

The Memetic Connotations and Evolution of “Pietas” in Roman Ideology, Ethics and Politics

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Abstract: This article examines the application of memetics as a valuable and manageable framework for cultural studies. Specifically, it delves into the memes associated with Roman “Pietas” and their impact on the ideological, ethical and political landscape of Ancient Rome. Utilizing historical discourse excerpts, the study aims to illustrate the evolutionary processes and distinctive characteristics of memes within a particular cultural meme complex.

1. Introduction

In many Roman coins and various royal medals spanning the extensive historical period from Augustus (ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE) to Emperor Constantine (ruled from 280 to 337 CE), we observe the personification of “Pietas.” Figure 1 is the picture of a coin from the reign of Tiberius, adorned with the inscription “Pietas”.



Figure 1. Roman coin bearing the face of “Pietas”, a Roman goddess (Tiberius, 14-37 CE)

The devout goddess on the coin, named “Pietas”, is depicted wearing a veil or a rounded headdress. These coins often belong to the Herennia gens family, and some are associated with the coins of the Tiberius Empire. These coins serve as early records of “Pietas.”

This virtue “Pietas” was elevated by the Romans to divine status and commemorated in a temple erected in the ninth and eleventh regions of Rome. The term not only expressed reverence and respect for the gods but also, in a broader sense, applied to the love and charity towards parents, children, friends, neighbours, and their country, rulers, and soldiers.

The concept of “Pietas” in Roman religion embodies respect, loyalty, and affection, particularly towards parents and family. In Rome architecture, The Temple of

Pietas (Latin: *Aedes Pietatis*) was established in 181 BCE. On coins, “Pietas” is portrayed as a female figure holding a palm branch or a sceptre. On altars, “Pietas” is depicted as a casting incense lady, often accompanied by a stork, symbolizing filial piety.

In Latin, the word “Pietas” is an abstract noun (with its plural being *pious*, also an adjective), and its literary origin can be traced back to the epic poem “*Aeneid*,” (30 to 19 BCE) where it describes the qualities of Aeneas. In this epic, Aeneas is renowned for his “Pietas.” When Troy fell, Aeneas carried the statues of his limping father Anchises and two household gods (Lares and Penates) to a place of safety.

“Pietas” can refer to “dutiful conduct towards the gods, one’s parents, relatives, benefactors”, but also to “[g]entleness, kindness, tenderness, pity, compassion” (Andrews & Lewis 1969, pp.1374-1375)^[1]. In the Oxford Latin Dictionary, “Pietas” is defined as: “Piety; a sense of duty; affection, love; loyalty; gratitude.” Traditional Latin usage of “Pietas” conveys a complex and highly esteemed Roman virtue. Individuals possessing this virtue show reverence towards their responsibilities to God, country, parents, and family. Strictly speaking, this sentiment should resemble a son’s love for his father.

“Piety,” derived from the Latin “Pietas,” as a nuanced and comprehensive virtue, serves as a propagandistic term used across various purposes and media. The earliest documented record of “Pietas” in English is found in Anselm Bayly’s work titled “*The Alliance of Music, Poetry, and Oratory*”, published in 1789. Here are a few examples in modern English:

“*Learning, Virtue, and Piety.*”—*Motto of Boston University*

“*True patriotism is better than the wrong kind of piety.*”—*Abraham Lincoln*

Abundant evidence has shown that, as a strong meme, “Pietas/Piety” is of crucial importance to the culture of the whole world, and the transmission of this idea is significant for cross-cultural studies. The present study is

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not designed as a cross-cultural analysis; its primary objective is to delineate the evolutionary trajectory of the connotations associated with “Pietas” in Roman society by historical discourses.

2. Memetics—a framework of cultural studies

Memetics is a new theory based on the perspective of Darwinian evolution, aiming to explain the laws of cultural evolution. It attempts to interpret the evolutionary patterns of universal connections between things and the inherent characteristic of cultural inheritance, both from a diachronic and synchronic perspective.

The term was first introduced by the advocate of the new Darwinian paradigm, Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book “*The Selfish Gene*”.^[3]

Genes reproduce through inheritance, but memes spread through imitation, much like viruses. Dawkins initially considered memes as units of cultural imitation or transmission, later regarding them as information units in the brain—a replicator existing within the brain. Memetics views everything from small ideas to entire cultures as a meme or a complex of memes. The reason why one culture or idea differs from another is because it possesses unique meme factors.

Dawkins believed that for anything to constitute a replicator, it must possess three characteristics: inheritance, evolution, and selection. Cultural memes fully exhibit these three features: cultural memes have inheritance—the process of cultural meme transmission is the process of its inheritance. For example, when a certain religion spreads, the belief as a meme continues to be inherited among believers; cultural memes have variability—during the process of transmission, cultural memes undergo evolutions, allowing for development. Continuous development, creativity, and technological progress lead to constant changes and developments in the components of culture, such as people’s perspectives; cultural memes have selectivity—the spreading ability of cultural memes allows only those memes that adapt to social norms and cultural environments to be successfully transmitted horizontally, vertically, and across cultures.

The continuous selection of replicators is what leads to the rich diversity observed in both the biological and cultural realms. As a crucial aspect of world culture, the concept of “Pietas” has a profound influence on the development and supplementation of Roman ethics, social life, and early Christian doctrines.

3. Memetic Interpretation of “Pietas” in Roman Society

“Pietas” is generally considered a form of reciprocal behaviour based on Roman societal norms, a religious belief, and a social obligation. It ideally expresses loyalty and reverence for family and institutions, playing a positive role in maintaining social harmony and stability. The so-called harmony in Roman society depends on whether citizens could fulfill their responsibilities to the

gods and each other. How did such a religious term expand its usage in Roman political and social life?

3.1 Inheritance—religious meme

In *De Natura Deorum* (45 BCE), the concept of “Pietas”, serving as a source of orthodox moral behaviour, is reiterated and demonstrated to be inherently interconnected with all other virtues. The following quotation is a reflection:

Quae contuens animus accedit ad cognitionem deorum, e qua oritur Pietas, cui coniuncta iustitia est reliquaeque virtutes, e quibus vita beata existit par et similis deorum... (De Nat. Deor. 2.153.7)

“Contemplating such things (the heavens) the soul comes to an understanding of the gods, from which “Pietas” arises, to which justice and all remaining virtues are joined, from which things a good life exists and one similar to the gods” (translated by Natli, 2014).^[5]

The religious meme of “Pietas” is its main connotation, showing strong memetic inheritance.

The evolution of the religious connotation and the family connotation of “Pietas” shows the inheritance and evolution of the meme complex. The change of the connotation can be illustrated by the Italian noun “Pietà” derived from the Latin noun “Pietas”. The evolving relationship between the words “Pietas” and “Pietà” reflects a dynamic interplay between linguistic and cultural shifts. It is often associated with a specific art historical and religious context, referring to representations of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus, conveying themes of compassion and sorrow. The story is based on the Bible, depicting the poignant moment when the Virgin Mary cradles the crucified Christ. Christ lies between the Virgin Mary’s knees, with a wound on his side, his head drooping backward, and his right arm resting on the Virgin Mary’s right knee.



Figure 2. Michelangelo Buonarroti’s “*La Madonna della Pietà*” (Our Lady of Piety)” in Saint Peter’s Basilica, 1498-1499.

The theme “Pietà” has found widespread representation in both painting and sculpture, serving as one of the most poignant and powerful visual expressions of people’s emotions towards Christ and the Virgin Mary.

It first appeared in the early 14th century in Germany and quickly spread to France, becoming popular in Northern Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries. The most iconic representation of the “Pietà” theme is Michelangelo’s sculpture completed in 1499, located in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (shown in figure 2). Influenced by the Northern style, Michelangelo draped Christ’s body over Mary’s lap. Through the pyramid design and the details of his characters, Michelangelo created a scene that conveys pain, solemnity, and heroic strength.

3.2 Inheritance—family meme

Another connotation of “Pietas” reflects devotion to family. The family meme and religious meme of “Pietas” coexist as core memes.

Herennia gens family mentioned in section 1 is famous for a coin of gens bearing the representation of goddess “Pietas” on the front and the tale of the two brothers of Catana who, in escaping a Mount Aetna eruption, carried their elderly parents. The coin is a great representation of the virtue of filial piety. Figure 3 shows the first documented record of the concept of “Pietas” on the coin of Marcus Herennius.



Figure 3. Coin of Marcus Herennius (108-107 BCE)

Néraudeau (1984)^[6] classifies the term “Pietas” as about “superiors,” such as God, parents, or the homeland. The family connotation is also demonstrated in Cicero’s *De Inventione*:

“appellant pietatem quae erga patriam aut parentes aut alios sanguine coniunctos officium conservare moneat.” (Cic. De Inv. II, 22. 66)^[2]

“They term it Pietas which advises to observe officium towards homeland, parents, or others joined by blood.” (Translated by Natali, 2014)^[5]

By analyzing the citation rate of “pietas paterna (in English means: father, paternal)” and “pietas maternal”, Saller (1988)^[8] found that their citation rate is much higher than “filial pietas/filial piety”. Although the meanings of these two groups of words are not significantly different, Saller’s research reflects two facts: first, the religious term “Pietas” has already transcended its religious category and is widely used in family relationships; second, the meaning of “Pietas” is much broader and more inclusive than “filial piety.”

3.3 Evolution—the meme of social and political relationships

As a linchpin of social structure, “Pietas” holds particular significance in family relationships. This concept is also aptly interpreted within the familial framework of the nation. Authorities believe and understand the universality of “Pietas” in the hearts of the Roman people. As the Roman Republic transitioned to Monarchy, those in power saw an opportune moment to use the language of “Pietas” to support their own interests. The monarch was eventually solidified as the head of the household, positioning the citizens, guided by the “Pietas” cognitive system, as members of the monarch’s family. This system benefited Roman citizens, as the head of the household was expected to exhibit characteristics such as responsibility and love for the people.

In Johns’ (2022) epigraphic study based on the imperial status of Roman emperors, it is found that among Commodus’ special titles (presented in Table 1), the most commonly documented virtue is his sense of Pietas (Pius), which is mentioned in 46 inscriptions, accounting for 90% of the sample (absent only in 5 inscriptions with virtuous titles).

Table 1. Honorific titles identified on inscriptions of Commodus in the Latin-speaking West from the period of his sole rule (180-192 CE) (Johns, 2022, p. 114)^[4]

Honorific Titulature				
Retrospective Dynastic	Prospective Dynastic	Triumphal	Abso-lutist	Virtuous
divi Marci fili	princeps iuventutis	Germanicus maximus	Dom-inus	felix/ felicissimus
divus Marcus to Nerva		Sarmaticus		Invictus
		Britannicus		pacator orbis
				pious nobilissimus

The political climate of the post-Roman Republic period is closely tied to the understanding of the concept of “Pietas.” In tracing the development of this concept, Wagenvoort (1980)^[9] pointed out that around 45 BCE, Cicero’s philosophical works began to connect “Pietas” with the nation, parents, and relatives, whereas previously, “Pietas” was primarily associated with the gods. Wagenvoort further emphasized that this shift in the conceptualization of “Pietas” reflects the internal strife and the decline of the Roman Republic’s political situation. He believed that the driving force behind this shift reflects Cicero’s attempt to reconcile Roman imperialistic expansion policies with ancient Greek philosophical thought. The highly developed philosophical viewpoint of “Pietas” is often considered to have evolved from early Greek intermediary thinking, particularly influenced by Platonic thought. Platonic thought is driven by individual responsibility to inspire behavior. This makes “Pietas” a concept in the realm of emotions. “Pietas” becomes a way for individuals to take action based on responsibility and obligation. Here, we

summarize an associated reflection – “Pietas” is not only a virtue but also an emotion, described by Schultz as “dutiful love.” This reciprocal characteristic extends the concept of “Pietas” to friendship and, in Roman politics, expands to the responsibility for the state.

3.4 Evolution—the meme of personal value fulfillment

“Pietas” is a symbol of actions based on understanding an individual’s responsibility to societal affairs. The ability to understand and practice personal responsibility is the starting point for expectations related to “Pietas”. Without the ability to comprehend and act, expectations of mutual benefit, a crucial aspect of “Pietas”, would not arise.

A crucial record of Roman administrative history and the daily affairs of life during the 1st century is “*Pliny the Younger’s letters*” (also called *Epistulae*) written by Latin.^[7] An example from the letters illustrates the practicality of Romans towards their descendants and parental expectations—a strong expectation of reciprocal behaviour. On letter primarily focuses on the demise of Minicia Marcella, the daughter of Fundanius. The inscription on her tombstone (105/106 CE) simply provides basic information about her and her father.

Luckily, Pliny’s letter (letter 5.16.), which expresses deep emotions, outlines Minicia’s qualities: her friendliness, adherence to a dignified Roman lifestyle, and the great sorrow her death caused. The expectation of marriage and childbirth, mentioned by Pliny, is abruptly ended by Minicia’s untimely death, altering the course of her life and the societal expectations, therefore, in the expressions, there is no explicit mention of the term “Pietas”.

Based on Minicia’s examples, we conclude that in Roman society, “Pietas” became a societal standard for evaluating individuals’ life values. The concept of “reciprocity” is a key factor in this evaluation and serves as a driving force behind human generational relationships.

3.5 Selection

As a replicating factor, memes follow the laws of natural selection and survival of the fittest, engaging in fierce competition for survival.

Being important cultural concept of Rome, Pietas shows comprehensive representations of religious, family, personal fulfillment and political memes in the Roman Empire. The evolving procedure of the meme complex of Pietas can be demonstrated by figure 4 in a chronological order:

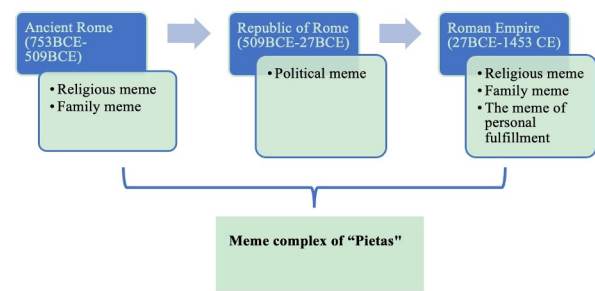


Figure 4. Evolving procedure of “Pietas” memes

4. Concluding remarks

In a broader context, “Pietas” is characterized as the virtue of dutifully fulfilling one’s obligations to individuals or entities with whom they have a connection. Pietas holds significant religious, social, and political connotations in ancient Roman society, exerting a persistent influence as a powerful meme force on Roman ethics and cultural society, even to the present day.

The cultural ecological environment, like the natural ecological system, not only involves interdependence but also entails competition. In the long process of cultural evolution, the inheritance characteristics of culture reach a relatively mature and stable state through the integration of cultural systems. Memetics provides a new avenue for the analysis of cultural inheritance, prompting researchers to pay attention to the impact of memes on culture.

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