrifices were always accomplished according to the rites, if the provisions were carried to the tomb on the appointed days, then the ancestor became a protecting god. Hostile to all who had not descended from him, driving them from his tomb, inflicting diseases upon them if they approached, he was good and provident to his own family.

There was a perpetual interchange of good offices between the living and the dead of each family. The ancestor received from his descendants a series of funeral banquets, that is to say, the only enjoyment that was left to him in his second life. The descendant received from the ancestor the aid and strength of which he had need in this. The living could not do without the dead, nor the dead without the living. Thus a powerful bond was established among all the generations of the same family, which made of it a body forever inseparable.

Every family had its tomb, where its dead went to repose, one after another, always together. This tomb was generally near the house, nor far from the door, "in order," says one of the ancients, "that the sons, in entering and leaving their dwelling, might always meet their fathers, and might always address them an invocation."⁶⁰ Thus the ancestor remained in the midst of his relatives; invisible, but always present, he

continued to make a part of the family, and to be its father. Immortal, happy, divine, he was still interested in all of his whom he had left upon the earth. He knew their needs, and sustained their feebleness; and he who still lived, who labored, who, according to the ancient expression, had not yet discharged the debt of existence, he had near him his guides and his supports — his forefathers. In the midst of difficulties, he invoked their ancient wisdom; in grief, he asked consolation of them; in danger, he asked their support, and after a fault, their pardon.

Certainly we cannot easily comprehend how a man could adore his father or his ancestor. To make of man a god appears to us the reverse of religion. It is almost as difficult for us to comprehend the ancient creeds of these men as it would have been for them to understand ours. But, if we reflect that the ancients had no idea of creation, we shall see that the mystery of generation was for them what the mystery of creation is for us. The generator appeared to them to be a divine being; and they adored their ancestor. This sentiment must have been very natural and very strong, for it appears as a principle of religion in the origin of almost all human societies. We find it among the Chinese as well as among the ancient Getae and Scythians, among the tribes of Africa as well as among those of the new world.⁶¹

The sacred fire, which was so intimately associated with the worship of the dead, belonged, in its essential character, properly to each family. It represented the ancestors; it was the providence of a family, and had nothing in common with the fire of a neighboring family, which was another providence.⁶² Every fire protected its own and repulsed the stranger. The whole of this religion was enclosed within the walls of each house. The worship was not public. All the ceremonies, on the contrary, were kept strictly secret.⁶³ Performed in the midst of the family alone, they were concealed from every stranger. The hearth was never placed either outside the house or even near the outer door, where it would have been too easy to see. The Greeks always placed it in an enclosure,⁶⁴ which protected it from the contact, or even the gaze, of the profane. The Romans concealed it in the interior of the house. All these gods, the sacred fire, the Lares, and the Manes, were called the consecrated gods, or gods of the interior.⁶⁵ To all the acts of this religion secrecy was necessary.⁶⁶ If a ceremony was looked upon by a stranger, it was disturbed, defiled, made unfortunate simply by

this look.

There were neither uniform rules nor a common ritual for this domestic religion. Each family was most completely independent. No external power had the right to regulate either the ceremony or the creed. There was no other priest than the father: as a priest, he knew no hierarchy. The pontifex of Rome, or the archon of Athens, might, indeed, ascertain if the father of a family performed all his religious ceremonies; but he had no right to order the least modification of them. *Suo quisque ritu sacrificia faciat* — such was the absolute rule.⁶⁷ Every family had its ceremonies, which were peculiar to itself, its particular celebrations, its formulas of prayer, its hymns.⁶⁸ The father, sole interpreter and sole priest of his religion, alone had the right to teach it, and could teach it only to his son. The rites, the forms of prayer, the chants, which formed an essential part of this domestic religion, were a patrimony, a sacred property, which the family shared with no one, and which they were even forbidden to reveal to strangers. It was the same in India. “I am strong against my enemies,” says the Brahmin, “from the songs which I receive from my family, and which my father has transmitted to me.”⁶⁹

Thus religion dwelt not in temples, but in the house; each house had its gods; each god protected one family only, and was a god only in one house. We cannot reasonably suppose that a religion of this character was revealed to man by the powerful imagination of one among them, or that it was taught to them by a priestly caste. It grew up spontaneously in the human mind; its cradle was the family; each family created its own gods.

This religion could be propagated only by generation. The father, in giving life to his son, gave him at the same time his creed, his worship, the right to continue the sacred fire, to offer the funeral meal, to pronounce the formulas of prayer. Generation established a mysterious bond between the infant, who was born to life, and all the gods of the family. Indeed, these gods were his family — 0Eom EyyEvEm□; they were of his blood — 0Eom crwvampom.⁷⁰ The child, therefore, received at his birth the right to adore them, and to offer them sacrifices; and later, when death should have deified him, he also would be counted, in his turn, among these gods of the family.

But we must notice this peculiarity — that the domestic religion was transmitted

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3 only from male to male.

4 This was owing, no doubt, to the idea that generation was due entirely to the
5 males.⁷¹ The belief of primitive ages, as we find it in the Vedas, and as we find
6 vestiges of it in all Greek and Roman law, was that the reproductive power resided
7 exclusively in the father. The father alone possessed the mysterious principle of
8 existence, and transmitted the spark of life. From this old notion it followed that the
9 domestic worship always passed from male to male; that a woman participated in it
10 only through her father or her husband; and, finally, that after death women had not
11 the same part as men in the worship and the ceremonies of the funeral meal. Still
12 other important consequences in private law and in the constitution of the family
13 resulted from this: we shall see them as we proceed.