

Transcript

What was the Compitalia?

Dr Jess Hughes:

The Compitalia was a traditional Roman mid-winter festival which was held in either December or January in honour of the Lares Compitales. Now, Lares were ancient Roman protective gods of place. And you could find them everywhere from houses and shops, to bars and farms and street corners. And you can recognise Lares when you see them in ancient paintings because they're often shown in identical pairs wearing short tunics and with flower garlands in their hair. And they're dancing and holding up drinking vessels and they look like they're having fun.

The Lares Compitales were specifically the Lares of the street, of the public street and particularly the street corner. And every local neighbourhood had their own Lares Compitales and it was at the shrine of these Lares that everybody gathered on the day of the Compitalia festival to celebrate the Lares and to make them offerings.

Our evidence for the Compitalia festival is quite scattered and fragmentary but we do know that everyone would have had the day off and often there would have been a sacrifice of a pig and communal feasting on roasted pork after the sacrifice. Perhaps there was also a procession where people led animals round the boundary of the neighbourhood. There was music and lots of wine and each household also brought a honey cake to offer to the Lares Compitales.

Some ancient literary texts tell us that on the night before the Compitalia festival the street altars were decorated with small dolls made of wool and small woollen balls. And it said that each of the woollen dolls represented a free person while each of the balls of wool represented a slave. And some people think that this may at some point have been a traditional way of counting the population.

But perhaps the main function, like the Compitalia festival itself, was simply to bring every member of the local community into the presence of the Lares who were being asked at the Compitalia to protect the people and the place they lived for the whole of the coming year.