

Cess pits and society

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ABSTRACT: For many ancient sites we do not know how excrement was dealt with; in both hunter-gatherer and farming societies settlements are usually marked by high concentrations of phosphates, implying that defecation by both humans and livestock was simply in the open in and around the settlement or was collected and used as manure on the fields; the size of the compost heap could be an indication of status (e.g. the number of cattle). But as settlements became larger and population more dense, and especially with urbanisation, dealing with excrement started to become a problem, especially in terms of smell and as a health hazard. Ways of dealing with it vary, from open drains in the streets to the provision of sewers flushed by water as in the classical towns of Rome and Greece.

One common feature of urban sites is the digging of cess pits, something which could be organised at the household level where there was access to open spaces such as gardens, but this gradually evolved into more comfortable indoor solutions with stone- or wood-lined pits which could be emptied when convenient (the removal of 'night soil'), and with the provision of special vessels for use in bedrooms – the chamber pot or 'gazunder' (goes under the bed!). These various solutions give us indications of the level of community organisation (or the lack of it), and how this may have evolved over time; I shall discuss examples with which I am familiar, in Exeter and Winchester. But there are also examples which do not fit the accepted pattern, and I shall also discuss an example of a Roman rural settlement at Owslebury near Winchester which at one period had deep cess pits which could not have been emptied to provide manure – why?

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I completed my doctoral thesis on urbanisation in Iron Age temperate Europe at Cambridge in 1975, and taught the Iron Age at Sheffield from 1972 to 2005, and have written numerous articles and some books on archaeology, especially the Iron Age and the Celts and excavated across Europe, mainly in Britain and France.

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