DAILY LIFE IN A ROMAN PROVINCIAL TOWN: GRAFFITI FROM POMPEII

On the walls of the houses of Pompeii, buried and preserved by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E., many scribblings give us an idea of what the life of ordinary people was like.

- How do these graffiti differ from those one sees in a modern American city? What do they reveal about the similarities and differences between the ordinary people of ancient Rome and the people of today? How would you account for the differences?

I

Twenty pairs of gladiators of Decimus Lucretius Saturnius Valens, lifetime flamen of Nero son of Caesar Augustus and ten pairs of gladiators of Decimus Lucretius Valens, his son, will fight at Pompeii on April 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. There will be a full card of wild beast combats, and awnings [for the spectators]. Aemilius Celer [painted this sign], all alone in the moonlight.

II

Market days: Saturday in Pompeii, Sunday in Nuceria, Monday in Atella, Tuesday in Nola, Wednesday in Cumae, Thursday in Puteoli, Friday in Rome.

III

Pleasure says: "You can get a drink here for an as [a few cents], a better drink for two, Falernian for four."

IV

A copper pot is missing from this shop. 65 ses-tences reward if anybody brings it back, 20 ses-tences if he reveals the thief so we can get our property back.

V

The weaver Successus loves the innkeeper's slave girl, Iris by name. She doesn't care for him, but he begs her to take pity on him. Written by his rival. So long.

[Answer by the rival:] Just because you're bursting with envy, don't pick on a handsome man, a lady-killer and a gallant.

[Answer by the first writer:] There's nothing more to say or write. You love Iris, who doesn't care for you.

VI

Take your lewd looks and flirting eyes off another man's wife, and show some decency on your face!

VII

Anybody in love, come here. I want to break Venus' ribs with a club and cripple the goddess' loins. If she can pierce my tender breast, why can't I break her head with a club?

VIII

I write at Love's dictation and Cupid's instruction.

But damn it! I don't want to be a god without you.

IX

[A prostitute's sign:] I am yours for 2 asses cash.

ROME'S INDEPENDENT WOMEN: TWO VIEWS

In the last years of the republic and into the transition to the empire, Roman writers began to describe what might be called the "new woman." These women are pictured as wearing makeup, dressing and behaving shamelessly, and engaging in adulterous affairs. Perhaps the most shocking of their practices was to engage in sexual activity, but to refuse to have children. The following passages reveal two different approaches to the newly popular means of birth control. The first comes from Soranus, a doctor who practiced in Rome late in the first century C.E. The second comes from Ovid's poems about love.

• According to the doctors, if and when are abortion and contraception appropriate? What reasons do they have for their opinions? What arguments does Ovid make against the use of abortion? How do these ancient arguments compare with modern ones?

Soranus

For one party [of doctors] banishes abortives, citing the testimony of Hippocrates who says: "I will give to no one an abortive"; moreover, because it is the specific task of medicine to guard and preserve what has been engendered by nature. The other party prescribes abortives, but with discrimination, that is, they do not prescribe them when a person wishes to destroy the embryo because of adultery or out of consideration for youthful beauty, but only to prevent subsequent danger in parturition if the uterus is small and not capable of accommodating the complete development, or if the uterus at its orifice has knobby swellings and fissures, or if some similar difficulty is involved. And they say the same about contraceptives as well, and we too agree with them.

Ovid

She who first began the practice of tearing out her tender progeny deserved to die in her own warfare. Can it be that, to be free of the flaw of stretchmarks, you have to scatter the tragic sands of carnage? Why will you subject your womb to the weapons of abortion and give dread poisons to the unborn? The tigress lurking in Armenia does no such thing, nor does the lioness dare destroy her young. Yet tender girls do so—though not with impunity, often she who kills what is in her womb dies herself.


LIFE IN IMPERIAL ROME: THE APARTMENT HOUSE

The civilization of the Roman Empire depended on the vitality of its cities. The typical city had about 20,000 inhabitants, and perhaps only three or four had a population of more than 75,000. The population of Rome, however, was certainly greater than 500,000, perhaps more than a million. People coming to Rome for the first time found it overwhelming and its size, hustle, and noise either thrilled or horrified them. The rich lived in elegant homes called domus. These were single-storied houses with plenty of space, an open central courtyard, and rooms designed for specific and different purposes, such as dining, sitting, or sleeping, in privacy and relative quiet. Though only a small portion of Rome's population lived in them, domus took up as much as a third of the city's space. Public space for temples, markets, baths, gymnasiaums, theaters, forums, and governmental buildings took up another quarter of Rome's territory.

This left less than half of Rome's area to house the mass of its inhabitants, who were squeezed into multiple dwellings that grew increasingly tall. Most Romans during the imperial period lived in apartment buildings called insulae, or "islands," that rose to a height of five or six stories and some-
The satirical poet Juvenal lived and worked in Rome in the late first and early second centuries C.E. His poems present a vivid picture of the material and cultural world of the Romans of his time. In the following passages, he tells of the discomforts and dangers of life in the city, both indoors and out.

What dangers awaited pedestrians in Juvenal’s Rome? Who had responsibility for the condition of Rome? If the situation was as bad as he says, why was nothing done about it? Why did people choose to live in Rome at all under the conditions he describes?

Who, in Praeneste’s cool, or the wooded Volscian uplands,
Who, on Tivoli’s heights, or a small town like Gabii, say,
Fears the collapse of his house? But Rome is supported on pippets,
Matchsticks, it’s cheaper, so, for the landlord to shore up his ruins,
Patch up the old cracked walls, and notify all the tenants
They can sleep secure, though the beams are in ruins above them.
No, the place to live is out there, where no cry of Fire!
Sounds the alarm of the night, with a neighbor yelling for water,
Moving his chattels and goods, and the whole third story is smoking.

Look at other things, the various dangers of nighttime.
How high it is to the cornice that breaks, and a chunk beats my brains out,
Or some slob heaves a jar, broken or cracked, from a window.
Bang! It comes down with a crash and proves its weight on the sidewalk.
You are a thoughtless fool, unmindful of sudden disaster,
If you don’t make your will before you go out to have dinner.
There are as many deaths in the night as there are open windows
Where you pass by, if you’re wise, you will pray, in your wretched devotions,
People may be content with no more than emptying slop jars.

_Society_ Seen from the harsh perspective of human history, the first two centuries of the Roman Empire deserve their reputation of a “golden age.” One of the dark sides of Roman society, at least since the third century B.C.E., had been its increasing addiction to the brutal contests involving gladiators. By the end of the first century C.E., emperors regularly appealed to this barbaric entertainment as a way of winning the acclaim of their people. (See “Seneca Describes Gladiatorial Shows,” page 164, and “Encountering the Past: Chariot Racing,” page 162.) On broader fronts in Roman society, by the second century C.E., troubles were brewing that foreshadowed the difficult times ahead. The literary efforts of the time reveal a flight from the present, from reality, and from the public realm to the past, to romance, and to private pursuits. Some of the same aspects may be seen in everyday life, especially in the decline of vitality in the local government.

In the first century C.E., members of the upper classes vied with one another for election to municipal office and for the honor of doing service to their communities. By the second century C.E., the emperors had to intervene to correct abuses in local affairs and even to force unwilling members of the ruling classes to accept public office. Magistrates and council members were held personally and collectively responsible for the revenues due. Some magistrates even fled to avoid their office, a practice that became widespread in later centuries.

These difficulties reflected more basic problems. The prosperity that the end of civil war and the influx of wealth from the East brought could
Roman society was never gentle, but by imperial times the public had become addicted to brutal public displays of violence in the form of combats involving gladiators. At first, gladiators were enslaved prisoners of war or condemned criminals, but later, poverty drove free men to enter the combats. They were all trained in schools by professional trainers. The following selection by Seneca gives an unfriendly account of the shows and of the spectators who watched them.

- What does Seneca think of the gladiatorial contests? What does he think of the spectators? Who were the gladiators? What was the attitude of the spectators toward them? What do such entertainments say about the society in which they take place?

Do they have any effect on the character of that society?

I

charred to stop in at a midday show, expecting fun, wit, and some relaxation, when men's eyes take respite from the slaughter of their fellow men. It was just the reverse. The preceding combats were merciful by comparison; now all trilling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no protective covering. Their entire bodies are exposed to the blows, and no blow is ever struck in vain. In the morning men are thrown to the lions and the bears, at noon they are thrown to their spectators. The spectators call for the slayer to be thrown to those who in turn will slay him, and they detain the victor for another butchering. The outcome for the combatants is death, the fight is waged with sword and fire. This goes on while the arena is free. "But one of them was a highway robber, he killed a man!" Because he killed he deserved to suffer this punishment; granted. . . . "Kill him! Lash him! Burn him! Why does he meet the sword so timidly? Why doesn't he kill boldly? Why doesn't he die game! Whip him to meet his wounds! Let them trade blow for blow, cheats bare and within reach!" And when the show stops for intermission, "Let's have men killed meanwhile! Let's have nothing going on!"

known as the Pharisees, the group that was most strict in its adherence to Jewish law. He took part in the persecution of the early Christians until his own conversion outside Damascus about 35 C.E., after which he changed his name from Saul to Paul.

The great problem facing the early Christians was to resolve their relationship to Judaism. If the new faith was a version of Judaism, then it must adhere to the Jewish law and seek converts only among Jews. James, called the brother of Jesus, was a conservative who held to that view, whereas the Hellenist Jews tended to see Christianity as a new and universal religion. To force all converts to follow Jewish law would have been fatal to the growth of the new sect. Jewish law's many technicalities and dietary prohibitions were strange to Gentiles, and the necessity of circumcision—a frightening, painful, and dangerous operation for adults—would have been a tremendous deterrent to conversion. Paul supported the position of the Hellenists and soon won many converts among the Gentiles. After some conflict within the sect, Paul won out. Consequently, the "apostle to the Gentiles" deserves recognition as a crucial contributor to the success of Christianity.

Paul believed that the followers of Jesus should be evangelists (messengers), to spread the gospel, or "good news," of God's gracious gift. He taught that Jesus would soon return for the Day of Judgment, and that all who would, should believe in him and accept his way. Faith in Jesus as the Christ was necessary, but not sufficient, for salvation, nor could good deeds alone achieve it. That final blessing of salvation was a gift of God's grace that would be granted to all who asked for it.
suspected. The love feasts were erroneously reported to be scenes of sexual scandal. The alarming doctrine of the actual presence of Jesus' body in the Eucharist was distorted into an accusation of cannibalism.

The privacy and secrecy of Christian life and worship ran counter to a traditional Roman dislike of any private association, especially any of a religious nature. Christians thus earned the reputation of being "haters of humanity." Claudius expelled them from Rome, and Nero tried to make them scapegoats for the great fire that struck the city in 64 C.E. By the end of the first century, "the name alone"—that is, simple membership in the Christian community—was a crime.

But, for the most part, the Roman government did not take the initiative in attacking Christians in the first two centuries. When one governor sought instructions for dealing with the Christians, the emperor Trajan urged moderation. Christians were not to be sought out, anonymous accusations were to be disregarded, and anyone denounced could be acquitted merely by renouncing Christ and sacrificing to the emperor. (See "Christians in the Roman Empire.") Unfortunately, no true Christian could meet the conditions, and so there were martyrdoms.

Mobs, not the government, started most persecutions in this period. However, though they lived quiet, inoffensive lives, some Christians

**CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

Pliny the Younger was governor of the Roman province of Bithynia in Asia Minor about 112 B.C.E. Confronted by problems caused by Christians, he wrote to the emperor Trajan to report his policies and to ask for advice. The following exchange between governor and emperor provides evidence of the challenge Christianity posed to Rome and the Roman response.

**Questions:** What objections did the Roman state have to the Christians? On what grounds did Pliny punish them? What procedures did Trajan recommend? Why those and not others?

**TO THE EMPEROR TRAJAN**

Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them.

In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians, if they confessed it, I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither . . . .

**TRAJAN TO PLYN**

The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people, when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished, with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion). Informations without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.

AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS DESCRIBES
THE PEOPLE CALLED HUNS

Ammianus Marcellinus was born about 330 C.E. in Syria, where Greek was the lan-
guage of his well-to-do family. After a military career, he lived in Rome and wrote
an encyclopedic Latin history of the empire, covering the years 395 to 378 C.E. and
giving special emphasis to the difficulties of the fourth century. Here he describes
the Huns, one of the barbarous peoples pressing on the frontiers. Like most Romans,
these nomadic peoples appalled him. His account combines observation, hearsay,
and prejudice, and it is not always easy to separate facts from fantasy.

- How did the culture of the Huns differ from that of the Romans? How did their
  way of life give them an advantage against Rome? How was it disadvantageous?
- Which of the writer's statements do you think are factual?

The people called Huns, barely mentioned in ancient records, live beyond the sea of
Azof, on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel. At the
very moment of birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron, in order
that the hair, instead of growing at the proper season on their faces, may be hindered by the
scars; accordingly, the Huns grow up without beards, and without any beauty. They all have
closely knit and strong limbs and plump necks; they are of great size, and low legged, so that
you might fancy them two-legged beasts or the stout figures which are hewn out in a rude
manner with an ax on the posts at the end of bridges.

They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth, and are so hardy that they nei-
ther require fire nor well-flavored food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the
fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing it
between their own thighs and the backs of their horses.

They never shelter themselves under roofed
houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily
avoid sepulchers as things not fit for common
use. Nor is there even to be found among them a
cabin thatched with reeds; but they wander
about, roaming over the mountains and the
woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost
and hunger and thirst from their very cradles....

There is not a person in the whole nation
who cannot remain on his horse day and night.
On horseback they buy and sell, they take their
meat and drink, and there they recline on the
narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep so
deep as to indulge in every variety of dream.

And when any deliberation is to take place on
any weighty matter, they all hold their common
council on horseback. They are not under kirly
authority, but are contented with the irregular
government of their chiefs, and under their lead
they force their way through all obstacles.


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