

Dolphin Arm Rests and the God of Good Health

Sanitation in Ancient Rome

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Sanitation in

ancient Rome was not the honey- I'll-be-on-the-throne-got-a-

magazine-I-could-read business that it is now. For although eight aqueducts brought in 222,237,060 gallons of water into Rome (according to Frontinus, a contemporary of Trajan), very little of that found its way into private homes. Even when it did find its way, it was confined to the lower floors. The tenants of an insula had to get water from public fountains. The higher up the apartment, the more difficult it was to get water into it. This led to abominable conditions with filth accumulating everywhere and the insect population having the run of the place. Petronius in his *Satyricon* has one of his miserable characters hiding under his bed with his lips pressed against the mattress black with bugs.

These conditions, however, were not for want of a good sewer system. The cloacae were begun in the sixth century B.C. and were continually improved under the republic and the empire. Agrippa, Augustus' general and later trusted administrator in charge of the imperial rotor-rootering, did more than anyone to improve the condition and function of the cloacae. They were so big in places that you could travel through them by boat and so well constructed that the cloaca maxima can still be seen opening into the river at the Ponte Rotto. This longevity is a sobering thought for anyone who's recently had to re-pipe the privy. Why can't Agrippa be my plumber? I bet you he would at least return my calls when the toilet overflows and I'm beating back the tide with a borrowed plunger.

Unfortunately, despite the efficiency and grandeur of the sewer system, they didn't use it to its best advantage in ensuring health and decency for the citizens of Rome. It only collected the sewage from the ground floors of some buildings and from the public latrines.

Your recourse if you were rich and lived in a domus was to build your throne room on the ground floor. If you were near a cloaca the sewage would get swept away. If not, it could fall into a trench dug under the toilet. These trenches weren't very deep, nor were they hygienic even in the broadest sense of the word. So, enter the turdman.

The great emperor Vespasian was portrayed by Tacitus as being such a skinflint that he even sold the rights to collect human waste, creating the malodorous merchant position of turdman. OK, so maybe they didn't actually call him that, but anyone with an overdeveloped sense of the ridiculous would probably have thought up an appropriate Latin nickname. The turdman came with his wagon and carted off grandma's badly digested breakfast and then sold it to farmers who then used it to fertilize their crops. Ah, the cycle of life! Vespasian's name, by the way, has survived forever linked to scatology. One Spanish word for a public toilet is *Vespasiana*.

If you weren't rich but had a few ases to spare (no pun intended, "ases" were roughly the worth of pennies), you could hunker down at the public toilets. According to documents preserved from the time of Trajan, most free citizens had to use the public toilets. It must have felt the way it was before the comfort of home video, when the only recourse was to sit with the smelly masses in a public theater. The difference was that the masses were smellier in the latrines of ancient Rome and, lamentably, popcorn had yet to be invented.

The Romans probably didn't have a god specifically for bowel health

People met, had conversations, made dinner reservations and played games in the latrines. What kind of games they played scares me to think about. The toilets and environs were decorated with all manner of frippery like statues of heroes, bubbling fountains, the god of health - the Romans probably didn't have a god specifically for bowel health - and leaping dolphins, probably leaping AWAY from the toilet. The dolphins were used as arm rests and separators because the seats were placed side by side. This arrangement was not limited to the public latrines. The Imperial Toilet boasted three seats side by side, replete with requisite dolphins, so the emperor could hitch up his toga and take a seat right next to his trusted general and discuss invading Dacia while evacuating the royal repository.

But misers went to squeeze a sesterce and the very poor weren't willing to part with even an as to join the intestinal tumult at the public out-house. Their preferred container of relief was a broken jar. Once filled with liquid

it was taken to the local fuller who used it to make those white togas brighter, as it was an effective organic bleach. Again, they purchased permission to do this from

Vespasian, who had his hand in everything it seems, and probably up to the elbows. Alternatively, the jar users went downstairs and emptied the contents of their homemade chamber pots into a large container under the stairs in their building. And, that being barred by the landlord, they scuttled over to the neighborhood dung heap, which were so numerous that in some neighborhoods you couldn't walk more than twenty paces without finding one. In addition to dung, a sort of streamlined adoption center flourished there with unwanted children left on the top of the heap by unnatural mothers and barren want-to-be mothers rooting around looking for unwanted children.

Finally, those who couldn't or wouldn't climb down the stairs to dispose of their waste, who didn't have an as for the public toilets and had no access to a private bathroom just threw the contents of their jars out the window. In a crowded city such as Rome this sometimes caused a passerby to receive an unwelcome gift or even to suffer an injury, though I can't see how. Needless to say, Roman law covered this breach of potty etiquette with quite eloquent attempts to fix the blame on the responsible party, though the person held responsible wasn't always the culprit. The ownership and rental of an Insula was a chaotic tangle of deeds and rental agreements so the poor devil who had to pay injuries might have been sitting on a dolphin-adorned public toilet discussing a return to republican values when the offending projectile homed in on the unsuspecting victim below.