Dynamics of Grief: A Comparative Analysis of Mourning Rituals in Roman Paganism and Early Christianity

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BA, Indiana University, 2016
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A Masters Essay presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts in Ancient History

Department of History

University of Virginia
May 2024

Introduction

In the exploration of grief and mourning rituals in Roman society, the dynamic interplay between familial expectations, societal norms, and religious convictions emerges as a transformative force. This study delves into the nuanced responses to death, particularly martyrdom, in the contexts of Roman paganism and early Christianity. The traditional pagan emphasis on familial bonds as the cornerstone of everyday life, intertwined with societal reputation and the concept of a 'good' death, undergoes a profound transformation in the Christian world. This change signifies a broader societal transformation, marked by a shift from allegiance to the traditional family unit to a spiritual community united by shared religious beliefs. The exploration of these mourning rituals illuminates the transformative power of religious beliefs in reshaping not only the understanding of death but also the fundamental fabric of social relationships, challenging and redefining traditional Roman concepts of familial continuity and societal honor.[1]

Grief Under Paganism

I. Where the Impact Is Felt

In the traditional pagan perspective, the family stood as the central and most vital building block of Roman society. Because of the prominent status accorded to the family within the framework of Roman society, the demise of a family member within pagan households exerted a

[1] I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Elizabeth Meyer and J.E. Lendon for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Their expertise and insights have significantly contributed to the completion of this thesis.
All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

substantial impact on the natal family because it was the family that not only handled funerary rituals, but was also primarily harmed by death. The perpetuation of familial identity stood as a paramount concern among Romans, a notion that found expression in familial continuity where offspring, irrespective of gender, were expected to perform sacred rites after death and perpetuate the family lineage.[2] The prevalence of high mortality rates in the ancient world compelled families either to adopt male heirs or to bear numerous children, primarily to safeguard familial property under the *patria potestas*.[3] While male children were generally deemed more desirable, female children, despite the financial burden of the dowry, offered the potential for advantageous marriage alliances with distinguished families.[4] The responsibilities of offspring went beyond mere continuation of the familial legacy: they were expected to act as caregivers in their parents' old age, with the exception of daughters who entered *manus* through marriage, thereby exiting the *potestas* of their fathers.[5] Additionally, the offspring bore the responsibility for mourning rituals and commemoration after the parents' demise.[6] Individuals were expected to adhere to the principles of familial loyalty, reinforcing the significance of familial bonds within the broader societal framework.

Written around AD 95, the sixth book of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* offers a poignant depiction of a mourning father embedded within the fabric of familial continuity. In this passage, the orator grieves the loss of his second son, providing a deep exploration into the enduring importance of family ties and the profound reverberations of loss within the Roman societal framework. After losing his wife at the age of nineteen and his first son at the age of five, this

[2] Lindsay (2010) 346.
[3] Rawson (2011) 96.
[4] Salisbury (1997) 6.
[5] Hope (2000) 107.
[6] Hope (2000) 107.

third death was a devastating blow: “I lost the child, for whom I had such expectations, and in whom I rested the sole hope of my old age, I have fallen again with the wound of mourning.”[7] He laments the loss of his wife and first son, with whom he expressed a strong emotional connection as well; yet while his wife’s death saddened him, he took solace in the fact that she had done what was socially expected of her and borne two healthy children, and had escaped the “terrible afflictions” of mortal life. After he had lost both his wife and first son, Quintilian nonetheless claimed that he had less cause to grieve, for he was still fortunate that he had a surviving son, in whom he placed all hopes for the future.[8] He lamented the life that his son could have had, had he survived: “... when your recent adoption into a consular family brought you nearer to hopes of the highest offices, when you were destined to be the son-in-law and nephew of a praetor....”[9] The account reveals not only the emotional depth of Quintilian's attachment to his family but also embodies the expectations of a traditional Roman father whose child is considered an extension of familial identity.

The expectation that one’s family will take care of funerary rites is also demonstrated in Latin literature. While in exile, Ovid laments that he will be lacking the accustomed rites after his death that people should expect from their *familia*:

> Nor will my body grow weak on the accustomed bed, nor will there be anyone who mourns me deposited there; nor will the little time of my dear soul approach with the tears of my mistress falling upon my face; nor will I give commands, nor will a friendly hand close my eyes with a final outcry; but this head, without funerals, without the honor of a tomb, will be covered by a barbarian land unlamented![10]

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[7] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*: 6.2: Illum enim de quo summa conceperam, et in quo spem unicam senectutis reponebam, repetito vulnere orbitatis amisi.
[8] Quintilian, *Institutio oratia*: 11-12.
[9] Quintilian, *Instituto oratia*: 13: Tene consulari nuper adoptione ad omnium spes honorum propius admotum, te avunculo praetori generum destinatum...
[10] Ovid, *Trisita* 3.3.37-46: nec mea consueto languescent corpora lecto,/depositum nec me qui fleat, ullus erit; nec dominae lacrimis in nostra cadentibus ora/accedent animae tempora parva meae;/nec mandata dabo, nec cum clamore supremo/labentes oculos condet amica manus;/sed sine funeribus caput hoc, sine honore sepulcri/indeploratum barbara terra teget!

This excerpt demonstrates the expectation in Roman society that one's family would take care of the proper funerary rites after their death. Ovid laments the lack of these customary rituals that he anticipates he will miss while in exile. He describes the absence of loved ones to mourn him, the lack of rituals such as closing his eyes and giving commands, and the unfortunate prospect of being buried in a foreign land without proper funerals or a tomb. This passage underscores the significance placed on familial obligations and the importance of proper funeral rites in Roman culture. It reflects the idea that without these rituals, the dead would not receive the proper respect and honor they expected in both life and death.

A glimpse at Tacitus' description of the death of his father-in-law reveals a different aspect of a similar sentiment of familial expectations surrounding death. In his *Agricola*, Tacitus laments that he and his wife will not be present at the death of Agricola to perform their expected roles: "…the sorrow of the parent taken away intensifies for me and his daughter, not only because of the bitterness of losing a father, but also because it was not possible to sit by his illness, to comfort him in his weakness, or to satisfy him with our presence and embrace."[11] Not only is Tacitus grieving the loss of the man himself, he is also mourning that he cannot perform his expected role in Agricola's final moments. While the passage does not explicitly mention mourning rituals, it vividly illustrates the deep sense of duty and emotional attachment expected of Roman families during times of death. Tacitus' expression of regret highlights the societal norm that familial members would be present to fulfill their roles, not only in life but also in the transition to death. This emphasis on familial obligations extends beyond mere grief for the deceased; it encompasses the expectation of active participation in the dying process itself.

[11] Tacitus, *Agricola* 45: sed mihi filiaeque eius praeter acerbitatem parentis erepti auget maestitiam, quod adsidere valetudini, fovere deficientem, satiari vultu complexuque non contigit.

Through Tacitus' lament, we glimpse the intricate web of familial responsibilities and emotional connections that characterized Roman society's approach to death and mourning.

II. What is Done: Rituals

In the ancient world, much like many other facets, the care of the deceased and the public exhibition of mourning were distinctly gendered. Although the option to hire an undertaker (*pollinctor*) existed for those with the financial means, it was predominantly women who undertook the primary responsibilities for handling the deceased in Roman pagan families. This encompassed the closing of the eyes, performing the *conclamatio*, undertaking the body's ablution and anointing, and preparing it for public viewing among relatives and friends.[12] The involvement of female family members in these rituals was particularly significant, since it provided them with a recognized role in the public eye during a period when such opportunities were rare.[13] Members of the deceased person's household, the *familia funesta* (the bereaved *familia*), adhered to practices such as wearing dark clothing, eating infrequently, and, in a well-known display of grief, mourners (usually women) appeared disheveled, tearing at their hair. These were anticipated performances of grief, serving as inversions of social norms to signal to the community the need for appropriate support for, and empathy towards, the bereaved.[14]

In the pagan world death was viewed as a journey into the underworld for the deceased. As part of this journey, the deceased was expected to interact with Charon, the ferryman of the

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[12] Hope (2009): 69; Davies (1999): 149.
[13] Hope (2009): 125. Volp (2002): 195 notes that participation by pagan priests in leading the funerary and burial rituals was not customary. On the contrary, it was forbidden because of ancient notions of impurity, which raised concerns about the risk of contamination of temple service through contact with a corpse.
[14] Hope (2009): 122.

Styx, and present him with a coin to pay for passage across the river. In funerary rituals, those taking care of the body would be responsible for placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased to ensure that they would be allowed to cross the river in the underworld.[15] Reference to the significance of the coin for passage is seen throughout Greek and Roman literature;[16] for example, Juvenal details how miserable one's lot can be when they are not provided with the coin in their mouth for their journey:

> ... But now he, a newcomer,
> Sits on the bank and shudders at the loathsome
> Ferryman, the unlucky man does not hope for a boat
> Across the foul whirlpool, (for) he does not have a triens (a bronze coin) in his mouth,
> Which he should offer.[17]

This passage demonstrates that Romans believed that the coin was a necessary step of the journey of the deceased. The dead man in the passage above is shown not only as fearful of Charon's loathsome appearance, but as also acknowledging that his fate in the afterlife will be to remain eternally present on the shores of the Styx, as he is described as not having any sort of hope for crossing without the coin. Placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased would ensure that their journey through the underworld was successful and would grant them safe passage to the realm of the dead.[18] This ritualistic act reflects the deeply ingrained belief in the importance of proper preparation for the afterlife within pagan societies. By adhering to these funerary customs, individuals sought to secure the well-being and transition of their loved ones into the next world.

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[15] Rush (1941): 94.
[16] Authors such as Propertius (4.11), Lucian (*Charon* 11), and Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 6.18.4-5) allude to the importance of presenting a coin to Charon in order to cross the Styx, indicating the significance of coinage in an individual's journey to the underworld.
[17] Juvenal, *Satires*, 3.264-267: …at ille/iam sedet in ripa taetrumque novicius horret/porthmea nec sperat caenosi gurgitis alnum/infelix nec habet quem porrigat ore trientem.
[18] Rush (1941): 93-94.

The physicality of mourning was a prominent aspect of female grief. Scenes of lamentation, wailing, crying, breast-beating, cheek-scratching, and, ultimately, the disheveling and tearing of hair were commonly depicted in ancient literature as integral components of mourning.[19] These behaviors were considered communal expectations for women, rooted in the prevailing notion that they were the 'softer' sex, and thus more emotionally susceptible than men. This perception is exemplified in various writings, such as Seneca's *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, in which he asserts, "...despite suffering the same bereavement, women are more deeply wounded than men…."[20] Seneca further reinforces the gendered disparity in mourning practices in a letter addressing the loss of friends, stating, "The forefathers have established a year for women's mourning, not that they should mourn for so long, but that they not do it longer; for men, there is no fixed time [to mourn], because it is not honorable."[21] Seneca's words suggest not only a community standard guiding women's outward expressions of grief but also even the dishonor attributed to outward mourning for men, particularly those of elite status, who were expected to maintain a higher degree of emotional control.[22]

The treatment of the body of the deceased and the gendered displays of mourning constituted the initial stages of the significant elements of Roman pagan funerary customs. Nevertheless, beyond these practices, additional rituals were necessary prior to the deceased's

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[19] Hope (2009): 125.

[20] Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, 3: Ut scias autem non esse hoc naturale, luctibus frangi, primum magis feminas quam viros… eadem orbitas vulnerat. See also: Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 3.62: Ex hac opinione sunt illa varia et detestabilla genera lugendi: pedores, muliebres lacerationes genarum, pectoris, feminum, capitis percussiones.

[21] Seneca, *Epistles* 66, 13: Annum feminis ad Iugendum constituere maiores, non ut tam diu lugerent, sed ne diutius; viris nullum legitimum tempus est, quia nullum honestum.

[22] Hope (2009) 122, 131; King (2020) 133-134. Emotion, particularly grief, poses a challenge in historical study, as societal expectations for public emotional expression may not accurately reflect an individual's true emotional state. In fact, even public expressions of mourning were up for debate among ancient authors, who discussed and debated how people mourned and how they should mourn, and how grief was acknowledged and how it was "... perceived as a mixture of both raw emotion and expected behaviour." This interplay of emotion and social norms is evident in the 'rules' for ritual mourning.

transition from merely a deceased person into the revered state of being one of the *di manes*, or 'divine spirits,'[23] in which the individual would be worshipped in the *manes* cult. The Romans worshiped the dead through a divine cult, rooted in familial *pietas*, that entailed expectations of mutual support among family members, which included legal obligations for the upkeep of a family members tomb, typically the responsibility of the *paterfamilias*.[24] Before a deceased individual transitioned into this *manes* cult, there was necessary ritualistic action that needed to be taken. After the cremation of the body, the remains were gathered in an urn and funerary participants would bury the urn.[25] The grave, however, had to undergo ritual action before it became the sacred space for the worship of *manes*. This step was significant because it completed an individual's transformation from a dead person to a *manes*, wherein the individual would no longer be mourned, but worshipped as a divinity in his or her own right.[26] According to Cicero, the two essential elements for making a grave a sacred space were the sacrifice of a pig and the heaping of earth upon the grave.[27] Varro explicitly mentions the importance of throwing earth over the cremated remains: "… if on the burial mound of a Roman who has been burned on the pyre clods of earth are not thrown… the household remains in mourning…,"[28] while Horace also urges his audience not to forget the necessity of the earth being thrown upon his bones: "…do not hesitate to grant a small amount of sand to my bones and unburied head…throw three

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[23] In his recent publication, *The Ancient Roman Afterlife:* Di Manes*, Belief, and the Cult of the Dead* (2020), Charles W. King devotes the first chapter to establishing nuanced definitions surrounding Roman beliefs and practices regarding the dead. In Chapter 1, the discussion revolves around the nature of *di manes*, revealing that *di* should be understood as an adjective meaning "divine," while *manes* refer to worshipped human dead. King suggests that "the divine *manes*" is the most accurate translation.
[24] King (2020) 45-46; Rebillard (2009) 90.
[25] King (2020) 136.
[26] King (2020) 139.
[27] Cicero, *de Legibus* 2.55-57: nec tamen eorum ante sepulchrum est, quam iusta facta et porcus caesus est… nam prius quam in os iniecta gleba est, locus ille, ubi crematum est corpus, nihil habet religionis…
[28] Varro, *de Lingua Latin*, 5.23: … qui Romanus combustus est, si in sepulcrum eius abiecta gleba non est… familia funesta manet.

handfuls of dust….”[29] These examples suggest that the heaping of earth is a minimum necessary element of these rites to turn the grave into a sacred site, as it was something that could be done even under adverse circumstances.[30]

The second component, the sacrifice of the pig, holds a more traditionally religious significance in the transformation of an individual from a dead person into a divine *manes*, ready to be worshipped. Not only was the sacrifice of a pig needed for the burial space to be legally defined as a grave,[31] the sacrifice of an animal as an offering to a god or goddess was common in traditional Roman religious practices. This suggests that the sacrifice of a pig at the conclusion of the funerary rites identifies the *manes* as the focal point of the offering: since the sacrifice of the pig sanctifies the grave, then the sacrificed pig is an offering to the *manes.*[32] After this offering has been made, the individual is now initiated into the *manes* cult and will be celebrated in the various festivals dedicated to the post-funerary remembrance of ancestors. This notion of presenting a sacrifice to a departed soul is affirmed by Ovid. In book 6 of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts the story of Procne conducting funeral rites for her sister, Philomena, who was kidnapped by her brother-in-law and mistakenly thought to be dead by Procne: “…she built an empty grave and brought offerings to a false spirit and mourned the fate of her sister, not thus to be mourned yet.”[33] This passage demonstrates that an offering is an integral part of the funerary rites for *manes*, as indicated by these lines, despite Ovid’s insistence that the *piacula* was presented *falsis…manibus* and, therefore, was not valid, because Philomena was not actually in the transitional phase between a dead person and a *manes*. It is evident from this story that the

[29] Horace, *Odes*, 1.28.23-24, 35-36: ne parce… harenae/ossibus et capiti inhumato… iniecto ter pulvere.
[30] King (2020) 140.
[31] Toynbee (1971) 50.
[32] King (2020) 140.
[33] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.668: …inane sepulcrum/constituit falsisque piacula manibus infert/et luget non sic lugendae fata sororis.

act of offering marks a crucial moment in the rites surrounding the transition from mortal to divine. Once these rites were performed, the grave was transformed into a sacred space, appropriate for the post-funerary worship of the *manes*, since the dead were now part of the *manes* cult.[34] This also means that the mourners, the family of the *manes*, are now effectively transformed into worshippers.

The worship of a *manes* as a god is demonstrated in the *Consolatio ad Claudium Etruscum*, a consolatory poem in Statius' *Silvae*. The poet describes the grief of a man named Etruscus after the death of his father and eventually describes the ritualistic actions that Etruscus will undertake to worship the sacred spirit of his father:

> Here I will keep your spirit, here within the home.
> You are the guardian and master of the hearth, all of your (people)
> Will obey you. Rightly less than you, always second,
> I will offer constant meals and drink to your sacred spirit
> And I will worship your effigy. Shining stones and
> Lines of skillful wax bring you back in semblance.
> Now ivory and tawny gold will imitate your face.[35]

This excerpt demonstrates both the expectation of familial *pietas* between a father and a son, and the worship of a *manes*. The worship of the *manes* was in fact a form of *pietas*: the participation of family members was central to all steps of mourning and worship, reflecting the deep-rooted concept of familial *pietas* in mourning rituals within Roman society.

Significance

[34] King (2020) 139.
[35] Statius, *Silvae*, 3.3.196-202: …hic manes, hic intra tecta tenebo./tu custos dominusque laris, tibi cuncta tuorum/parebunt: ego rite minor semperque secundus/assiduas libabo dapes et pocula sacris/manibus effigiesque colam; te lucida saxa,/te similem doctae referet modo linea cerae,/nunc ebur et fulvum vultus imitabitur aurum.

In traditional societies where familial bonds are paramount, the death of a family member is not only a personal loss but also a disruption to the larger familial and societal structure, for the death disrupts familial goals such as public service and commemoration. In recognition of this, men, both elite and non-elite, could be criticized for prioritizing private emotions over their public obligations.[36] This mindset is evident in Seneca's *Epistle* 99, written in the first century AD, addressed to a man named Marullus, in which Seneca criticizes Marullus for his emotional response to the death of his son. Marullus is accused of enduring the loss somewhat 'softly,' making him "more worthy of reprehension than consolation."[37] Seneca further reproaches Marullus for grieving over a child while suggesting that greater men have endured more significant losses without succumbing to grief, swiftly returning to their civic duties:

> There are numerous examples of men, who have buried sons in the prime of life without tears, who have returned from the pyre to the Senate or to any other public duty, and they immediately did something else. And not without cause: for first, grief is useless, if you profit nothing by grieving.[38]

Seneca here draws a distinction between grieving for the death of a pre-pubescent child and mourning the loss of young men in their prime. Marullus not only grieves the loss of a child but does so in a manner deemed inappropriate enough to attract attention. In contrast, other men have faced the death of adult heirs but resumed their public duties despite the disappointment of dashed hopes for familial continuity.

Death can, however, be more easily accepted if the death came about in a noble, or 'good,' way. For pagans, the ideal death, though not universally realized, would involve either

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[36] Hope (2009) 131-132.
[37] Seneca, *Epistle* 99, 1: ... diceretur molliter ferre... obiurgatione esset quam solacio dignior.
[38] Seneca, *Epistles* 99, 6: Innumerabilia sunt exempla eorum, qui liberos iuvenes sine lacrimis extulerint, qui in senatum aut in aliquod publicum officium a rogo redierint et statim aliud egerint. Nec inmerito; nam primum supervacuum est dolere, si nihil dolendo proficias.

perishing in battle or peacefully at home, surrounded by family members gathered at the bedside of the soon-to-be deceased.[39] In classical literature, pagan Romans attributed significant importance to confronting death with dignity and bravery, even in violent or unexpected circumstances.[40] One such example comes from Plutarch's account of Cicero's death. Pursued by assassins, Cicero, after ordering his slaves to halt his litter, met his demise with composure: "... he himself, just as he was accustomed, grasping his chin in his left hand, observed his slayers intently… having stretched out his neck from the litter he was slain…."[41] Cicero not only embraces his death with decorum but actively offers his neck to hasten the process, signaling a preference for a swift end. It is noteworthy that an individual need not be an elite or courageous general to achieve what was considered a good death. Moreover, ordinary Romans likely aspired to conclude their lives comfortably, painlessly, and with dignity, surrounded by their families who would play pivotal roles in the ensuing funeral and burial rituals. There was a dread of a death that would be considered dishonorable. This included premature or untimely deaths (such as the passing of offspring before their parents), perishing in a shipwreck, or facing death without dignity, marked by expressions like weeping or begging.[42] Dishonorable deaths were typically reserved for social outcasts, particularly criminals, who faced violent executions such as death in the arena by wild animals—an execution method commonly also employed for martyrs, as will be elaborated later.

Grief and the Christians

[39] Toynbee (1971) 43.
[40] Hope (2009) 55-56.
[41] Plutarch, *Lives. Cicero*: 48: αὐτὸς δ᾽, ὥσπερ εἰώθει, τῇ ἀριστερᾷ χειρὶ τῶν γενείων ἁπτόμενος ἀτενὲς ἐνεώρα τοῖς σφαγεῦσιν… ἐσφάγη δὲ τὸν τράχηλον ἐκ τοῦ φορείου προτείνας…
[42] Hope (2009) 60-62.

In the traditional pagan viewpoint and practice, the family stood as the central and most vital building block of Roman society, and familial loyalty and bonds within the broader cultural framework were emphasized; within Christianity, however, a paradigm shift would occur. Christians formed a distinct society within the larger community of their city, and that society would challenge the established norms. While Roman society emphasized loyalty to one's immediate family, Christians would come to prioritize their allegiance to the Christian community over the traditional family unit.[43] While traditional Roman society commanded that one's family be the central building block of everyday life, the Christians were first and foremost loyal to the Christian community, not the traditional family unit. The Christian community "... offered fictive family ties that seemed as strong as any blood ties,"[44] and as will be shown with the *Passion* of Perpetua, sometimes Christian converts and those facing martyrdom would actually renounce their natal families (parents, spouses, children) in favor of their faith and community. Christians commonly referred to each other by familial titles, such as 'father', 'mother', 'brother', or 'sister' and shared in communal meals, much as a large family might do. In essence, the differences between the traditional pagan perspective and the emerging Christian structures underscored not only a shift in allegiance from familial ties to communal bonds but also a redefinition of what constituted familial relationships, highlighting the transformative power of faith within the evolving community.

I. Where the Impact is Felt:

While pagan culture emphasized the familial role in funerary rituals, the Christian community instead performed some of the same burial rituals, Christians, however, were guided

[43] Salisbury (2004) 11.
[44] Salisbury (1997) 71.

by the belief in the joyous transition from life to eternity, unlike the fear of death felt by pagans. Whereas pagan families grieved the unhappy realities of death, the Christians saw death as a birth.[45] Christian doctrine taught that death should be viewed as the summons of Christ himself, who has prepared a place in the heavenly kingdom for the individual.[46] Christians were urged to rejoice in death, since death is the start to an eternal life. St. Cyprian advises his followers:

> …laying aside the fear of death, let us think on the immortality which follows. By this let us show ourselves to be what we believe, that we do not grieve over the departure of those dear to us, and that when the day of our summons shall arrive, we come without delay and without resistance to the Lord when He Himself calls us.[47]

Tertullian similarly urges Christians against excessive mourning, since the summoning of Christ is to be welcome, not lamented: "We offend Christ when, having been called by Him, we do not receive those summoned by Him with equanimity, as if they were instead to be pitied."[48] Here, Cyprian and Tertullian underscore the significance of maintaining faith and hope in the afterlife when confronted with death. This illustrates a shift in mourning ideals, urging Christians to remember the collective norms of their faith, rather than to lament the loss death represented, as their pagan counterparts did.

Not only were Christians urged to see death as a rebirth, but epigraphic evidence also demonstrates that it was a common practice to describe Christians as being at rest, in order to expel the belief that death was something of which to be afraid.[49] Many inscriptions depict

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[45] Rush (1941), 72-87 notes the disdain with which Christians looked upon their day of birth, since they believed they were born in sin. Therefore, they viewed the day of their death as a *dies natalis*.
[46] Rush (1941) 24; John 14.2: ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρός μου μοναὶ πολλαί εἰσιν· εἰ δὲ μή, εἶπον ἂν ὑμῖν· πορεύομαι ἑτοιμάσαι τόπον ὑμῖν.
[47] St. Cyprian, *De Mortalitate*, 24: pauore mortis exclusi immortalitatem quae sequitur cogitemus. hoc nos ostendamus esse quod credimus ut nec carorum lugeamus excidium...
[48] Tertullin, *Di Patientia*, 9: Christum laedimus cum evocatos quosque ab illo quasi miserandos non aequanimiter accipimus.
[49] Rush (1941) 24.

individuals at peace, resting, or asleep: "Here lies Leo in peace,"[50] "Hyperechius sleeps here."[51] These epitaphs demonstrate a shift in ideals about death, from the pagan belief that one had been ripped or snatched away to the Christian belief that death was restful or peaceful. This contrast in the language of funerary inscriptions reflects the broader Christian theology of death as a transition to eternal peace and rest, contrasting sharply with the fearful connotations often associated with death in pagan beliefs.

While death's impact was felt in the Roman family, the communal ethos of Christians drove a shift not only in how death was perceived, but also how the rituals following death were managed. In Christian writings, there were descriptions of Christian funerary rites performed to by the community as a whole. For instance, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* the Church of Smyrna took care of the body of Polycarp after his death:

> Therefore, the centurion, seeing the contention that arose among the Jews, placed him in the midst, as was their custom, and burned him. Thus, we, afterward, taking the more precious stones, valuable and approved, above gold, laid down his bones, wherever it was also appropriate. Where, as much as possible, as we gather together in rejoicing and joy, the Lord will grant us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom.[52]

In this excerpt, there is a community of people who are gathered to not only take care of the bones of the martyr, but also to commemorate him on the day of his martyrdom (*dies natalis*, discussed above), exemplifying the communal ethos of early Christians in managing death and commemorating martyrs. This communal approach to death rituals was a significant departure from pagan traditions, where the responsibility for funerary rites primarily rested with the family. In the case of Polycarp, we see that it was not just his immediate family or a select few

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[50] *CIL* 13, 3849 Leo hic quiescet in pace.
[51] *Inscriptiones, Latinae Christianae veteres* 3200: Hyperechius hic dormit; Rush (1941) 21.
[52] *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18.1-3: Ἰδὼν οὖν ὁ κεντυρίων τὴν τῶν Ἰουδαίων γενομένην94 φιλονεικίαν, θεὶς αὐτὸν ἐν μέσῳ, ὡς ἔθος αὐτοῖς,95 ἔκαυσεν. οὕτως τε ἡμεῖς ὕστερον ἀνελόμενοι τὰ τιμιώτερα λίθων πολυτελῶν καὶ δοκιμώτερα ὑπὲρ χρυσίον ὀστᾶ αὐτοῦ ἀπεθέμεθα, ὅπου καὶ ἀκόλουθον ἦν. ἔνθα ὡς δυνατὸν ἡμῖν συναγομένοις ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει καὶ χαρᾷ παρέξει ὁ κύριος ἐπιτελεῖν τὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ ἡμέραν γενέθλιον…

individuals who attended to his remains. This collective action highlights the solidarity and sense of community among early Christians, who considered it their duty to honor and care for their martyred brethren. This communal involvement in death rituals served to reinforce the bonds within the Christian community and strengthen their sense of identity and purpose.

The aid of fellow Christians in burial practices became the norm. In *Acts of Apostles* 5, it is narrated that after the death of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, "…the younger men wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him."[53] Here again, there is a community involved in the care and burial of a body. This passage underscores the communal responsibility felt by early Christians to ensure the respectful treatment of the deceased, emphasizing the collective nature of Christian life and the importance of communal support, even in times of death and mourning.

Christian funeral rituals will be examined later. The descriptions of the administration of the eucharist, however, provide valuable insight into who most feels the impact of death. This can also be seen in the fifth-century AD *Melaniae Junioris Vita*, in which one can see both a familial and an ecclesiastical presence in the funeral rites. Melania, the titular saint, hears that her uncle Volusian, who was the urban prefect of the city in 416 and 421 and the praetorian prefect from 428-429,[54] converted to Christianity on his deathbed. After reaching his bedside, Melania is described as being the driving force behind her uncle taking the eucharist:

> Melania herself sat all night by her uncle's bed and comforted him saying, "You are truly blessed, my lord, since you have been greatly honored in the present life and now in your future life you proceed towards the Lord justified, for you have received the bath of immortality." She had him participate in the Holy Mysteries [the eucharist] three times and at daybreak—it was the feast of the Holy Epiphany—she joyfully sent him in peace to the Lord.[55]

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[53] *The Acts of the Apostles* 5.5-6: οἱ νεώτεροι συνέστειλαν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξενέγκαντες ἔθαψαν.
[54] Clark (2021) 225.
[55] Gerontius, *Melaniae Iunioris Vita*, 55.

This excerpt demonstrates not only multiple administrations of the eucharist, but also that a familial presence would be expected in its administration, especially in the context of deathbed conversions. Melania's role as her uncle's caregiver and spiritual guide underscores not only the intimate connection between family members during the transition to death, but also the joy with which Christians bid farewell to their fellow community members. Moreover, when Melania herself received the eucharist immediately before her own death, she is also described as being accompanied by family: "After this, her cousin, Lady Paula, entered with her entire household. The saint advised all and in particular consoled her cousin who was deeply distressed over her separation from Melania."[56] Along with her cousin, Melania is also in the company of ecclesiastics, first her chaplain Gerontius (the author of her *Vita*), then a bishop:

> And thus, with the sacrifice of praise completed, she received communion.[57] However, when day came, the bishop came to see her... and again she received communion from the bishop's hand[58]…About the ninth hour she started losing consciousness. We, however, assumed that she had expired and tried to stretch her legs, but she recovered slightly and she said to my humble person in a feeble voice, "My time has not yet come."[59]

This narrative from the *Melaniae Junioris Vita* sheds light on the intertwining of familial and ecclesiastical roles in the administration of the eucharist, particularly in the context of deathbed conversions. Melania's dedication to her uncle's spiritual well-being highlights the significance of familial bonds in guiding loved ones towards religious rites, even at life's end. Her actions exemplify the profound influence family members can have on one another's faith journeys, especially during moments of transition such as death. Furthermore, Melania's own reception of the Eucharist before her death emphasizes the sacrament's centrality in her spiritual journey. The

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[56] Gerontius, *Melaniae Iunioris Vita*, 68.
[57] Gerontius, *Melaniae Iunioris Vita*, 66: … et ita perfecto sacrificio laudis communicavit…
[58] Gerontius, *Melaniae Iunioris Vita*, 67: …facto autem die venit episcopus ad videndum eam... et iterum communicavit de manu episcopi…
[59] Gerontius, *Melaniae Iunioris Vita*, 68.

presence of both family members and ecclesiastical figures underscores the communal nature of religious rituals, wherein both provide support and guidance. Melania's interaction with her cousin and the comforting presence of ecclesiastical figures such as her chaplain and the bishop highlight the importance of communal support in times of spiritual significance and transition.

This shift from the more family-centered pagan ideal to the broader Christian community's involvement in rituals after death is well illustrated in Eusebius' account of the plague that ravaged the empire in AD 250, following the Decian persecution. Eusebius recounts a speech by Dionysius of Alexandria to his followers, in which the Christian community assumed responsibility for performing the funerary rituals, despite the constant risk of contracting the disease themselves:

> Now all is lamentation, and all are grieving, sympathizing, caring for the sick without fear, serving them eagerly, healing in Christ; they rejoiced with them most cheerfully, taking upon themselves willingly the sufferings of others, and willingly attracting the disease from nearby and willingly sharing their pains. And many, having cared for and strengthened others, themselves passed away, transferring their death onto themselves… And with their own hands they would take up the bodies of the saints, raising them with care, closing their eyes and mouths, wrapping them in linen cloths, adhering to them, joining them, adorning them with baths and garments, and after a little while they obtained the same state, always being followed by those who came after them.[60]

This speech from Eusebius highlights two significant aspects of the Christian communal role in rituals after death: the ritual actions themselves and the willing attitudes and solidarity among the Christians. Dionysius describes the rites that Christians performed for one another, such as the

[60] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History,* 7.22: νῦν μέν γε θρῆνοι πάντα, καὶ πενθοῦσιν πάντες, καὶ πενθοῦσιν πάντες, ἐχόμενοι, ἐπισκοποῦντες ἀφυλάκτως τοὺς νοσοῦντας, λιπαρῶς ὑπηρετούμενοι, θεραπεύοντες ἐν Χριστῷ, συναπηλλάττοντο ἐκείνοις ἀσμενέστατα, τοῦ παρ᾽ ἑτέρων ἀναπιμπλάμενοι πάθους καὶ τὴν νόσον ἐφ᾽ ἑαυτοὺς ἕλκοντες ἀπὸ τῶν πλησίον καὶ ἑκόντες ἀναμασσόμενοι τὰς ἀλγηδόνας. καὶ πολλοὶ νοσοκομήσαντες καὶ ῥώσαντες ἑτέρους, ἐτελεύτησαν αὐτοί, τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον εἰς ἑαυτοὺς μεταστησάμενοι… καὶ τὰ σώματα9 δὲ τῶν ἁγίων ὑπτίαις χερσὶ καὶ κόλποις ὑπολαμβάνοντες καθαιροῦντές τε ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ στόματα συγκλείοντες ὠμοφοροῦντές τε καὶ διατιθέντες, προσκολλώμενοι, συμπλεκόμενοι, λουτροῖς τε καὶ περιστολαῖς κατακοσμοῦντες, μετὰ μικρὸν ἐτύγχανον τῶν ἴσων, ἀεὶ τῶν ὑπολειπομένων ἐφεπομένων τοῖς πρὸ αὐτῶν.

closing of the mouth and eyes, along with the washing of the body.[61] Moreover, Dionysius emphasizes the remarkable solidarity among Christians, who willingly embraced suffering and death for the sake of their community. In their selfless devotion to one another, Christians exemplified the essence of Christian fellowship and collective action during times of crisis. Their commitment to caring for the sick and honoring the deceased not only provided comfort and dignity but also fostered a profound sense of unity within the Christian community. Eusebius' account emphasizes the unwavering solidarity among these early Christians, highlighting their remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

Eusebius' narrative sheds light on the unity of the Christian community during funerary rites; additional texts present a nuanced view of emotional expressions around death. These depictions often resemble the typical emotional aspects of pagan rituals of mourning, such as the *conclamatio*, yet are vehemently discouraged by Christian authors as unfitting. Writing in the mid-late fourth century AD, the most extensive criticism comes from John Chrysostom, in which he repeatedly urges restraint in funeral lamentation and commemoration of the dead in his homilies, with his arguments following similar lines each time. Two examples come from his extensive collection of sermons, although I have already cited some relevant passages earlier. In one of his sermons, he says:

> But at this point, I must sigh deeply when I see to what heights Christ has raised us and how far we have lowered ourselves. For when I see the wailing (κοπετή) in public, the lamentation (ὀλολυγμὸς) over those who have passed away, the moaning, and other unseemly practices, I am ashamed before the pagans, Jews, and heretics who witness it, and indeed before all those who laugh at us because of it.[62]

[61] Volp, 2002 173, 176 notes that in times of persecution, Christians probably did not want to draw attention to themselves, which might explain the scarcity of sources that mention the laying out of the corpse.
[62] John Chyrsostom, *Homily* 4 on Matthew 4:36 (translation from Volp [2002] 180).

The components that Chrysostom is lamenting here align very closely with those that were the norm in pagan funerary rituals. Chrysostom's critique underscores his concern for maintaining decorum and dignity in Christian funerary practices, aligning with broader theological and cultural shifts within the early Christian community.[63] His words reveal not only a desire for proper conduct among Christians but also an awareness of the impression their actions make on outsiders, reflecting a growing emphasis on community identity and attempts to control public perception.

When Chrysostom admonishes parents in another excerpt that they should bear the death of a child without lamentation, it represents a significant escalation of the usual call for moderate mourning, especially if the child was the prospective heir. Chrysostom urges that "…you should not do this [i.e., lament] even at the birth of a child, for that birth [i.e., death] is better than the other. For they go ahead to another dwelling place."[64] While there are echoes of Seneca's advice to Marullus regarding moderation in mourning here, Chrysostom goes further, suggesting that parents should refrain from lamenting altogether. He contends that death is the ultimate blessing, surpassing even birth. This perspective, while possibly extreme, reflects a shift in ideology from pagan traditions, which prescribed appropriate emotional expressions in mourning, to Christianity, which encourages its adherents to perceive death as a welcome transition.

II. What is Done: Rituals

It is through these perspectives of joy and peace upon death and the involvement of the community that Christian funeral rituals should be examined. Christian funeral rituals were

[63] Volp (2002) 180.
[64] John Chrysostom, *Homily* 21 (translation from Volp [2002]: 181).

rather similar to those of their pagan counterparts, apart from the administration of the eucharist and a deathbed baptism.[65] These were performed before death.[66] As with their pagan counterparts, the first act among Christian funeral rites was to close the eyes and the mouth of the deceased.[67] The body was then laid out, washed, and anointed.[68] The *conclamatio* did not transfer over from pagan funerals, however, and was replaced instead by the singing of psalms.[69] Christian mourning rituals did not constitute the overtly emotional characteristics that pagan rituals did, such as the gendered behaviors of tearing at one's cheeks and crying out. This singing of psalms and hymns during funerals conveyed a sense of joy, aligning with the prevailing Christian perspective on death as a source of hope and making further celebration on the *dies natalis*.[70] This can be demonstrated in the book of Saint James, wherein he states, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise."[71] Saint James encourages believers to find solace in prayer and praise even amidst suffering. Therefore, it seems that the introduction of the singing of psalms to the Christian funeral rituals is meant not only distinguish the Christians from the pagans, but also to reflect of a new concept of death.

Another crucial ritual of care before death came in the form of the eucharist, or *viaticum*, and was considered to a be a method of spiritual aid for the dying when death was imminent.[72]

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[65] Volp (2002) 160-163. Death-bed baptisms were often criticized by Christian writers, such as Tertullian who fought against the tendency to postpone repentance and baptism for as long as possible because fear of the high demand for a 'sinless' Christian life after death.
[66] Rush (1941) 91. While older works on ancient funerary ritual, such as Rush (1941), take a rather firm stance on the hostility felt by Christian authors toward pagan rituals, Volp (2002) 240-242 urges for a more cautious and careful reading of the dynamics between the two religions. Volp, 241-242 highlights the sepulchral art on the tomb of the prefect Petronius Probus (c. 330-390), which demonstrates the complicated balance between inherited non-Christian forms and the new Christian self-awareness.
[67] Rush (1941) 105; Davies (1999) 104; Volp (2002) 173.
[68] Rush (1941) see 109-112 for the nuances of laying out the body, 112-117 for the varying ways in which bodies were washed, 117-125 for details on anointing the body.
[69] Rush (1941) 109 and Volp (2002) 181-182 suggest that the replacement of the *conclamatio* with the singing of psalms was a measure encouraged by Christians to demonstrate a constraint on one's emotions.
[70] Rush (1941) 231-232; Volp (2002) 203-204.
[71] James 5:13, Κακῶς τις ἐν ὑμῖν; προσευχέσθω. εὐθυμεῖ τις; ψαλλέτω.
[72] Rush (1941) 93-94.

The eucharist was meant to be in the mouth of the dying individual at the moment of their death.[73] The eucharist was thought to be the body and blood of Christ and, therefore, was a sort of parting nourishment for the dying individual and a protection on the deceased's journey in the afterlife. Because of the role of the eucharist in one's *migratio ad Dominum*,[74] it was of utmost importance that the eucharist be administered immediately before death. A fourth-century inscription of Julia Florentina, an eighteen-month-old child, demonstrates the significance of receiving this rite when death was near: "… Having remained faithful until the eighth hour of the night, she breathed her last, surviving for four hours thereafter, as if repeating her customary habits (*consueta*), and then passed away…."[75] This inscription exhibits not only the importance of the administration of the eucharist right before death, but also the possibility that it might need to be administered more than once. Since the eucharist was meant to serve as spiritual nourishment and protection for the journey into the afterlife, its administration just before death was crucial in ensuring the individual's safe passage and spiritual well-being, as it was for Julia Florentina, as well as Melania and her uncle.

Although it happens before death, the action of administering the eucharist has parallels in the pagan ritual of placing a coin in the mouth of a deceased person after death to pay for their fare in the underworld. Both the administration of the eucharist for Christians and the coin for the pagans were thought of as a sort of spiritual aid for the dying or deceased. The time of the placement of this spiritual aid also differed: the Christians were known to administer the eucharist more than once, if necessary, since it needed to be in the dying individual's mouth at the time of his or her death, whereas the pagans placed the coin in the mouth of the deceased

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[73] Rush (1941) 93.
[74] Rush (1941) 95.
[75] *CIL* X, 7122: fidelis facta hora noctis/octava ultimum spiritum agens supervixit/horis quattuor ita ut consueta repeteret, ac/defuncta…; Rush (1941), 96 argues that *consueta* here refers to the eucharist.

after death. Significance also lies in the purported functions of both the coin and the eucharist. The coin was viewed as a sort of payment for Charon, which would secure a safe passage into the underworld. In contrast, the eucharist did not have any sort of supposed monetary value or transactional purpose. Instead, the eucharist was understood as a sacred ritual imbued with spiritual significance, symbolizing the believer's communion with Christ.

In contrast to the pagan tradition of cremation, the Christians (like the Jews) were known primarily to practice inhumation, as a consequence of their belief in of the importance of the physical body for resurrection. From the late 2nd century to early 5th century AD, Christians buried their dead in catacombs.[76] While the practice of inhumation set them apart from their pagan counterparts, Christians followed in the pagan tradition of burying their dead outside of the city walls.[77] Near the end of the 4th century AD, once Christianity had been more widely accepted by Roman officials, Christian burials moved from the catacombs and soon began to take place above ground.[78] Burials were then typically associated with churches or mortuary chapels within cities, which demonstrated the newly accepted and emerging dominance of Christianity and its burial practices.

While the pagans had ritual practices that were meant to transition a deceased person into the worshipped *di manes*, the Christians celebrated the *dies natalis* of the deceased in their community. In Christian doctrine, especially that of the Old Testament, an individual was born into the world in sin.[79] With their understanding that joy should come with death, the *dies natalis*

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[76] Davies (1999) 192-193 discusses the workforce of diggers and decorators that would have been necessary for these catacomb burials. He argues that construction on this scale would certainly have been known to Roman authorities and was likely not done to hide bodies or funerals.
[77] Davies (1999) 193.
[78] Davies (1999) 193-194.
[79] Rush (1941) 72. See *Job* 14:4 and *Jeremiah* 20:14.

served as a way for Christians to commemorate the passing of their loved ones not as an end, but as a transition into eternal life with their god. This is not totally unlike the pagan belief of the *di manes*: there was a shift in an individual's status from their time of death. For the pagans, deceased individuals became something different, the *di manes*, whereas the Christians envisioned the spirits of their dead as also entering a new phase. The substantial difference is that the pagans worshiped the *di manes* as gods in their own right, whereas Christians believed in the presence of the deceased within the company of their God, while at a subordinate status, i.e., not worshiped as gods themselves. Tertullian, writing in the second century AD, discusses how Christians should sacrifice on the day of someone's death: "We give sacrifice for the dead on the anniversary (of their death), instead of on their birthday."[80] Here, Tertullian mentions that it is customary practice for the dead to be commemorated on their day of death, as opposed to the day that they were born. While both traditions recognized the importance of commemorating the deceased, the Christian perspective emphasized the hope of eternal life and reunion with God, transcending the earthly realm. The *dies natalis* served as a joyful occasion to honor the departed as they entered into this eternal bliss, marked by prayers, remembrance, and communal celebration. In contrast, the pagan worship of the *di manes* focused more on maintaining ancestral ties and seeking their continued favor and protection in worldly matters. Offerings and rituals were performed to appease these ancestral spirits and ensure their benevolence towards the living. While the anniversary of a person's death was significant in both traditions, the underlying beliefs about the afterlife and the nature of existence beyond death differed fundamentally. For Christians, the *dies natalis* symbolized the culmination of their faith in the promise of resurrection and eternal life through Christ, while for pagans, the worship of the *di*

[80] Tertullian, *De Corona Militis* 3: Oblationes pro defunctis, pro nataliciis, annua die facimus.

manes reflected a belief in the ongoing influence and presence of deceased ancestors in the earthly realm. Thus, while there may be some similarities in the commemoration of the deceased between the two traditions, the theological and spiritual contexts in which these practices were situated were distinct and reflective of their respective religious beliefs and worldviews.

Pagan Ideals vs. Christian Ideals.

This section highlights a profound shift in societal values and cultural norms within Christianity, particularly concerning familial relationships and the attitude towards death. The contrast between traditional pagan perspectives and those of the Christian community marked a redefinition of familial bonds and mourning rituals. In the traditional pagan worldview, the family served as the cornerstone of society, emphasizing loyalty and cohesion within the familial unit. Within Christianity, however, new ideas emerged that challenge the primacy of familial ties in favor of a broader allegiance to the Christian community. Christians prioritized their communal bonds over traditional family structures, forging fictive kinship ties within their faith community.

Christian funeral rituals reflected this communal ethos, diverging from pagan practices that centered on familial grief and lamentation. While pagans mourned death with expressions of sorrow and despair, Christians were urged to embrace death as a joyous transition to eternal life. Central to Christian doctrine was the belief in resurrection and the promise of an afterlife, fostering a sense of hope and celebration even in the face of death. The role of the Christian community in funeral rituals was significant, with members actively participating in the preparation and commemoration of the deceased. Unlike the *conclamatio* of pagan funerals,

which emphasized lamentation, Christians replaced mourning with the singing of psalms and hymns, symbolizing their faith in the promise of eternal rest and peace. Moreover, Christian funeral inscriptions reflected a shift in attitudes towards death, depicting the deceased as being at peace or asleep, rather than snatched away or ripped from life, as in pagan beliefs. This transformation in funerary practices mirrored broader theological shifts within the Christian community, highlighting a departure from fear and apprehension of death to a sense of tranquility and acceptance.

The writings of early Christian figures such as Cyprian, Tertullian, Eusebius, and John Chrysostom further underscored this shift in mourning ideals, urging believers to find solace and joy in death as a passage to eternal life. John Chrysostom's admonitions against excessive mourning and lamentation represented a departure from pagan traditions, emphasizing instead the importance of decorum and dignity in Christian funeral practices. This departure from pagan traditions, while not explicitly stated, seems to be something of a driving force in the strengthening of the Christian community. Eusebius' account shows the remarkable transition from individualistic pagan practices to the communal and compassionate approach of the Christian community. Their willingness to care for the sick, perform funeral rites, and even risk their own lives exemplifies the depth of their faith and commitment to serving others. In embracing the suffering of their fellow believers and honoring the departed with dignity and reverence, these Christians embodied the transformative power of love and solidarity. Through their actions, they not only upheld the sanctity of life and death but also forged a profound sense of unity and continuity within the Christian community. His account is also significant for another reason: it demonstrates the individualistic priorities of the pagans during times of panic, priorities that were frowned upon by the Christian community. In Eusebius' account, while

Dionysius is praising the conduct of his fellow Christians in Alexandria, he juxtaposes their actions with those of the 'heathens':

> The others [pagans], on the contrary, acted in exactly the opposite manner: when people began to fall ill, they shunned them and fled their dearest ones, casting them out into the streets half-dead and throwing out unburied corpses, diverting themselves from the sharing and spreading of death.[81]

This account has a purpose, of course; it is meant to paint the Christians in a favorable light by demonstrating their superior attention to everyone in the community, whereas the pagans threw out even their own family members. Therefore, the account should be read with caution, but it can still elucidate the values of compassion, solidarity, and communal responsibility that were central to the Christian ethos circa AD 250. While the pagan response to illness and death was characterized by fear, self-preservation, and abandonment, the Christian response was marked by selflessness, sacrificial love, and a steadfast commitment to caring for the vulnerable and marginalized. In highlighting these contrasting responses, Eusebius underscores the ethical and moral superiority of the Christian community. Moreover, by emphasizing the communal nature of Christian practice, Eusebius emphasizes the strength and resilience of the Christian community, which, united by a shared faith and sense of purpose, was able to confront and overcome the challenges posed by disease and death. Thus, while Eusebius' account may be biased in favor of Christianity, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into the values and virtues that underpinned the early Christian movement, shedding light on the profound difference of Christian teachings in the moral and ethical landscape of the ancient world.

[81] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastic History* 7.22: τὰ δέ γε ἔθνη πᾶν τοὐναντίον·10 καὶ νοσεῖν ἀρχομένους ἀπωθοῦντο καὶ ἀπέφευγον τοὺς φιλτάτους κἀν ταῖς ὁδοῖς ἐρρίπτουν ἡμιθνῆτας καὶ νεκροὺς ἀτάφους ἀπεσκυβαλίζοντο, τὴν τοῦ θανάτου διάδοσιν καὶ κοινωνίαν ἐκτρεπόμενοι….

Christian Martyrs: A Changed Ideology[82]

Christian Martyrs 1:

The concept of martyrdom among Christians also produced a profound shift in familial dynamics, challenging traditional bonds and loyalties and replacing them with a new spiritual allegiance. Converts and those facing martyrdom would renounce their natal families in favor of their faith and community. Martyrs were required to sever all ties with their families, including spouses and children, as they sought eternal life with God, their heavenly father. Martyrdom symbolized a rebirth for the martyrs, ushering them into eternal life after their demise and leading them to join a new spiritual family.[83]

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is an excellent case study in the changing ideals around family, community, and their involvement in death. In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, we witness the most prominent example of familial grief among pagans, encompassing both anticipated and unforeseen circumstances. Perpetua, born into an elite family in Carthage, offers a distinctive perspective on martyrdom, since much of her *Passion* is narrated from her (firsthand) point of view. Written around AD 203, her account is remarkable because, at the time of her arrest and martyrdom, she was a newly married young woman of only twenty-two years with a nursing infant.[84] Perpetua recounted her final days in prison and her trial, as well as the visions she saw that confirmed that she and her companions were meant to join God in heaven. Some of the most striking sections of Perpetua's account are those in which she communicates

[82] When examining literary works such as the Martyr Acts, it is crucial to approach them with caution, considering their often dubious historical accuracy. Despite this limitation, they remain valuable in historical inquiry, primarily for their vivid depiction of the transformative ideology accompanying Christianity.
[83] Salisbury, 1997: 75.
[84] Musurillo, 1972: 107: ...et fillium infantem ad ubera.

with her father, who visited her in prison and attended her trial, hoping to change his daughter's mind about dying for her beliefs.

The scenes involving her father highlight the norms of tradition Roman parental grief. Despite Perpetua still being alive, his behavior already mirrors that of a bereaved parent. Perpetua's father arrives with the intention of dissuading her by appealing to familial conventions, deeply ingrained in her since childhood:

> 'Daughter,' he said, 'have pity on my grey head, have pity on me, your father, if I deserve to be called your father... if I have raised you to reach the prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you.'[85]

Initially, he appeals to her by invoking his old age and his successful efforts in raising her, emphasizing the traditional expectations placed upon Roman daughters to bear children and bring honor to their family. This plea seamlessly transitions into the second part, where he beseeches her to consider not only her newborn son but also the broader impact on her natal family. Recognizing that her perceived dishonorable and proud actions could tarnish the family's reputation, he emphasizes the potential consequences. He is a member of an elite provincial family; it becomes evident how this concern weighs heavily on his mind. It is crucial, however, to note that Perpetua has already forsaken her natal family in favor of her Christian community, aligning with the common practice among Christian converts.

The movement from maternal anguish to spiritual resolve is vividly portrayed in Perpetua's account. In the early part of her *Passion*, Perpetua describes the pain in her breasts as

[85] Musurillo, 1972: 112: Miserere, filia, canis meis; miserere patri, si dignus sum a te pater vocari; si his te manibus ad hunc florem aetatis provexi, si te preaposui omnibus fratribus tui: ne me dederis in dedcus hominum. Aspice fratres tuos, aspice matrem tuam et materteram, aspic filium tuum qui post te vivere non poterit.

she is consumed with thoughts of her child; and she later describes how, after she and her companions had been sentenced to die in the arena, she sent for her son to be with her in the prison although her father refused.[86] Despite this refusal and the separation from her baby, Perpetua articulates a decisive break from her natal family in the face of her impending martyrdom: “But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation; and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts.”[87] Perpetua's shift away from maternal feelings symbolizes a decisive departure from the expectations of her natal family and the norms dictated by pagan society. This depiction of the loss of her maternal desire to nurse her son demonstrates a clear break from her natal family, fully aligning with the expectations of the Christian community of her complete commitment.

During Perpetua's trial before the proconsul Hilarianus, her father, assisted by the proconsul, makes successive attempts to free her from her Christian affliliation by appealing to pagan familial conventions. Her father appeared “...with [Perpetua’s] son, dragged me from the step and said: ‘Perform the sacrifice, have pity on your baby!’”[88] In response to this, Hilarianus tells her that she should pity her father’s grey head and to think of her baby. Despite these appeals to her roles as a Roman woman, daughter, and mother, Perpetua resolutely maintains her Christian identity during questioning. In a further attempt to sway her, her father is ordered beaten down with a rod. This punishment, likely driven by his disruptive behavior and inappropriate emotional display, is an unfitting consequence for a man of his status.

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[86] Musurillo, 1997: 115.
[87] Musurillo, 1997: 114: Et quomodo Deus voluit, neque ille amplius mammas desideravit neque mihi feruorem fecerunt ne sollicitudine infantis et dolore mammarum macerarer.
[88] Musurillo (1997) 112: Et apparuit pater ilico cum filio meo et extraxit me de gradu dicens: Supplica. Miserere infanti.

Although Perpetua remains steadfast in her resolve for martyrdom, her father persists in displaying pagan mourning norms, disregarding the inappropriateness of such emotional demonstrations. As the day of Perpetua's martyrdom approached, her father, although unsuccessful in his previous pleas, visited her once more. While Perpetua does not assert that he attempted to persuade her with words, he wholeheartedly adhered to the customary conventions of grief: "He started tearing the hairs from his beard and threw them to the ground; he then threw himself on the ground and began to curse his old age and to say such words that would move all creation."[89] Perpetua's father is grieving for his daughter in a manner typically associated with women: he is tearing his hair, vocalizing his lamentations, and openly displaying his sorrow in a public setting. Such conduct would have been deemed inappropriate, particularly for a man of his elite status. This behavior is similar to his actions at her trial, where he was punished for his open emotional display in front of an upper-level magistrate. Perpetua's father's response is rooted not only in her decision to embrace a religion he considers false but also in her choice to renounce her natal family, which is the fundamental unit of the society to which he belongs.

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* stands as a noteworthy case study in Roman grief within a story of Christian martyrs, serving as an exemplar of the perspectives on death and mourning one's family and highlighting the contrast between pagan and Christian perspectives. Roman mourning rituals are both exemplified and inverted: a prevalent Roman motif depicted in the narrative involves the grief experienced and expressed by parents upon the death of their adult children, symbolizing not only the loss of security in old age but also of the prospect of

[89] Musurillo (1997) 116: ...coepit barbam suam evellere et in terram mittere, et prosternere se in faciem, et inproperare annis suis, et dicere tanta verba quae moverent universam creaturam.

posthumous commemoration. Perpetua's father, however, mourns her while she is still alive, contending that she has already tarnished the family's reputation.

The *Acta* of Bishop Fructuosus and his companions during the second persecution of Valerian in January of AD 259,[90] where the grief for a martyr is expressed by his Christian counterparts, demonstrates that the Christian community viewed themselves and clergymen as a type of family. Fructuosus was regarded as a sympathetic character and "...much beloved of pagans and Christians alike," for he was deemed to embody all "...that a bishop should be."[91] While the author(s) of this Act initially portrayed the joy of Fructuosus' 'brothers' in anticipation of his noble death, later passages delve into the explicit mourning that followed. After his death by burning, with reported apparitions of the bishop and his deacons, the author conveys the deep sorrow experienced by the Christian community: "But the Christians were sad, as those who are abandoned without a shepherd and burdened with sorrow, and this was not because they felt sorrow for Fructuosus, but rather because they missed him and recalled the memory of the faith and the contest of each of the martyrs."[92] The Christian companions' grief following Fructuosus's death is distinct from the pagan expressions of mourning. Unlike the mournful anticipation described by Perpetua's father, the Christians are not grieving his death, given the honorable manner in which he died. Instead, their sorrow stems from the absence of Fructuosus and the other companions as individuals within their community, valued for their piety and exemplary

[90] Musurillo (1997) xxxii.
[91] Musurillo, (1997) 179: …populus Fructuosum episcopum dolere coepit quia talem amorem habebat non tantum a fratribus sed etiam ab ethnicis. Talis enim erat qualem Spiritus sanctus per beatum Paulum apostolum… episcopum debere esse declaravit.
[92] Musurillo (1997) 182: Tunc velut derelicti sine pastore fratres tristes sollicitudinem sustinebant, non quod dolerent Fructuosum sed potius desiderarent, uniuscuiusque fidei et agonis memores.

character. This stands in contrast to Perpetua's father, who emphasizes the potential impact of her martyrdom on the family's reputation and livelihood.

Whereas in the *Passion* of Perpetua, pagan ideals of familial mourning are prominently featured, this transformation in who constitutes a family is also vividly exemplified in the martyrdom of the slave woman Blandina, circa AD 177, a story recounted by Eusebius. He underscores the significance of Blandina's resolve, despite enduring various forms of torture in the arena, emphasizing her pivotal role in nurturing familial bonds with fellow martyrs. An illustrative episode within his account features Blandina's meaningful connection with a young fifteen-year-old boy named Ponticus:

> For Ponticus, encouraged by the sister, so that the crowd saw that that woman was urging on and supporting him, nobly having submitted to every punishment, he yielded up his spirit. Blessed Blandina, last of all, just as a noble mother who encouraged her children and sent them forth to the king triumphantly, she herself, enduring all the trials of her children, having retraced her steps towards them, delighting and rejoicing at her death as if having been summoned to a bridal feast, rather than having been thrown to the beasts.[93]

The shift in describing Blandina initially as a 'sister' and later as a 'mother' reflects a transformation in her role within her Christian family or community, ultimately extending to the afterlife. This shift is attributed to the profound impact of her courageous spirit on Ponticus' own journey towards martyrdom. Initially positioned as a 'sister,' a common appellation within Christian gatherings,[94] Blandina's noble conduct in the arena, inspiring the young Ponticus towards martyrdom, elevates her to the revered role of a mother for the Christian community. Demonstrating maternal traits, Blandina provides a powerful exemplar for approaching one's

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[93] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*: 5.54-55: ὁ μὲν γὰρ Ποντικὸς ὑπὸ τῆς ἀδελφῆς παρωρμημένος, ὡς καὶ τὰ ἔθνη βλέπειν ὅτι ἐκείνη ἦν προτρεπομένη καὶ στηρίζουσα αὐτόν, πᾶσαν κόλασιν γενναίως ὑπομείνας ἀπέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα· ἡ δὲ μακαρία Βλανδῖνα πάντων ἐσχάτη, καθάπερ μήτηρ εὐγενὴς παρορμήσασα τὰ τέκνα καὶ νικηφόρους προπέμψασα πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα, ἀναμετρουμένη καὶ αὐτὴ πάντα τὰ τῶν παίδων ἀγωνίσματα ἔσπευδεν πρὸς αὐτούς, χαίρουσα καὶ ἀγαλλιωμένη ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξόδῳ, ὡς εἰς νυμφικὸν δεῖπνον κεκλημένη, ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς θηρία βεβλημένη.
[94] Salisbury (2004) 74.

death nobly with the prospect of eternal life in mind. This narrative suggests that while a martyr may sever ties with her natal family, there persists a profound sense of familial connection and support within the Christian community.

The above examples have followed the movement of individuals from pagan families to their new familial connections with members of the Christian community. There is, however, another category of familial/community responses in martyr literature, as the martyrdom of Marius in AD 259 provides. This account shares similarities with the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* in that the story includes a natal relative, Marius' mother. The depiction of Marius' mother after her son's execution once again highlights the distinct emotional reactions of pagan and Christian family members to their loved one's martyrdom:

> When this was all over, Marius' mother, now sure of her son once his passion was finished, rejoiced... congratulated not only Marius but also herself that she had borne such a son. In the body of her son she embraced the glory of her own womb; again and again with religious devotion she pressed her lips to the wounds of his neck....[95]

This excerpt showcases a distinct contrast in the expressions of emotions by Christian and pagan parents during the martyrdom of their children. While Perpetua's father is portrayed as openly mourning his daughter and lamenting the perceived damage to the traditional family and its reputation, which she was rejecting through her choice of a death he deemed disgraceful, Marius' mother is depicted not only celebrating her son's death but also worshiping the still-bloodied wounds on his neck and congratulating herself alongside him. To her, her son's death is a victory not only for him but also for her body; while her body may not be the object of worship that her son's has become, she played a role in his creation. This marks a significant departure from the traditionally shameful public display of grief seen in the account of Perpetua's father. Marian's

[95] Musurillo (1997) 212: His peractis... Mariani mater exultans et passione perfecta iam secura de filio, non illi tantum coeperat sed et sibi, quae tale pignus ediderat, gratulari. Complectebatur in filii corpore suorum viscerum gloriam, et in ipsa cervivis vulnera frequens osculum pietas religiosa figebat.

mother is portrayed as aware of not only her son's role in strengthening the Christian community, but her own as well.

In Christians we can see a profound reevaluation of familial dynamics, because of the changes that come from different attitudes within the faith towards fundamental matters and beliefs about the afterlife, and martyr stories make this transition vivid and compelling. Martyrs, facing persecution and death, renounced their natal families in favor of their faith community, severing ties with spouses and children in pursuit of eternal life with God. In parallel, female martyrs often assumed maternal roles within the Christian community, symbolizing a shift in familial identity. The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* serves as a compelling case study in this transformation. Perpetua's firsthand account offers insight into the conflict between familial expectations and religious devotion. Despite her elite Roman upbringing and her recent marriage and motherhood, Perpetua's resolve to embrace martyrdom supersedes her familial obligations. Her father's emotional appeals reflect pagan mourning norms, contrasting with Perpetua's steadfast commitment to her Christian faith. Similarly, the martyrdom of Bishop Fructuosus demonstrates the Christian community's perception of itself as a spiritual family. Following Fructuosus's death, his Christian companions mourn not his passing, but the loss of his presence within their community. This contrasts with pagan expressions of grief and underscores the significance of communal bonds within the Christian context. The account of Blandina further illustrates the transformation of familial roles within the Christian community. Initially depicted as a sister to her fellow martyrs, Blandina's courageous example elevates her to a maternal figure, symbolizing the nurturing and supportive environment fostered within the Christian community. The martyrdom of Marius provides another perspective on familial responses to martyrdom. Marius's mother rejoices in her son's martyrdom, viewing it as a triumph for both

him and herself. Her worship of his wounds symbolizes a departure from traditional pagan mourning practices, emphasizing the spiritual significance of his sacrifice. These examples highlight the complex interplay between familial expectations, religious devotion, and communal identity within the context of martyrdom. They illustrate the profound impact of martyrdom on familial dynamics and the evolving understanding of familial and communal bonds within the Christian tradition.

Martyrs 2: What is Actually Done and Who Does It.

The rise of the martyr cult marked a shift in Christian attitudes towards dead bodies. As Marius' mother's actions made clear, martyrs' bodies, no longer considered agents of pollution as they had been in the pagan tradition, now were objects of reverence.[96] A earlier example comes from the account of the mass martyrdom in Lyon in AD 170, in which the Christian crowd mourned that they could not perform the funeral rituals for the martyrs. The bodies of the martyrs were "...made an example of in every way and exposed for six days,"[97] and "…the situation among us was fraught with great mourning because we were unable to bury the bodies in the ground…."[98] This demonstrates not only the communal solidarity and strength among early Christians and their commitment to upholding their faith even in the face of persecution, but also the Christian perspective on dead bodies, which is vastly different from that of the pagans. This description from Eusebius demonstrates a Christian community that awaited the opportunity to perform funeral rites collectively. A martyr's body was believed to possess divine

[96] Salisbury (2004) 31.
[97] Rebillard (2017) 169; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History,* 5.1.62: τὰ οὖν σώματα τῶν μαρτύρων παντοίως παραδειγματισθέντα καὶ αἰθριασθέντα ἐπὶ ἡμέρας ἕξ...
[98] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.61: τὰ δὲ καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς ἐν μεγάλῳ καθειστήκει πένθει διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι τὰ σώματα κρύψαι τῇ γῇ…

power, and there are numerous accounts of individuals who described being overcome with passion upon seeing the bones of martyrs. Another such account involves a Carthaginian woman named Megetia, who, after traveling to view the bones of Saint Stephen, experienced overwhelming "longings of her heart... and her whole body."[99] Overpowered by this passion upon seeing the bones of the martyr, she threw herself against the protective iron grill. Breaking through, she "pushed her head inside and laid it on the holy relics resting there, drenching them with her tears."[100] In this account, there is no overwhelming sense of disgust or fear of the dead body, but instead a fevered passion to get closer to it. This profound connection with martyrs' remains is not isolated; rather, there are numerous accounts in the martyr acts that describe the bodies of newly martyred Christians being collected or worshipped at the execution site.

Martyrs 3: Perceptions of Good versus Bad Death

The martyrdoms of Blandina and Ponticus, Perpetua and Felicity, Marian, and Fructuosus exemplify a shared characteristic between Christians and pagans—the aspiration to experience a virtuous and noble death. For Christians, especially martyrs, achieving a good death, perfect salvation, and eternal life involved welcoming and embracing suffering and courage in the face of death.[101] Willingly and courageously enduring bodily suffering and facing death in the arena served to demonstrate an individual's purity and strengthen his or her claims to the faith.[102] Martyrs who willingly embraced bodily suffering, enduring conditions such as being bound in chains, starved, or imprisoned in filthy conditions, and then faced their deaths in the arena, were

[99] Salisbury (2004) 31; *Book of Miracles of St Stephen* 2.2.6.
[100] Salisbury (2004) 31; *Book of Miracles of St Stephen* 2.2.6.
[101] Cobb (2008) 9; Moss (2012) 27.
[102] Moss (2012) 47.

deemed courageous by their fellow Christians.[103] Christian martyrs pursued death, viewing the act of dying for God, particularly in agonizing circumstances such as facing wild beasts in the arena, as the happiest and most desirable culmination of life. Although pagans also believed in dying nobly, the manner in which Christian martyrs faced death—whether in the arena, through beheading, or at the stake, akin to a common criminal—led them to perceive Christian martyrdom as a truly dishonorable way to die, as Perpetua's father did. This perspective stemmed from the belief that Christians were forsaking their upbringing and traditional gods by willingly embracing execution in the arena for a God rejected by pagans.

While Perpetua's narrative vividly portrays conventional pagan expressions of grief through the lens of the natal family, this *Passion* also provides insight into Christian ideals of a 'good' death through the account of Felicitas. Little biographical or descriptive information is available about Felicitas, except that she was a slave and heavily pregnant. Given the Roman law that exempted pregnant women from execution, Felicitas and her companions were anxious about a potential postponement of her execution, which could lead to her being put to death alongside common criminals: "Her comrades in martyrdom were also saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief."[104] In this instance, the companions mourn the unfortunate circumstance of someone deemed worthy of divine salvation by God who might well meet an ignoble end. Just as pagans sought a good death and dreaded a 'bad' or dishonorable demise, so too does Felicitas. In the Christian context, Felicitas's death would be considered dishonorable if

[103] Cobb (2008) 9.
[104] Musurillo (1997) 122: ... et conmartyres graviter constristabantur ne tam bonam sociam quasi comitem solam in via eiusdem spei relinquerent. Coniuncto itaque unito gemitu ad Dominum orationem funderunt ante tertium diem muneris. Statim post orationem dolores invaserunt.

she were put to death in the company of common criminals, unable to join her companions on the day, her *dies natales*, they deemed pivotal for their salvation.

Unlike Perpetua's father, who expresses pagan revulsion at the thought of a bad death, Marius' mother epitomizes Christian ideals surrounding martyrdom as an honorable way to die, making her celebratory response to her son's death not out of the ordinary. Martyrs' bodies were often revered, and Marius' mother exemplifies this ideal through the worship of her son's wounds. Marius' mother's celebratory response to her son's martyrdom reflects an extraordinary commitment to Christian ideals surrounding martyrdom as an honorable way to die for one's Christian family member. Similarly, in the Act of Fructuosus, despite the sadness expressed by those around him, there is no doubt regarding the just cause of his death. Unlike pagan expressions of mourning, the Christian companions' grief stems not from questioning the honor of Fructuosus's death, but from the loss of valued members of their community known for their piety and exemplary character. This contrasts with Perpetua's father, who focuses on the potential impact of her martyrdom on the family's reputation and livelihood.

Conclusion

In examining the diverse accounts of grief and mourning in the contexts of Roman paganism and Christianity, a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between familial expectations, societal norms, and religious convictions emerges. The dichotomy between pagan and Christian responses to death, particularly martyrdom, reflects a profound difference in cultural values. The traditional pagan perspective placed a significant emphasis on the centrality of the family in Roman society, where familial bonds were considered the cornerstone of

everyday life. The expectations of parents and the cultural norms governing expressions of grief reveal a profound connection between familial identity, social reputation, and the concept of a “good” death. Conversely, the rise of Christianity introduced a very different understanding of death, commemoration, and the grieving process. Christian martyrs challenge conventional notions of mourning. Their deaths, viewed as honorable by their Christian counterparts, evoke expressions of grief centered not only on the loss but on the individual's character and spiritual significance. The difference between pagan and Christian mourning practices will eventually result in a broader societal transformation, as many individuals shift allegiance from the traditional family unit to a spiritual community bound by shared religious beliefs. The communal aspects of Christian grief and the celebration of martyrs’ noble deaths mark a departure from the familial and reputation-centric grief observed in the pagan tradition. In conclusion, the exploration of mourning rituals in Roman society provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between familial expectations, religious convictions, and societal norms. The contrasting perspectives of paganism and an increasingly developed Christianity highlight the transformative power of religious beliefs in reshaping not only the understanding of death but also the very fabric of social relationships. As the Christian community sought solace in communal expressions of grief and veneration, it challenged and redefined the traditional Roman understanding of familial continuity and societal honor.

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