

BOOK REVIEW

The Traffic Systems of Pompeii. By ERIC E. POEHLER. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 276. Hardback, \$85.00. ISBN: 978-0-190-61467-6.

A visitor to the excavated areas of ancient Pompeii will soon notice ruts here and there in the city's streets. Presumably caused by the iron rims of ancient cart wheels, the ruts are testimony to the passage of many vehicles over the course of many years. There are other marks as well, less visible but more instructive: scrapes, worn areas and circular marks in the vertical surfaces of curbs, stepping stones, guard stones, fountains and walls. Over the last few decades a number of scholars have studied such marks from various points of view, and Poehler draws on their work; but his own work is, so far as I know, the first comprehensive approach to this material, and he helpfully discusses it within a general survey of all available evidence on wheeled traffic, including literary and legal texts and epigraphical and archaeological materials.

In his Introduction, Poehler immediately takes up some controversial questions. How were statutes concerning traffic enforced? Who was responsible for the maintenance of city streets? These are interesting matters, but it might have been more useful to provide basic definitions and explain the conventions employed in the text. The term "traffic" is never, so far as I recall, defined. It turns out eventually that Poehler is concerned only with wheeled traffic; pedestrian traffic and the movement of pack animals are mentioned only in passing. Chapter 2 outlines the history of Pompeii's street network, and in Chapter 3 Poehler describes the structure of streets, in particular the various surfaces used as pavement. Many streets were paved in beaten ash, not the large polygonal pavers we non-specialists tend to think of, and there was a general repaving going on at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius.

Chapters 4 through 6 are the heart of the book. Poehler describes the "architecture of the street," by which he means the elements found along the course of a street: curbs and sidewalks, guard stones, stepping stones and such things as fountains. After a brief description of the construction of Roman carts, he considers how carts and wagons might have bumped into, scraped or worn down these various elements, and he identifies marks that resulted from cartwheels riding up and

over stepping stones, others that show wheels sliding along the vertical surface of a stone and some that show cyclical motion. The wear marks are illustrated in photographs which unfortunately are not as helpful as they might be: they need to be clearer, and they badly need labels keyed to Poehler's verbal descriptions of the marks. Having defined the various types of mark, Poehler proceeds to analyze them. In his analysis, the wear marks reveal much. They tell us the direction the wagon was traveling in and whether a given street had two-way traffic or was limited to one-way traffic. Cart drivers in Pompeii preferred to drive in the center of the street, well away from the curbs; but when faced with a cart coming toward them, they would try to keep to the right-hand side of the street. Many Pompeian streets were too narrow for two-way traffic, and most such small streets were limited to one-way traffic. In several cases, it seems that, at a certain point in time, there was a change in the direction allowed (for example, from northbound to southbound).

The question then arises: who established the one-way rule and other conventions? And who enforced them? In Chapter 7, Poehler sees the one-way rule as evidence of municipal control of traffic and argues that the municipal authorities enforced rules that would facilitate traffic in the city. (Surprisingly, this cannot be taken for granted.) In the eighth and final chapter, Poehler sets all of this material within the broader context of the Roman empire. He visited some two dozen ancient cities in search of comparative material and found similar wear marks on the street architecture of many such sites, but--and this is an important point--he also points out that many cities, such as Paestum, Timgad and Perge, had at least some very broad streets and low curbs. The congestion that is likely to have clogged the narrow streets of Pompeii may well have been less serious in such cities. The evidence in this book pertains, that is, to Pompeii and is not necessarily indicative of the situation in other Roman cities.

The book functions at two levels. First, it is a kind of handbook, providing an introduction to an underutilized body of evidence and demonstrating the methodology to be used in working with this evidence (hence my wish for clearer illustrations). Second, it is an analytical work, defining a body of evidence and pushing it as far as possible. It would be useful to have the results of physical experiments (actual trials of iron on stone), but in their absence Poehler has done as much as can be done. It will take time and the work of others to test the accuracy of his conclusions, but this is certainly a useful start.

There are many typographical and proofreading errors, some small (e.g., “statutes” becomes “statues” on p. 17) and some large (two lines of type are repeated, p. 231).

GEORGE W. HOUSTON

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, gwhouston63@gmail.com