

HUI216

Italian Civilization

Andrea Fedi

16.0 Announcements

- <http://www.campo7.com/hui216/>
- All the audio files of the lectures from weeks 7 and 8 have been added to the class Web page
- Required readings of week 9 have been posted
- The review session is scheduled for Wednesday, Mar. 22
- The midterm will be on March 27, for students with last names beginning A-K; on March 29, for students with last names beginning L-Z
 - The questions will be based on the topics introduced from the beginning of the semester up to Mar. 15 (weeks 1-8, topics 1.1-15.1)

16.1 The Roman poet Lucretius (99/94-55/51 BCE)

- The exact dates of his birth and death, reported differently by IV- and V-century Christian scholars, are not known
- He came from a wealthy Northern Italian family
- He went to study Greek philosophy in Naples, a city which had been a Greek colony (its ancient name, *Neapolis*, means "new city" in Greek), and had maintained through the centuries its status of cultural center of southern Italy, with a particular emphasis on the Greek roots of that area's culture

16.1 The life and death of Roman poet Lucretius

- According to Latin sources, he wrote his masterpiece poem, *On the Nature of Things*, "per intervalla insaniae" (=during the intermissions of his insanity)
- According to tradition, he became crazy after drinking a love potion (cf. [Tennyson's poem](#)): modern scholars have argued that he might have suffered from manic depression
- The great Cicero (lawyer, politician, intellectual and master of the art of rhetoric), edited and published the poem after Lucretius's death (it was suicide, according to tradition)

16.2 Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*

- This poem was not written with the intention of entertaining the readers with a piece of aesthetically beautiful literature; it is a didactic poem, composed to teach about a particular vision of nature and the world
- Lucretius's poem shows the great influence that Greek culture (especially literature, philosophy and historiography) had on Roman civilization
- The poem was inspired by the ideas of Greek philosophers such as Democritus (460/70-370/61 BCE) and Epicurus
 - Democritus believed that everything in nature is the result of the combination of atoms (the smallest indivisible particles of matter) and void
 - He also believed that our five senses are stimulated by atoms: we see because small atoms travel from the object that we see to our eyes, we hear because atoms enter our ears, etc.

16.2 *On the Nature of Things*: atomism

- You may learn more about Lucretius' essential role in the preservation and the transmission of the ancient theories of atomism, and about the relevance that those theories had during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and into the 19th-century, when you read passages from chapter 1 of the 2001 book written by David Lindley, entitled *Boltzmann's Atom: The Great Debate That Launched A Revolution In Physics*, posted in the site of the *Washington Post*

16.2 Lucretius and Epicurus

- Epicurus (341-271 BCE), another Greek philosopher that Lucretius had studied in Naples, developed Democritus's ideas (especially in the field of ethics)
 - Epicurus believed that men should seek the maximum of pleasure (which is to be found through the use of moderation in all areas of life), the minimum of pain
 - He wanted to dispel fear of death, and the fear of the gods
 - He thought that gods might exist in the *intermundia*, spaces with rarefied matter found between the planets
 - Therefore the gods could not possibly care about humans, and had no interest in punishing or rewarding them
 - Avoidance of politics was considered to be a safe measure by Roman Epicureans, while members of the Roman elite who subscribed to the Stoic philosophy emphasized selflessness and the highest respect for morals and for social duties

16.3 The ancient Romans and religion

- The poet Lucretius's perspective on the traditional practices and beliefs of the pagan religion was not really unique
- Even some of the great Roman authors condemned and satirized widespread superstition in Roman society, and exposed the superficiality of a relationship with the supernatural based mostly on material exchanges: sacrifices in return for good health, happiness and prosperity
- The first Christians, and the "Fathers of the Church" later on finished the job, so to speak, attacking pagan religions with no mercy, to the point of losing perspective entirely
 - Roman religion may have been somewhat primitive, but it was a religion nonetheless, a legitimate attempt to fill up needs and answer questions that each individual may have

16.3 The religion of ancient Romans: sacrificial offerings

- Rituals such as those of the Romans, especially sacrificial offerings, can acquire a very deep meaning and value
- In the case of the Romans, though, their religious practices are often considered 'primitive' not because those practices involved sacrificing animals, which is common in many religions to this day
- The problem (if you want to call it that), in the case of Roman religion, is the almost completely mechanical approach to the sacrifice, the fact that the ritual itself could mean little or nothing to the person who performed it, and still be presumed to be 'effective': this undoubtedly is closer to superstition or magic (following the meaning of this term in popular fiction and fables), than to religion
- This lack of spiritual depth, of a more personal connection with their divinities, in the end, really contributed to the decline of Paganism and facilitated the success of Christian religion in many areas of the empire

16.3 Religion as a social practice in ancient Rome

- Religion, in Roman society, was for the most part a social or formal practice, rather than a personal, deep spiritual experience
- Private rituals were performed to thank or ingratiate the gods: their success and their value did not really depend on the personal beliefs or the faith of the individual who performed that ritual
- Rather it is the ritual itself that seems to have had a quasi-magical power
- Apotropaic formulae and gestures, in the private life of the Romans, were apparently more common than personal prayers
 - apotropaic is an adjective that designates a ritual, a formula or a gesture used to prevent bad luck or to defend from evil forces

16.3 Superstition -- Ethics, religion and politics

- the Romans believed in the evil eye, as many Italians of today do (although this belief was later combined with Christian elements and symbols: oil, water, the time and place for the transmission of the apotropaic formulae etc.)
- archeological excavations have unearthed ancient Roman amulets shaped like a hand, making gestures that are exactly those used today in some areas of Italy
- Ethics in Roman society was supported largely by philosophy, by the social values and the law, rather than by religion alone
- Religion was often intertwined with politics
 - From a wall inscription in Pompeii (ca. 79 CE): "The worshipers of Isis as a body ask for the election of Gnaeus Helvius Sabinus as Aedile"

16.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- All our senses ought to be trained to endurance. They are naturally long-suffering, if only the mind desists from weakening them. This should be summoned to give an account of itself every day.
- Sextius had this habit, and when the day was over and he had retired to his nightly rest, he would put these questions to his soul: "What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respects are you better?"
- Anger will cease and become controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day. Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day?

16.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination--how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character!
- I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self.
- When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words.

16.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- I conceal nothing from myself, I omit nothing. For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with my self?
- "See what you never do that again; I will pardon you this time. In that dispute you spoke too offensively; after this don't have encounters with ignorant people; those who have never learned do not want to learn.
- You reprov'd that man more frankly than you ought, and consequently you have not so much mended him as offended him. In the future, consider not only the truth of what you say, but also whether the man to whom you are speaking can endure the truth. A good man accepts reproof gladly; the worse a man is the more bitterly he resents it"

16.4 Seneca and self-examination, from the philosophical dialogue *On the tranquillity of the soul*

- SERENUS: When I made examination of myself, it became evident, Seneca, that some of my vices are uncovered and displayed so openly that I can put my hand upon them, some are more hidden and lurk in a corner, some are not always present but recur at intervals; and I should say that the last are by far the most troublesome, being like roving enemies that spring upon one when the opportunity offers, and allow one neither to be ready as in war, nor to be off guard as in peace. Nevertheless the state in which I find myself most of all--for why should I not admit the truth to you as to a physician? --is that I have neither been honestly set free from the things I hated and feared, nor, on the other hand, am I in bondage to them; while the condition in which I am placed is not the worst, yet I am complaining and fretful--I am neither sick nor well.

16.5 Cato the Elder, The Harvest Ritual, circa 160 BCE

- Before the harvest the sacrifice of the pig must be offered in this manner
- Offer a sow... to Ceres before you harvest spelt, wheat, barley, beans, and turnip seed
- Offer a prayer, with incense and wine, to Janus, Jupiter and Juno, before offering the sow
- Offer a pile of cakes to Janus, saying, "Father Janus, in offering these cakes to you, I humbly pray that you will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household."
- Then make an offering of cake to Jupiter with these words: "In offering you this cake, O Jupiter, I humbly pray that you, pleased with this offering, will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household."

16.5 The prayer of Scipio Africanus (Livy, *History of Rome*, bk. XXIX, 27, 1-4)

- As a military expedition is about to set sail to attack Carthage in 204 BCE, the Roman general Scipio Africanus, offers to the Roman Gods the following prayer
 - Ye gods and goddesses, who inhabit the seas and the lands, I supplicate and beseech you that whatever has been done under my command, or is being done, or will later be done, may turn out to my advantage and to the advantage of the people and the commons of Rome, the allies, and the Latins who by land or sea or on rivers follow me, [accepting] the leadership, the authority, and the auspices of the Roman people; that you will support them and aid them with your help; that you will grant that, preserved in safety and victorious over the enemy, arrayed in booty and laden with spoils, you will bring them back with me in triumph to our homes; that you will grant us the power to take revenge upon our enemies and foes; and that you will grant to me and the Roman people the power to enforce upon the Carthaginians what they have planned to do against our city, as an example of [divine] punishment.

16.5 Actual inscriptions from Roman temples

- Thanks to Jupiter Leto, that my wife bore a child
- Thanks to Silvanus, from a vision, for freedom from slavery
- Thanks to Jupiter, that my taxes were lessened
- Am I to be sold?
- Shall I get the money?
- Is my lover who is away from home alive?
- Am I to profit by the transaction?
- Is my property to be put up at auction?
- Shall I be appointed as an ambassador?
- Am I to become a senator?
- Am I to be divorced from my wife?

16.5 Certificate of sacrifice to the traditional pagan gods (250 CE)

- To the Commissioners of Sacrifice of the Village of Alexander's Island [Egypt]
- From Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the Village of Alexander's Island, age 72....
- I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, and poured the drink offering, and tasted of the sacrifices, and I request you to certify the same...
- Handed in by me, Aurelius Diogenes
- I certify that I saw him sacrificing... [signature]
- Done in the first year of the Emperor, Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus... [June 26, 250 CE]

16.5 Certificate of pagan sacrifice
ca. 250 CE

