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978-1-107-01443-5 - Rome, Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity

Edited by Mark Bradley with Kenneth Stow

Excerpt

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## Introduction

MARK BRADLEY AND KENNETH STOW

In March 2007, Rome's Piazza del Popolo was desecrated with a provocative and topical type of dirt. For nine days, the Piazza was populated by approximately a thousand life-sized figurines, formed out of compacted, crystallized domestic and commercial waste (see figure 0.1). H. A. Schult's 'Trash People', a German exhibition dedicated to making a loud and highly visible statement about consumerism and environmental waste, had in fact already defiled Paris, Moscow, the Great Wall of China, the pyramids of Egypt and several other key landmarks around the world, and would go on to disrupt the skyline at Barcelona, New York and Antarctica.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this anthropomorphosed trash did not really constitute 'pollution': Schult's virtuous and politically correct mission to convince the world that (as he put it) 'we live in a time of garbage' and his argument that this 'social sculpture' operated as a 'mirror of ourselves' meant that his dirty exhibits – however 'out of place' they might seem – were thoroughly sanitized and legitimated, a powerful warning about what that world *might* become if it did not moderate its relationship with rubbish. 'Trash People', then, was a safe and institutionalized representation of dirt at its most global. Rome's 2007 encounter with universal trash, however, was by no means typical of the historical relationship between the city and its filth. Whereas 'Trash People' was a product of a modern global awareness imposed on the city from outside, Rome throughout its 2,500-year history has done a thorough job of formulating, evaluating and policing its own internal, culturally specific forms of pollution. This volume, then, is dedicated to exploring the history of pollution not within human thought (as many previous studies of the subject have done), but as part of the history, society, religion and politics of a single city. By doing so, it is hoped that the present study will both demonstrate the importance of pollution as a concept within the history of Rome, and provide a sensitive and nuanced case study for the construction and negotiation of pollution by culture.

This volume is a collection of fourteen essays and an Envoi addressing the development and transformation of ideas about dirt, disease and hygiene in

<sup>1</sup> See Schult (2002).

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0.1. H. A. Schult, 'Trash People', Piazza del Popolo (March 2007). Photo: H. A. Schult.

several major chapters of the history of the city of Rome, both in antiquity and in the modern period. It also argues that pollution and purity were guiding factors in the organization of the city's religion, politics, literature, art and architecture. Its contributions, representing the collaborative efforts of classical, Renaissance and modern scholars, span approximately two thousand years of Roman history from the Republican period through to the early decades of the twentieth century. They are structured broadly in chronological order, although each chapter addresses particular themes in the history of the city: pagan ritual; urban development; early Church doctrine; plague; sanitation; immorality. Most of the contributions concentrate on discrete historical or discursive moments, but collectively they span some of the most significant chapters in the city's history and provide a wide-ranging analysis of the synchronous development of Rome's society, religion and culture and ideas about purity and pollution, order and disorder. They represent a range of approaches to the subject, but set out to integrate detailed studies of events, individuals, literature and visual culture within the broader theoretical framework of pollution and propriety. Some chapters examine, from a synchronic perspective, patterns in how the city's inhabitants integrated these concepts into their lives (Lennon,

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Fantham); others examine specific events and developments (Gentilcore, Salvante), the characterization of particular groups (Stow on Jews, Janes on Victorian Protestants) or periods (Rinne, Syrjämaa), or shifts in practice over time (Davies, Hopkins); others adopt a primarily prosopographical approach (Assonitis) or explore the history of an idea (Bradley chapter 6 and Schultz on ancient punishment). Many of the chapters concentrate on literary approaches to pollution, others on archaeological, legal or visual material. In spite of the complex character and diverse definitions of ‘pollution’, this volume has mobilized Mary Douglas’ core formulation of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ as a common and interactive theme that unites all the chapters. Above all, the volume as a whole and its constituent parts are dedicated to creating a constructive dialogue between disciplines by exploring a common and pervasive theme of interest that cuts across several areas of scholarly research and that appears as a recurring feature in the history of the city from antiquity to modernity.

One key theme that ties together many of the chapters in this volume is the idea that the discourse of purity and pollution has been used as a political weapon across the city’s history, whether in urban zoning, forensic rhetoric, early Church doctrine, treatments of plague, sanitary reforms or the marginalization of minority groups; indeed this idea that purity systems have functioned as forms of social control across all human cultures is an essential component of theories proposed by Mary Douglas and other anthropologists about the role of cleanliness, dirt and danger within communities (see chapter 1, pp. 11–18). This is particularly evident in the sphere of religion, identified by many theorists as a central mechanism in the negotiation and policing of social boundaries and values: from pagan ritual to early Church law to papal sanitation measures, this volume demonstrates that throughout the city’s history the religious authorities have appropriated ideas about cleanliness, pollution and purity to maintain and reassert social control. This is one important aspect of historical continuity: at every stage in its history, Rome has mobilized what Davies in this volume describes as a ‘pollution-fighting infrastructure’ (p. 74). Furthermore, a diachronic study of these themes reveals that a regime’s claims to a state of purity or sanitation often involve developing discourses about the physical, moral or political decay and uncleanness of what went before. The restored and immaculate Rome of Augustus, for example, frequently imagined a late Republican city characterized by crumbling temples, polluted streets and political decay; early Christian writers bemoaned the impiety and ritual pollution of pagan religion; and the literature and imagery of Fascist Rome went to great lengths to compare and contrast the clean and renovated

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contemporary cityscape with the ruins and squalor of its recent past. The type of ‘dirt’, then, with which this volume is concerned is the stuff of language, discourse and representation: this volume does not explore how filthy the Roman sewers *actually* were, or how many people were actually carried off by the 1656 plague, but instead engages with the political and religious discourses that mobilized these phenomena as essential components of the city’s value system – the expulsion of sewage as a powerful metaphor for purging Rome’s criminals or the Church’s moral quest to identify and eliminate the causes of disease.

Another theme that is central to thinking about pollution and purification is the organization of *space*: carrying weapons on a battlefield is normal, but carrying them inside the city can be highly inappropriate; sex in a marital bed is ‘in place’, but sex in a temple or church is polluting; corpses in a necropolis are where they should be, corpses on the street are not. The formula ‘matter out of place’, then, has necessarily put space and location high on this volume’s agenda, and it is no accident that many of its chapters are concerned with the appropriate and inappropriate organization of urban space: sites of burial, sewage networks, disposal of criminals, the quarantining of plague victims, the zoning of minority groups or the renovation of key urban areas. Furthermore, throughout Rome’s history we find an enduring concern with the negotiation, establishment and maintenance of boundaries: the sacred *pomerium* of the ancient city that distinguishes the internal and the external, the civic and the military, for example; or boundary walls dividing wealthy districts from poor districts; or spaces marked out for ritual activity, economic activities or particular social groups. Connected to this is the theme of ‘racialization’ that characterizes several episodes in the city’s history, where groups perceived as marginal or threatening are compartmentalized socially or physically: the Jewish ghetto, for example (see Stow), or the political discourse that identified the city’s male prostitutes as foreign rather than indigenous (see Salvante).

This volume, however, with its diachronic emphasis, demonstrates that these boundaries are negotiable: matter can be put in place not only by physically moving it, but also by reconfiguring or even renaming it. As Hopkins demonstrates (this volume), Rome’s sewers could be both cleansing and polluting: they were constructed to drain Rome of its dangerous overflows, but (even as they were being built c. 600 BC), we are told, they were polluted by the crucified bodies of unwilling sewer-workers; by the early Empire, they were held up as one of the wonders of ancient Rome alongside roads and aqueducts, carrying an estimated 100,000 lb of human waste every day out into the Tiber and a focal point for religious activity to mark their

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purificatory role, but they were also where Nero is imagined washing (and so further contaminating) his bloodied hands after his nocturnal brawls; they were precisely the right place for depositing the body of the depraved emperor Elagabalus, but not that of St Sebastian, a striking example of ‘matter out of place’ dramatically represented in a painting by Lodovico Carracci (1612) commissioned for the Church of Sant’Andrea della Valle, where the saint’s body had reportedly been recovered from the sewer (see cover image).<sup>2</sup> Whether feats of hygienic engineering or sites of contamination, the sewers were potent and versatile carriers of meaning across the city’s history. And there are many other compelling examples of Roman filth reconfigured: in the hands of fullers or tanners urine could stop being human waste and become a detergent; bodies that had been in the ground long enough could lose their stigma as carriers of pollution (there is evidence for multiple burial grounds within the sacred boundary of the city); Christian corpses buried *ad sanctos* (next to the saints) were exactly where they should be; and executed criminals could be exposed in the Forum for righteous mutilation (see Bradley chapter 6). Furthermore, it is important to note that corpses on the street, dungheaps or fish-markets are not *per se* evidence of urban pollution: such sights and smells, particularly if they are part of an everyday experience, can be normalized and recalibrated. And alongside internal developments, a welter of external influences has shaped how dirt and cleanliness have been perceived within the city: the water technologies of the ancient Greek East, for example, ideas about purity circulated by resident Jews (Stow), or the religious and moral values of Victorian England (Janes). Pollution, at least in the terms this volume envisages it, is a shifting and organic component of political or cultural discourse rather than a static, objective phenomenon.

This volume is set out in two distinct halves: the first half concentrating on Rome in antiquity, and the second half on the city from the early Renaissance through to the twentieth century. We beg the reader’s indulgence in omitting a long and important stretch of the city’s history (late antiquity and the origins of Christianity, as well as the development of the medieval Church) for which the themes of pollution and propriety are pivotal: these periods have been the subject of some fascinating recent work (see pp. 28–33), and the volume’s approaches and contributions have benefited greatly from these perspectives. However, the modest aim of the present work is to persuade the reader that the city’s ancient and

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the painting’s title is misleading if this was indeed the findspot of the body: Sant’Andrea della Valle lies close to the ‘Giuditta’ sewer, not the Cloaca Maxima (see figure 5.1).

modern history alike were informed and influenced by a common set of discourses about pollution and propriety, and that the shift from antiquity to modernity and from paganism to Christianity preserved some striking similarities in Rome's approach to dirt and the strategies it developed to fight it.

The volume begins by embedding the study of pollution and propriety in Rome within the theoretical and scholarly research context in which concepts of dirt, cleanliness and purity have been most important. Bradley's opening chapter considers the impact of Mary Douglas on approaches to pollution and the significance of her seminal work *Purity and danger* (1966) on scholarship in a wide range of disciplines, as well as addressing alternative theoretical approaches to the subject and the debates that have emerged out of them. It then discusses the importance of these themes for research on the society, religion and culture of antiquity – Greece and Rome, as well as ancient Judaism and early Christianity. The chapter then considers how some of these approaches have been developed by studies of medieval Europe and the modern West, as well as exploring some of the new directions adopted by this scholarship. It finishes by discussing various considerations for approaching dirt, cleanliness and pollution in the twenty-first century, and by doing so highlights the flexibility and malleability of these concepts, as well as their intellectual potential as indices of culture.

The first half of the volume then discusses aspects of the city of Rome in antiquity, concentrating on the late Republic and early Empire. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the various manifestations of pollution and purity in the early stages of Roman society, an exercise that is familiar within scholarship on ancient Greece, but which is under-represented in work on Rome (see chapter 1, pp. 19–22). The chapter by Lennon examines several basic aspects of ancient Roman life (birth, sex, blood, death) in order to demonstrate the pervasive significance of pollution and purity in pagan society, as well as the centrality of religion and ritual in creating patterns of belief and imposing system and order on the city's inhabitants. Following on from this, Fantham discusses the formulation of pollution and purification in one area of Roman religious ritual – purification and the avoidance of pollution on public holidays in the Roman calendar year – and the way this filtered across into the community's secular life; in particular, this chapter makes an important point about the intimate relationship between washing and ritual in ancient Roman thought, and the importance of water (and the Tiber) in achieving states of purification. These two chapters, then, critically assess the terms in which pollution and propriety could be formulated and described in the initial phases of the city's history, and set out some

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preliminary parameters for understanding and approaching these concepts in the rest of the volume.

The three chapters that follow examine the ways in which notions of pollution and purity helped give the ancient city physical shape, by exploring the establishment and negotiation of boundaries at critical stages in Roman historical development and considering how the very process of urban cleansing could be incorporated into the city's religious and symbolic system. These chapters draw together important recent work on Roman urban sanitation, its significance for the city's early political and legal developments, and its thematic and metaphorical currency within contemporary literature and rhetoric (see pp. 22–5). Davies' chapter discusses urban planning during the Republic, when the city was expanding faster than at any other period, and considers Roman attitudes to the quintessential taboo, death and burial, and how these attitudes dictated the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside', between clean and unclean, as well as how Republican politicians directed their professional careers to establishing and reinforcing urban sanitation and cleanliness. Hopkins then focuses attention on a single urban monument by examining the ambivalent representation of the magnificent ancient sewer (the Cloaca Maxima) – simultaneously a miracle of engineering for purging the city and a receptacle and focal point for the city's dirt and impurity. Bradley maintains the emphasis of the previous two chapters on topography and dirt removal, but extends it into the sphere of criminal behaviour and punishment by examining a critical part of the urban landscape in which the capital punishment of Rome's criminals was carried out, the Capitoline Hill complex (with its execution chamber, sewer channels and Tarpeian rock). He argues that criminality in legal rhetoric and across the full range of Latin literature became analogous to the literal pollution that so much of the city's infrastructure was designed to remove, and explores the creative representation of crime and punishment within the city's landscape. Like chapters by Davies and Hopkins, this chapter draws attention to the distinctive symbolic and intellectual currency attached to the process of waste disposal in ancient Rome. Collectively, these three chapters demonstrate how a seemingly narrow aspect of ancient urban development could permeate social, religious and cultural life, and point forward to themes in the city's more recent politics, religion and law that are explored by the volume's later chapters.

The final chapter on the ancient city, by Schultz, pursues similar concerns about the organization of space by examining strategies in pagan Rome for disposing of individuals whose actions or behaviour had threatened the religious establishment and made their presence polluting to the city. This

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chapter corroborates anthropological arguments about the role of religion as a mechanism for social control, as well as the thesis championed by Mary Douglas that purity and pollution were central discourses in this process (see p. 12). Schultz revisits a classic problem of Roman religious ritual – the live interment of transgressive Vestal Virgins – and considers the traditions of this practice alongside other expiatory rituals in Roman religion that involved expulsion and elimination, patterns of Roman pagan behaviour that would shape and influence early Christian approaches to heresy and dissidence.

Part II of the volume then shifts the focus on to the city in modernity, beginning with plague and bodily pollution in fifteenth-century Rome and scrutinizing the themes of pollution and propriety across each major phase of Rome's modern history. Chapters 8 and 9 address a theme that was critical to both ancient and medieval urban culture and the history of medicine: the effects of disease on politics and urban management, as well as the establishment's exploitation of disease as a tool of social and political control (for a discussion of some of these ideas, see pp. 28–31). Assonitis examines the treatises and sermons of the fifteenth-century Dominican friar Fra Girolamo Savonarola, who, drawing upon the language of contemporary medical culture, presented the Roman Church as a diseased body, and the city of Rome as a plague-stricken graveyard for pagan morals and behaviour. Assonitis focuses on a familiar theme in recent scholarship on urban history and the study of pollution: the somatization of the city and the use of anatomical and medical language to negotiate and evaluate its values and morals. Gentilcore then discusses the Roman plague of 1656 and the attitudes adopted by the authorities in treating and controlling the outbreak; by examining their willingness to bargain over the health of Rome's inhabitants with one particular Neapolitan 'alchemist', Gentilcore discusses the character of this epidemic in Rome (and in other Italian cities), and the quest for new and effective remedies to fight it. These two chapters consider the extent to which the outbreak of disease, and its effects and treatment, were discussed and evaluated within the city in comparable ways at different stages in Rome's history.

The next three chapters, which address the theme of sanitation and renovation, return to some of the ideas explored in earlier chapters on ancient urban management, by examining various efforts in the history of Rome from the early modern period to the late nineteenth century to fix Rome's prevailing reputation as a city of dirt, disease and corruption through the zoning of particular regions, the public supply of water and the renovation



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of buildings and districts. Chapters 10, 11 and 12 explore spatial aspects of cleansing and sanitation, and the association of particular areas with perceived sources of pollution within the local population. Stow begins by discussing the marginalization of Rome's ghettoized Jews in the late sixteenth century and the means by which this section of the Roman community dealt with poor urban sanitation; by doing so, he addresses the issue of urban zoning in early modern Rome, the stigmatization of minority groups, and the discourses of purity and pollution with which contemporary social issues were described. Rinne then surveys papal efforts in this same period to improve urban sanitation by renovating the city's water supply and infrastructure and thereby symbolically cleansing both the city and the Church of vice and corruption; these renovations and urban cleansing programmes, she argues, were a key part of papal propaganda to reinstate Rome as the rightful centre of Christendom. Finally, Syrjämaa explores the tensions generated by differing approaches to urban space and Rome's identity, both those formulated by outsiders and those proposed by the internal authorities, once Rome had become the nation's capital in the late nineteenth century; by examining a range of visual and literary evidence from nineteenth-century Rome, this chapter explores the intellectual currency of dirtiness and cleanliness in a period of intense social and political change. These three chapters, then, highlight the continuing significance attributed to programmes of cleansing and purification in Rome's modern history and consider the relationship of these programmes to the city's longstanding associations with dirt and pollution.

The final two chapters in part II consider two modern contexts in which the city of Rome has been associated with physical and sexual immorality: first, by Victorian commentators in mid-nineteenth-century England; second, by the Fascist legal and political discourses of 1920s Rome. Deviant sexual behaviour, and its association with crime, disease and immorality, has been recognized as a critical component of Western urban society, particularly in the cities of modern Europe (see pp. 31–2), and these final chapters integrate several themes in the history of Rome explored in earlier chapters. Janes discusses the city's representation as a site of physical and moral danger by religious figures of Victorian England for whom Rome had become an evocative lesson about the dangers of decay, corruption and the seductions of the flesh. Second, Salvante explores a case study within Rome itself, concerning the regulation of 'deviant' juvenile sexuality – specifically, male prostitution – and its identification with the city's physical and moral margins. The final part of the volume, then, considers pollution discourses

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within the city's more recent history and their role in formulating and shaping aspects of Rome's current urban identity. The volume closes with a short Envoi, in which Goldstein considers the role of dirt and cleanliness as a system of communication in modern crime fiction and investigative writing set in Italy, and the enduring significance of Mary Douglas' approach to pollution for considering all aspects of this system.