

BOOK REVIEW

The Archaeology of Sanitation in Roman Italy: Toilets, Sewers, and Water Systems. By ANN OLGA KOLOSKI-OSTROW. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. xxiv + 286. Hardcover, \$69.95. ISBN 978-1-4696-2128-9.

Studies on toilets in the ancient world have become more widespread, as scholars strive to understand this neglected area of daily life better.¹ Koloski-Ostrow, who has been working on Roman sanitation for over two decades, presents a spirited, insightful, and eagerly-awaited monograph on the subject. Using archaeological, literary, and epigraphic evidence from the Italian peninsula from the late third century BCE to the end of the second century CE, the study is not a catalogue of Roman toilets and sewers, but aims to examine these structures more closely, in terms of their placement, social practice, customs, and the considerations for the health of their users. A common thread is the need to scrutinize the modern concept of 'hygiene' and its drastically different Roman counterpart.²

Chapter 1 discusses toilets from Pompeii, Herculaneum, Rome, and Ostia, establishing the common features of latrines in Roman Italy. Drawing on a wide array of archaeological evidence, Koloski-Ostrow demonstrates that similarities and patterns of latrine placement can be markers of changes in society and urbanism. Chapter 2 explores Roman hygiene and sanitation of the Romans through a number of important issues, including theoretical models (e.g. formation processes), definitions of Latin terms, global sanitation practices, and modern sanitation standards. Koloski-Ostrow shows that Roman sanitation did not provide the same safe conditions that we know and expect today.

¹ Of particular note for the Roman world is R. Neudecker's *Die Pracht der Latrine: Zum Wandel öffentlicher Bedürfnisanstalten in der kaiserzeitlichen Stadt* (1994, Munich) and B. Hobson's *Latrinae et Foricae: Toilets in the Roman World* (2009, Duckworth). In 2011, the edited volume by G. Jansen, A. Koloski-Ostrow, and E. Moormann, *Roman Toilets: Their Archaeology and Cultural History* (Leuven), present a wide-range of evidence about Roman toilets themselves and how the Romans actually used and experienced these structures.

² For more on the concept of past hygiene in latrines, particularly in terms of archaeological and scientific evidence, see the recent collected volume of P. Mitchell, *Sanitation, Latrines, and Intestinal Parasites in Past Populations* (2015, Ashgate).

Chapter 3 uses the archaeological evidence to explore the importance of the structures as markers of Roman ‘cultural identity’ and their impact on daily life. Koloski-Ostrow demonstrates that latrines were brought to Italy from the Hellenistic East by means of trade and travel, and subsequently adapted and adopted—taking on a canonical Roman form. She shows how sewers and drains only functioned to control water in the city, acting as storm-drains and lacking essential elements of modern sewer technology (e.g. oxidation). Chapter 4 presents the Roman attitude towards toilets and excrement. The toilets themselves show that Romans sat close together, used the folds of the clothing for privacy, and used sponge sticks to cleanse themselves. The fifth chapter uses literary and graffiti to show social meaning of Roman toilets, particularly how Romans actually used latrines.

The monograph effectively makes the case for an interdisciplinary approach to toilets and sanitation in any time period, and scholars outside of Classics will find this an important resource. The familiar writing style of the monograph makes it easy to digest, an ideal source for advanced undergraduates. There are some curious omissions in the bibliography and minor mistakes (like the unfortunate error of ‘shirt’ for ‘shit’)—but they do not take away from the monograph.³ The volume is well illustrated; however, the plans of the properties would be better served by a uniform presentation style and complete labels.⁴ The reader is able to follow Koloski-Ostrow’s arguments well, despite a few strange organizational choices and lack of complete explanations.⁵ Regardless, the monograph

³ Omitted sources include F. Sear’s 2004 article “Cisterns, Drainage, and Lavatories in Pompeian Houses, Casa del Granduca (VII.4.56)” (*Papers of the British School at Rome*, 72) and B. Hobson’s *Pompeii, Latrines and Down Pipes: A General Discussion and Photographic Record of Toilet Facilities in Pompeii* (2009, BAR). Chiappetta’s monograph (*I percorsi antichi di Villa Adriana*, 2008, Edizioni Quasar) would have helped to illustrate the author’s point in navigating the space of Hadrian’s Villa (25). Despite her digression on the Bocca della Verità in Rome (36–37), the author could have cited F. Barry’s 2011 article (“The Mouth of Truth and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian,” *Art Bulletin*) to strengthen her point on the drain cover. Regarding lead poisoning (72, n. 115), the 2011 chapter by D. Keenan Jones et al. (“Lead Contamination in the Drinking Water of Pompeii,” in *Pompeii: Art, Industry, and Infrastructure*) was not included. The mistakes in the text found by the present reviewer include: the contraction “isn’t” (42); “Siberia” instead of “Syria” (53); “graffiti” misspelled (111); “shirt” printed instead of “shit” (206, n.129).

⁴ The plans would have been easier to read in a uniform style (instead of using the plans from different scholars), with more labeling, such as adding indications for Cardo III and IV in figure 25, which are both mentioned in the text.

⁵ The reader might find it strange that definitions of the Latin terms associated with toilets and sanitation are provided in the middle of Chapter 2, not at the beginning of the study (i.e., before

will serve as a future model for those plunging into toilets and sanitation in Roman Italy, the wider Roman Empire, and other time periods.

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the discussion of the archaeological case studies in Chapter 1) or in an appendix. There are moments in the text when a fuller engagement with the scholarly debate would be helpful for the reader, including the use of 'Romanization' without problematizing it fully (3 and 104) and not explaining exactly why the sponge stick was actually used, which Koloski-Ostrow suggests is *contra* to previous scholarship (86).