Rome, Pollution and Propriety

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Rome, Pollution and Propriety

Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity

Edited by MARK BRADLEY

with Kenneth Stow

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For Mary Douglas
(1921–2007)

Mary Douglas. Photo reproduced by kind permission of the British Academy.

Contents

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Preface

This volume examines the significance of pollution and cleanliness in the art, literature, philosophy and material culture of the city of Rome during antiquity and from the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. Dirt, disease and pollution and the ways they are represented and policed have long been recognized by historians and anthropologists as occupying a central position in the formulation of cultural identity, and Rome holds a special status in the West as a city intimately associated with issues of purity, decay, ruin and renewal. In recent years, scholarship in a variety of disciplines has begun to scrutinize the less palatable features of the archaeology, history and society of Rome. This research has drawn attention to the city's distinctive historical interest in the recognition, isolation and treatment of pollution, and the ways in which politicians, architects, writers and artists have exploited this as a vehicle for devising visions of purity and propriety. And yet, in spite of the volume of research into isolated instances of filth and cleanliness at Rome, there has been no comprehensive study of the history of pollution within the city. The challenge that remains, then, is to develop a more sophisticated analysis of developments over time in one geographical location, and to situate approaches to pollution in the city of Rome more broadly within cultural anthropology and the history of ideas.

This volume focuses on the theme of 'Pollution and Propriety' and the discourses by which these two antagonistic concepts are related. How has pollution in Rome been defined, and by what means is it controlled? To what extent is dirt culturally constructed (a position championed by Mary Douglas, but currently under challenge)? If dirt is dis-order/'matter out of place', how useful is it as an index of order or social and cultural system? How does Rome's own social and cultural history affect the way states of dirt and cleanliness are formulated? Does purity always accompany political, physical or social change? How different are pagan and Christian approaches to pollution and propriety at Rome, and do these approaches change over time from ancient to modern? Does Rome's reputation as a 'city of ruins' determine how it is represented? What makes images of decay in Rome so picturesque? And what do approaches to dirt at Rome tell us about contemporary value systems?

Rome, Pollution and Propriety brings together scholars from a range of disciplines in order to examine historical continuities in dirt, disease and hygiene within one environment, and to explore the development and transformation of these ideas alongside major chapters in the city's history, such as early Roman urban development, the Roman Empire, the early Church and the Renaissance, the Unification of Italy, and the advent of Fascism. This volume sets out to identify the defining characteristics, functions and discourses of pollution in Rome in such realms as disease and medicine, death and burial, sexuality and virginity, prostitution, purity and absolution, personal hygiene and morality, criminality, bodies and cleansing, waste disposal, decay, ruins and urban renovation. It also studies the means by which that pollution was policed and controlled. By combining literary and visual material on pollution, this volume integrates areas of academic inquiry that are normally separated in scholarly research in order to identify underlying cultural patterns. Its common theme is the enduring concern for purity in its various forms, as well as the concern for the environment that is evident throughout the history of the city.

This volume will be of interest to students and scholars working in archaeology, anthropology, art history, classics, cultural history and the history of medicine, as well as anyone interested in the history, society and culture of Rome. It provides a compelling context for examining general theoretical approaches to pollution and purity, which have experienced a resurgence of interest in academic and popular circles in recent years in the form of projects, publications and exhibitions. In doing so, the volume evaluates the applicability of these models to Rome, as well as using Rome as a test study for evaluating the models themselves.

Acknowledgements

It was a conversation with the late Keith Hopkins early in 1999, while I was struggling with my MPhil dissertation at Cambridge on ancient Roman laundries, that led to the conception of this project: the Romans had some filthy habits, Keith exclaimed in his inimitable manner, and somebody needs to do a proper study of what they thought about dirt and cleanliness. After the completion of my PhD (on an altogether cleaner Roman topic), I was determined to follow Keith's advice. Following my appointment at the University of Nottingham in 2004, a grant from the British Academy allowed me to spend a summer at the British School at Rome, plumbing the depths of the city's sewers, latrines, prisons, fulleries, tombs and all the less palatable features of Roman civilization – and it became clear that Roman dirt was a subject of interest to a wide range of scholars, and not just those working on antiquity. In 2005, I met Richard Wrigley, a regular at the British School at Rome and Professor of Art History at Nottingham, who had particular interests in health, disease and hygiene and their impact on the art and architecture of early modern Rome, and we could not pass up the opportunity to team together and get our hands dirty. Together we set out to organize a conference on continuities and differences in approaches to pollution and purity across the history of the city of Rome. A two-day conference ('Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in Rome from Antiquity to Modernity') was held at the British School at Rome on 21–2 June 2007, attended by nearly a hundred people and with speakers from all over Europe, America and Australia, from such diverse disciplines as archaeology, classics, history, literary studies, the history of art, the history of medicine, sociology and anthropology. In spite of its disciplinary and chronological range, the meeting quickly established a coherent and effective interdisciplinary dialogue around the central themes of the conference, and there was an impressive level of continuity in the arguments, ideas and material presented. The conference was only possible due to generous financial support from the University of Nottingham and the indispensable resources and facilities of the British School at Rome: in particular, I would like to thank Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Elly Murkett, Geraldine Wellington and Peppe Pellegrino for making the conference run so seamlessly. Many of

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March 2012