

Gemma C.M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Eric M. Moormann (eds.),
Roman toilets: Their archaeology and cultural history. Leuven: Peeters, 2011.
vii+224 pp. € 72. ISBN 978-90-429-2541-0.

Many aspects of ancient Roman daily life have been studied but toilets were largely neglected. Not surprising, perhaps, since human excretory habits were often considered an embarrassing topic for academic scrutiny, as they were in anthropology. This collection of articles intends to correct that neglect. The authors expect that archaeological observations not only reveal information about the construction and functioning of toilets but also about hygiene, attitudes towards dirt and defecation, taboos and sense of privacy. The book is richly illustrated with more than 150 coloured pictures and figures and has an elaborate index.

The study of excavations is combined with a close reading of contemporary writers to find clues for the exact functioning and use of sewers, drains and latrines. One of the most significant 'non-findings' is that archaeologists still do not know for sure how Roman citizens cleaned themselves after defecation. The 'significance' lies in the fact that writers did not think it necessary to describe this common daily practice. One explanation is, of course, its somewhat embarrassing nature but it is equally probable that such a mundane activity was taken for granted and deemed not deserving to be mentioned in literature. Authors that were most likely to refer to toiletry practices were comedy writers and satirists such as Juvenal, Plautus and Martial.

Another question that archaeologists struggle with is whether toilet behaviour was tied up with privacy. Some well-preserved locations show multi-seat latrines which seem to suggest that a visit to the toilet was a social event but in other places the latrine is well-hidden and screened off for people passing by. Segregation of sexes in toilets also remains a matter of speculation.

More is known about the use of human waste for manure. Cesspits were emptied and the waste was sold to farmers while urine was used for purposes like dyeing and tanning.

In a chapter on toilets and health Gemma Jansen writes that Roman toilets were far from hygienic. Paintings and graffiti suggest that toilets were seen as unsafe places inhabited by demons that made people sick. Jansen concludes that Roman sanitary facilities could perhaps be compared to conditions in the present-day 'Third World'. It is the only time that a reference – however indirectly – is made to anthropology. Anthropological insights are sorely missed in this book with the promising subtitle referring to cultural history. The only reason for anthropology's absence I can think of is that ethnographic work on defecation and hygiene could hardly be found.

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