

## Transcript

### What was the Parentalia?

#### Dr Emma-Jayne Graham:

The Parentalia was a nine-day Roman festival that took place every year between 13<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> February. During the festival families would gather together to celebrate, to remember and to appease the dead. Initially in their homes but also in the cemetery.

The main purpose of the Parentalia seems to have been to make sure that the restless dead were content in the afterlife. That they stayed in their graves and that they didn't terrorise the living.

The first eight days of the Parentalia saw people in their homes performing rituals of purification. And for this reason we know very little about these private aspects of the festival. But, on the final day, known as the Feralia they would congregate in the cemetery and honour the dead with a very public display of offerings, of prayers and of flowers. Culminating in a great banquet held right there in the cemetery outside the tomb and in the company of their ancestors.

And some tombs were equipped with small ovens. Meaning that fresh bread could be made right there on the spot ready for the occasion. And individual graves also sometimes had tubes inserted into them so that the dead could receive their share of the wine, of the honey and of the bread that their relatives were enjoying.

The poet Ovid writes about the Parentalia in his work on the Roman calendar and he describes it as an inauspicious time for business and for weddings. Because it was a moment when the unlucky shades of the dead were very close to the world of the living.

We also know about the Parentalia for the arrangements that people made for it in their Wills. Sometimes describing the flowers that they wanted to have adorning their tombs. And leaving money for their relatives to pay for it. A sure-fire way of making sure that your family didn't forget to commemorate you every year.

And just as evocative are tombs that are designed with dining couches and offering tables right outside the door. This meant that proper Roman style banquets could take place in the cemetery with people reclining whilst they ate. Enjoying their food with the dead at the head of the table.