

Good Ghosts: A Re-view of the Roman Ghost Story

Orality, emphasis on proper burial, and association with household or home are common themes noted in discussions about Roman supernatural tales, including those recorded outside of the epic and literary traditions. The general emphasis on communication as the interest of the spirit, and it is usually a ghost or spirit stuck in the world of the living, differs from later traditions which tend to be more rooted in fear and violence. While many of the tales of haunting that survive from the ancient Roman era may involve fear, it is less fear of violence and more often a fear of loss of life and identity.

Some of the older ghost traditions show that ghosts or spirits of the dead can be active with self-agency and have helpful intentions, such as when Anchises and Carissa advise Aeneas, or the protection of *lares* or *lemures*. These ghosts and spirits maintain a sense of self and belonging in respect both to themselves and the living with whom they interact. While it is possible for such spirits to turn hurtful, that is often the result of neglect or mistreatment by the living.

Many of the haunting stories, including the well-known one documented by Pliny the Younger's letter 7.27, suggest that the reason a ghost or spirit might turn frightening was because they were losing or had lost their sense of self or place; when that sense is restored, via proper burial in the case of Pliny's ghost, any problems the living might have had with the spirit stop.

These kinds of ghosts and spirits differ from the more commonly thought of threatening or spooky ghosts such as Nero, Julius Caesar, and the poltergeist at Velletri (as recorded by Pliny the Younger, Plutarch, and Suetonius). These encounters are ancestors of the medieval horror story collections like *Byland Abbey* (15th c.) or *Lanercost Priory* (14th c.). These kinds of ghosts

seem to retain their general selves as they might have been in life, but their appearances are still tied to those identities as they are recorded as interacting mostly with those who they would have been interested in (their biographer or killer, for example), and represent less of a threat to anyone else who might encounter them.

Ghosts might also have been perceived as frightening when they brought warnings or prophecies to the living, which they often did with good or honorable intention. There are many tales from mythology and folklore involving someone warned by a ghost, and in some instances, the humans involved might even have requested the advice. In some ways, these kinds of interactions might be the ancestors of the Christian practice of praying to martyrs; martyrs, while not ghosts, are spiritual existences, and often they are not represented as intervening unless directly prayed to for help.

In considering a more positive approach rather than fear-based, many of the ghosts and spirits of the Roman world appear motivated and understood as seeking affirmation or recognition of who they were in life, or where they should be in death. When a spirit has the recognition of its rightful self and place, it tends to be an existence, not a threat. The scary ghosts are those who are not recognized, either by themselves or the living, as place-less and identity-less. This re-envisioning of ghosts in the ancient world provides some possibilities for similarly reconsidering the modern ghost and ghost story.

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