

Preface

Fire had been a much needed source since prehistoric times. From a long, lost period when Prometheus stole the art of making fire from the Olympian Zeus, mankind had rubbed and scratched out a variety of ways to kindle a flame. Sticks were kindled together on some occasions while flints were dug from the earth to also produce a spark. Animal fats and oils soaked in wicks would keep the flame alight. Its glow brought enlightenment and warm, tender food to the cave-dwellers. As for immortality, the witch-doctors were the first to realise the money-spiel lay in touting the prospects of an afterlife to the tribal chiefs.

Worldwide though since the beginning of time a hearty meal was often difficult for many to achieve. Meat was rare. So much so that ritualized cannibalism was practiced by different tribes, usually as a last resort due to food shortages or at times of warfare. Over generations a variety of reasons were put forward for its justification, including providing a form of afterlife for the deceased.

Well into civilization food shortages occurred around the globe. During any famines cannibalism was never far away. In some cultures to appease a god, human sacrifices became as common as chips, and woe betide any soul accused of being a sinner. The people-eaters found it was more digestible to stew the elderly, with the taste of human flesh considered similar to pork.

More than 10,000 years ago the hunter-gatherers were always glad to reach the River Jordon where they could wash the dirt from their bodies and clean around the buttocks and genitalia, as well as splash water over their faces as a form of purification. Even prehistoric Blind Freddie had realized that a person could not survive for too long without water. Long gone was the period when mankind lived in caves and hid out in trees. The hunter-gathers found the river was a refreshing place where fish could be caught – and perfect for using the toilet facilities downstream. Apart from everything else, washing between the legs made sexual intercourse feel more pleasant. People naturally believed the fresh water was a blessing from a god.

The ritual of being washed in rivers and streams for religious purposes was practised throughout the millennia by tribes in a ritual manner for their different deities. The waterside chatter often attracted followers wanting to be cleansed, for one reason or another.

Amid a variety of religious beliefs, the god of the Hebrew/Israeli/Jews, dubbed Yahweh, was the first dogma to guarantee an afterlife for all of its followers. The Hebrews believed their god lived on a mountain, a mountain god nonetheless. So inflexible was its doctrine that it was even considered blasphemous to speak the name of this god. Pilgrims desiring an afterlife who adhered to this new doctrine, which was coined around 1,300bce, were not permitted to worship any of the other gods, and they were indoctrinated into abiding by a rigid practice of repeated prayers and rituals.

Pandering though to mankind, like the Greek gods Yahweh was described as having the profile of a male Homo-sapiens, while the scriptures for this religion were mainly adapted from the texts relating to the creator god of ancient Egypt, Amen, along with other deities revered in Greece.

As for when the Hebrew/Israeli/Jews became eligible for immortality that remained a grey area with some believing that such a transformation would take place at the end of this world, while others were praying this heavenly paradise would open for them upon their own

death. Hope sprang eternal.

Meanwhile the Greek priests, by the virtue of donations given to them by pilgrims, had grown so rich and powerful that they controlled all of Greece's financial structure, and in due course they devised a form of democratic government where anyone could have their say in government decisions – that is everyone except women, children, slaves and foreigners.

While the slaves in Greece by far outnumbered its citizens, most of them lived a good, though obedient, lifestyle. Many wore the identical clothes as their masters and, on dying, some were buried in the family tomb.

In 31BCE when Octavian, known as Augustus, defeated Mark Antony he was designated with the task of putting right the problems, including the civil-wars, of the Roman Republic. With Cleopatra also out of the way, he was the undisputed master of the known world. As the new Roman Emperor, Augustus promptly introduced a system of government whereby only those who were of his lineage could succeed to the throne.

All became peaceful. The turmoil of the past civil-wars was interpreted by the priests as being caused by the decline in respect and lack of offerings to the gods. It was thus incumbent for the new Emperor to restore all the traditional religious practices: by Jupiter it was.

Augustus relished in taking on the additional role of a chief priest. While there was a place in Rome to entertain new cults from the expanding Empire – such as Mithraism from the Middle East which could easily be associated with the traditional deities – the religious doctrines were more reliable as the levers of political control rather than the dispenses of holy comfort.

All roads ultimately led to Rome where this budding metropolis steadily grew and developed sufficiently enough to sustain the largest population on the planet. With military service being compulsory, there was no shortage of troops. For the legionnaires who carried flint-striker to spark a fire and marched for miles in light-leather sandals while holding high the banner of an eagle, the spoils of war were considered by them more important than any of the Emperors for whom they fought. 'Veni, vidi, vici,' the soldiers echoed Julius Caesar's battle-cry down through the ages.

At its peak, whilst most of the other known large cities accommodated a population of around 10,000, Rome embraced one million inhabitants; about one-third of whom were slaves – the 'barley-guzzlers,' with fermented barley being about as close as any slave ever got to feeling merrily intoxicated.

No civilization beforehand ever went to such extremes to supply water to its cities; with the builders being engineers who relied on slave-labour to complete the enormous tasks involved. Along their marches, whenever the Roman Legions camped in a village, they usually ensured that the settlement would be equipped with a supply of fresh water as well as a sewage system.

Eventually Rome grew to dominate the Olympic Games while its religious festivals were exceedingly popular, none more so than the Saturnalia. Held from December 17th to coincide with the winter solstice, it began with a three-day cessation of business where not even the lowliest slave was required to raise a sweat. Then following the religious incantations on the first day, nothing but gifts and games were considered for the next two days.

A paid corporation of lictors had been a fundamental part of the Roman Empire for as long as anyone could remember. Primary selected as the bodyguards for magistrates, these

physically fit men were granted immunity from the rigors of military service to instead guard the more elite.

Duty-wise the lictors carried rods decorated with fasces and axes that symbolized the authority to carry out corporal punishment. On outings they were organized in an orderly line in front of the magistrates and paved the way for them. As henchmen they stood beside legal officials whenever an assembly was addressed and likewise attended a Vestal Virgin when her presence was required at a public ceremony. About 30 of these sturdy men served the Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of Rome, and routinely guided sacrificial animals to the altars.

Similar to the Praetorian Guard's role in protecting the imperial family, the legal and priesthood professions usually chose their own personal lictors for attendance. Divided throughout the length and breadth of the Empire, there were many similar organisations.

The role of Tribunes was in itself an integral part of Rome's judicial and military ranks. They were the elected officials, usually no more than 20 in number, empowered to intervene on behalf of all citizens and to veto any unfavourable legislation relating to magistrates and military decisions, but they could only go so far. Their authority was restricted to within a one mile radius of Rome and did not extend outside of city limits.

Centurions, on the other hand, could march as far as they were required. Their symbol of office was easily identified by the traverse horse-hair crust on the top of their helmets and, as professional army officers, they mostly commanded legions of at least 80 men. Any centurion could be elected, appointed by the Senate, or promoted from the ranks for a variety of reasons. They were required to know how to read and write military orders and were responsible for ensuring that the legionnaires appear clean with their armour always polished bright. To maintain discipline in the ranks they used a sturdy vine-stick and gained a reputation for regularly breaking the stick across a soldier's back.

Such was everyday life in the Eternal City. While the farming regions from the Middle East to Egypt sold shiploads of grain to feed everyone, Rome ran smoothly on its production of olive oil; used for cooking, lighting lamps, massages in the new bathhouses, and for anointing pilgrims.

People felt safe living in Rome where many prided themselves in finding suitable ways to earn a living. The baking of bread was a massive business. In consideration for the poor, the State supplied free rations for about 20% of the population, with the freed slaves accounting for the bulk of recipients. Business-wise throughout the distant provinces it was thought uneconomical to retain slaves aged from their 40th year so most were set free and could be employed and granted citizenship, along with any children they may have.

Slavery had been a part of mankind for ages. The Greek philosophers, the bearded Plato, along with Aristotle, viewed it as a natural condition and contended that a civilized society could not function without slaves. After all, who else but slaves should empty and wash the household toilet-pots.

The Greeks though thought the Romans were an eccentric bunch because of their practice to free slaves after a period of faithful service and to grant them paid employment. In all, slavery remained a mixed bag with many of them forbidden to speak to their masters without permission; nevertheless in some households a certain amount of dilly-dallying did take place.

In common practices the Roman funeral services differed little from other cultures; much

being copied from the Greeks, some from Egypt. Whether to bury or cremate was always the family's choice.

Throughout the Roman Empire its cemeteries were traditionally placed outside the sacred boundaries of its cities where regularly the grave sites were visited by relatives and friends carrying offerings of food and wine. A Roman sarcophagus could be an elaborately crafted work of art, decorated with a relief sculpture depicting scenes that were mythological, allegorical, historical, or simply a picture of everyday life.

If anyone died at home, family and friends would gather around the death bed where a mourner would seal the passing of the spirit with one last kiss. During lamentations the deceased was called on by name as the body was placed on the ground, or upon a lounge, washed and anointed. Male bodies were dressed in a toga and females were attired appropriately to their status in life. For the funeral procession, masks were moulded directly from the corpse and worn by actors, mourners, or family members. Coins, Charon's obol, were sometimes placed in, or on the mouth or eyes, in the belief that Charon, the ferryman, would convey the corpse across the waterways that separated the world of the living from that of the dead.

Sacrifices were something that was par for the course. At cemeteries, it was customary to offer a sow to the deity, Ceres, with the sacrificed sow then sliced and shared around with wine, beer, produce and grain.

A few different customs transpired through the passage of time. On the original Roman calendar every New Years Day the dead were honoured at a nine-day festival where many gathered at cemeteries and shared wine and cakes. Elsewhere, tombs for the wealthy were constructed as houses with a decorative room for banqueting festivities.

Formed under Augustus, the cult of the dead was particularly important to soldiers whose position exposed them to a possible premature demise. In the permanent garrisons of the Empire, a portion of a soldier's pay was set aside and pooled for funeral expenses, including a meal and the burial. It was such a solemn procedure that a violation at a burial site was punishable by death, exile, or deportation to the mines.

Before written history, Roman mythology claimed the soul was immortal, and judged at death by a tribunal in the underworld, with those who had achieved good ascending to the lush pastures of the Elysian Fields, while those who done ill were sent to the dark region of Tartarus.

Various priesthoods promised paying pilgrims that immortality was only provided for the initiated, with the soul's progress through the phases of the moon, sun and stars. The uninitiated, the virtueless, were left behind in the underworld, a domain of perpetual torment.