

Posture and Gesture in Roman Prayer

Both textual and pictorial testimonies show that prayer and gesture complement themselves. It is known that some rare sacrifices involved no prayer [Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita*, XLI.16.1], though this was rare according to Pliny [Plinius, *Historia Naturalis*, 28.3.10]. The equivalence of meaning between prayer and gesture is also attested by several descriptions of sacrifices (namely taken from the *Comentarii Fratrum Arvalium*) which describe the consecration of the victim by the *mola salsa*, wine and the knife, while usually they omit the corresponding prayer.

Written sources

Some books like the *Dictionary of Roman Religion* by Lesley and Roy Adkins (1996) oversimplify the problem of ritual attitude claiming that the Romans prayed with the arms outstretched. In fact there are some Roman descriptions and depictions of rites being performed with outstretched arms. The following picture is a coin from the time of Domitian, in which the Emperor is represented dictating a prayer to a group of kneeling women. Their arms are outstretched, probably directed to the temple entrance where the statue of the deity stands.

This ritual is the *supplicatio* (supplication), and is textually described in the surviving *Acta Ludorum Saeculariorum*. The following was taken from the description of the *Ludi Saeculares* of 17 BC in *CIL VI 32323*:

"DEINDE CX MATRIBVS FAMILIAS NVPTIS QVIBVS DENV[NTIATVM ERAT M AGRIPPA] / PRAEIT IN HAEC VERBA / IVNO REGINA AST QVID EST QVOD MELI[VS SIET P R QVIRITIBVS MATRES FAMILIAE / NVPTAE GENIBVS NIXAE TE VTI / MAIESTATEMQVE P R QVIRITI[VM DVELLI DOMIQVE AVXIS VTIQVE SEMPER LATINVM NOMEN TVEARE INCOLVMITATEM] / SEMPITERNAM VICTORIAM [VALETVDINEM POPVLO ROMANO QVIRITIBVS TRIBVAS FAVEASQVE POPVLO ROMANO QVIRITIBVS LEGIONIBVSQVE P R] / QVIRITIVM REMQVE PVBLI[CAM P R QVIRITIVM SALVAM SERVES VTI SIES VOLENS PROPITIA POPVLO ROMANO] / QVIRITIBVS XVIR S F NO[BIS HAEC MATRES FAMILIAS CX POPVLI ROMANI] / QVIRITIVM NVPTAE GENI[BVS NIXAE QVAESVMVS PRECAMVRQVE]"

"After that, to/by 110 married *matresfamilias* to whom was announced ...[this part is lost] M. Agrippa precedes/dictates with the following words: 'Iuno Regina, yet this is as far as any better may fall on the roman people of the *quirites* ...[this part is lost] married *matresfamilias* kneeling to you may you ... [this part is lost] majesty of the roman people of the *quirites* both in the war and at the homeland, and also that you may always watch over the latin name. May you provide to the roman people of the *quirites* the eternal safety victory and good health and may you also favour the roman people of the *quirites* as well as its legions. May you preserve the public affairs ["*res publica*" = Republic] of the roman people of the *quirites* unarmed. May you be willing to be propitious to the roman people of the *quirites*, to the *Quindecemviri Sacris Faciundis* and to us... [We,] 110 married *matresfamilias* of the roman people of the *quirites* on our knees beg and pray ... [this part is lost]"

To extend the hand or hands to heaven seems to be used also when addressing deities of the sky [Horatius, *Odes*, III.XXIII]:

Caelo supinas si tuleris manus Nascente luna, [O pie erga divem], Si ture placaris et horta Fruge Lares [sacrificares]: Nec pestilentem sentiet Africum Fecunda vitis nec sterilem seges Robiginem aut dulces alumni Pomifero grave tempus anno...

This is confirmed by the description of a *devotio*, which was vowed before the walls of Carthage. The *devotio* was a ritual performed with the objective of vowing someone to the gods of the underworld (*Dii Inferi*), the gods of death. Its use was more common in a military context, where an enemy army and/or city was vowed to destruction. Sometimes this act involved the self sacrifice of the commander or a soldier chosen for the effect. According to Macrobius the ritual was the following [Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.9.10-12]:

"DIS PATER VEIOVIS MANES, SIVE QUO ALIO NOMINE FAS EST NOMINARE, UT OMNES ILLAM URBEM CARTHAGINEM EXERCITUMQUE QUEM EGO ME SENTIO DICERE FUGA FORMIDINE TERRORIS CONPLEATIS, QUIQUE ADVERSUM LEGIONES EXERCITUMQUE NOSTRUM ARMA TELAQUE FERENT, UTI VOS EUM EXERCITUM EOS HOSTES EOSQUE HOMINES URBES AGROSQUE EORUM ET QUI IN HIS LOCIS REGIONIBUSQUE AGRIS URBIBUSVE HABITANT ABDUCATIS LUMINE SUPERO PRIVETIS EXERCITUMQUE HOSTIUM URBES AGROSQUE EORUM QUOS ME, SENTIO DICERE, UTI VOS EAS URBES AGROSQUE CAPITA AETATESQUE EORUM DEVOTAS CONSECRATASQUE HABEATIS OLLIS LEGIBUS QUIBUS QUANDOQUE SUNT MAXIME HOSTES DEVOTI. EOSQUE EGO VICARIOS PRO ME FIDE MAGISTRATUQUE MEO PRO POPULO ROMANO EXERCITIBUS LEGIONIBUSQUE NOSTRIS DO DEVOVEO, UT ME MEAMQUE FIDEM IMPERIUMQUE LEGIONES EXERCITUMQUE NOSTRUM QUI IN HIS REBUS GERUNDIS SUNT BENE SALVOS SIRITIS ESSE. SI HAEC ITA FAXITIS UT EGO SCIAM SENTIAM INTELLEGAMQUE, TUNC QUISQUIS HOC VOTUM FAXIT UBI FAXIT RECTE FACTUM ESTO OVIBUS ATRIS TRIBUS. TELLUS MATER TEQUE IUPPITER OBTESTOR. Cum Tellurem dicit, manibus terram tangit: cum Iovem dicit, manus ad caelum tollit: cum votum recipere dicit, manibus pectus tangit."

"DIS PATER, VEIOVIS, MANES, OR WHOM WHOSE NAME IS LAWFUL TO NAME, MAY YOU FULFILL TO PUT TO FLIGHT IN PANIC AND TERROR ALL THOSE INHABITANTS OF THAT CITY OF CARTHAGE AND ARMY, WHICH I INTEND TO DESIGNATE, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO OPPOSE OUR LEGIONS AND ARMY WITH ARMS AND SPEARS. MAY YOU DRIVE AWAY THAT ENEMY ARMY AND MEN, CITIES AND FIELDS, AND THOSE WHO INHABIT THIS PLACE AND REGIONS, FIELDS AND CITIES. DEPRIVE THE ENEMY ARMY, THEIR CITIES AND FIELDS, WHICH I INTEND TO DESIGNATE FROM THE LIGHT OF THE SKY. MAY YOU HAVE THOSE CITIES AND FIELDS, THOSE HEADS AND PEOPLE OF ALL AGES DEVOTED AND CONSECRATED, ACCORDING TO THOSE PRINCIPLES BY WHICH AND AT WHICH TIME THE ENEMIES ARE ESPECIALLY DEVOTED. THEM I CONSECRATE AS SUBSTITUTES FOR MYSELF, FOR MY CREDIT AND MAGISTRACY, FOR THE ROMAN PEOPLE, FOR OUR ARMIES AND LEGIONS. MAY YOU ALLOW MY CREDIT AND AUTHORITY, OUR LEGIONS AND ARMY THAT ARE CARRIED ON IN THIS AFFAIR TO BE WELL SAFE. IF YOU LET ME KNOW, FEEL AND UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WILL ACT IN THIS WAY, WHOEVER HAS PROMISED TO SACRIFICE THREE BLACK EWES TO YOU, WHEREVER HE HAS DONE SO, LET IT BE UNDERSTOOD THAT HE HAS ACTED WITHIN THE RULES. I CALL ON YOU TO WITNESS, MOTHER EARTH, AND YOU, IUPPITER. Touches the ground with the hands while saying 'Tellus', directs the hands to the sky while saying 'Iuppiter' and touches his chest with the hands while saying the the vow to be received.

The important part is the last sentence in which it is said that while pronouncing the formula, the vower "touches the ground while saying 'Tellus', directs the hands to the sky while saying 'Iuppiter' and touches his chest with the hands while saying the the vow to be received". Again, the arms are extended to heaven when a deity of the sky (Iuppiter) is invoked, but the ground is touched when chthonic deities are invoked.

This is very important when compared with other information. In [Horatius, *Carmina*, 3.23] it is suggested that the altar should be touched while the prayers are being said, which is confirmed by

[Virgilius, Aeneis, 4.219]. According to Servius Honoratus, Varro wrote that this gesture is necessary to grant the good will of the deity [Servius, Aeneidos Commentarius, 4.219]. These examples suggest that it was a norm to direct the hands (or hand) towards the deity (or alternately touching the altar when one was present) when saying the prayer.

The posture of the officiant is also referred, for example, in another description of the devotio ritual provided by Livy. He describes the devotio performed by Consul Decius under the direction of a Pontifex, during a battle against the Latin League [Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, 8.9.4-8]:

"(...) pontifex eum togam praetextam sumere iussit et uelato capite, manu subter togam ad mentum exserta, super telum subiectum pedibus stantem sic dicere: 'Iane, Iuppiter, Mars pater, Quirine, Bellona, Lares, Diui Nouensiles, Di Indigetes, Diui, quorum est potestas nostrorum hostiumque, Dique Manes, uos precor ueneror, ueniam peto feroque, uti populo Romano Quiritium uim uictoriam prosperetis hostesque populi Romani Quiritium terrore formidine morteque adficiatis. sicut uerbis nuncupauit, ita pro re publica [populi Romani] Quiritium, exercitu, legionibus, auxiliis populi Romani Quiritium, legiones auxiliaque hostium mecum Deis Manibus Tellurique deuoueo.' (...)"

"(...) the Pontifex ordered him [i.e. Decius] to take the 'toga praetexta' and with the head covered, a hand protruding from beneath the toga touching the chin, standing with his feet over a spear said the following: "Janus, Jupiter, Father Mars, Quirinus, Bellona, Lares, ye Novensiles and Indigetes, deities to whom belongs the power over us and over our foes, and ye, too, Divine Manes, I pray to you, I do you reverence, I crave your grace and favour that you will bless the Roman People, the Quirites, with power and victory, and visit the enemies of the Roman People, the Quirites, with fear and dread and death. In like manner as I have uttered this prayer so do I now on behalf of the commonwealth of the Quirites, on behalf of the army, the legions, the auxiliaries of the Roman People, the Quirites, devote the legions and auxiliaries of the enemy, together with myself to the Divine Manes and to Earth. (...)"

Important information can be extracted from this description. Here we see that before saying the formula, Decius is instructed to dress the toga praetexta and to cover his head, which, as we have already seen, are usual procedures of a standard sacrifice Romano Ritu. The only elements not found elsewhere are the use of a spear laid on the ground and the act of touching the chin. While the detail of the spear is surely specific of the devotio (for Livy says later that the spear could not be captured by the enemy), the act of touching the chin may or may not be specific of the devotio. In fact it resembles the adoratio (kissing of one's right hand used to salute a deity [Plinius, Historia Naturalis, 28.25]), and it might well be a variant. But it can also be a symbol that Decius was also an offering to the gods as he was about to give his life in the sacrifice.

Lets see another example, which is the yearly announcement of the sacrifice to Dea Dia by the Fratres Aruales before the temple of Concordia, extracted from the Comentarium Fratrum Arvalium [CIL VI, 32340.0-20]:

"ille mag. manibus lautis capite velato sub divo contra orientem sacrificium indixit deae Diae sic Quod bonum faustum felix fortunatumque sit populo Romano Quiritibus, fratribusque arvalibus, Tiberio Caesar Augusto, Iuliae Augustae et liberis nepotibus totique domui eorum, sacrificium deae Diae hoc anno erit a.d. VI Kalendas Iulias"

"The magister [of the Fratres Aruales], with washed hands, head covered, below the open sky and turned to East proclaimed the sacrifice to Dea Dia in the following way: 'In order that it may be

auspicious, prosperous and happy to the Roman people of the Quirites, to the Fratres Arvales, to Tiberius Caesar Augustus, to Iulia Augusta and to all grandchildren of their household, the sacrifice to Dea Dia this year will be on the 6th day before the Kalends of June."

The description refers to the act of covering the head (*capite velato*), the direction of the officiant and details like the washing of hands, but it does not mention anything about the gestures made while prayer is being said. This may be due to the fact that special gestures were not required in this ritual. But it mentions that the prayer should be directed to the East, which is the preferred direction to offer prayer according to [Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, IV.5], which was a guideline for the construction of temples. Nevertheless, temples were built with a variety of orientations according to the possibilities, and Vitruvius implies that the sacrificer should in any case be looking at the deity during the sacrifice. In case of the announcement of the sacrifice to Dea Dia, the ceremony is done before the temple of Concordia and so the magister addresses Dea Dia towards the East. This may indicate that if there is no altar or image of the deity the prayers should be addressed to the East. Varro indicates an association of Ceres with the East [Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, 7.9], which can be related with this.

Depictions

Although there is a large number of bas-reliefs and paintings representing traditional Roman sacrifices both private and public, these depictions usually obey to rigid artistic conventions, which limit the information we can extract from them. Yet, they are a valuable source of information.

The available depictions of traditional Roman sacrifice invariably depict the sacrificer during the act of offering at the burning altar or hearth, usually during the *praefatio* or preliminary offering of incense and wine (for a detailed study about Roman sacrifice see [Scheid, J., *Romulus et ses Freres - Le College des Freres Arvales, modele du culte public dans la Rome des Empereurs*, Ecole frangaise de Rome, 1990, ISBN 2-7283-0203-7]). An example of this is the bas-relief that decorates the temple of Vespasian in Pompey:

The sacrificer is standing *cinctu Gabinio* (with the head covered - *capite velato* - by a fold of the *toga praetexta*), placing the offerings on the fire with one hand, while the other hand is free holding the *toga*. A similar scene is depicted in the following relief in which Marcus Aurelius sacrifices before the temple of Iuppiter Capitolinus. In this case the emperor seems to be imposing his right hand over the fire (a *foculus*, usually used for the *praefatio*), which may be equivalent to touching the altar. But it can also be the simple gesture of the orator who is saying a prayer:

Similar scenes are also depicted in private *lararia*, such as the following:

In this case the sacrificer is holding a *thyrium* (drinking horn) with the right hand while placing the offering on the sacred fire with the other hand.