

Merda Pompeiana

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the treatment of excrement in ancient Pompeii from the sensory point of view. Smelling and other sensations that are often considered solely physiological phenomena are in fact deeply influenced by culture and history, and without understanding the ancient sensory landscape, our knowledge of the past inevitably remains limited. In this paper, I explore the olfactory nuisances in one Pompeian city block (IX, 3). I examine the area's stench by tracing and mapping the sources of smells, focusing on those that in previous scholarship have been considered to render ancient towns foul-smelling.

The special focus is on the Pompeian toilets, their function, and their role in the management of excreta and other waste. The previous scholarship asserts that Roman cities, including Pompeii, must have been malodorous, given that they relied on cesspits to deal with human waste rather than sewers, which would carry excrement away from the living quarters. Such presumptions, however, tell more about us than ancient Romans. For a modern Westerner who has never experienced a cesspit toilet, the sewage system might seem far preferable, but this judgment reflects our own preferences rather than Roman ones. My paper contests the views of malodorous Roman urban space presented in previous studies and suggests that the smellscape of urban Pompeii was not a constant reek but milder and manageable. However, the analysis also reveals that social hierarchies and power relations played a part in Pompeian odor control, and the olfactory landscape was not the same for all inhabitants.

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