

**Toner, Jerry, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome*.**

Polity, Cambridge, 2009. Softcover, 248 pages, RRP \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-4310-6

This is an insightful discussion and analysis of daily details covering five broad areas of interest, and should inspire any historian by its lush portrayal of life for the typical Roman. Toner covers five broad areas of popular culture that are often neglected in Roman studies- problem solving, mental health, the senses, popular resistance, and the amusements of the poor. The author's use of sources is exemplary in breadth and insight, making this a most fascinating encounter with the Roman non-elite.

Toner discusses each topic in depth while also relating it to broader social issues, and this is one of the most valuable aspects of his book. For example, while the chapter "Common Scents, Common Senses" may at first glance appear to concern a fringe topic, Toner shows the political and social implications of various smells, colours and textures. Life for the non-elite Roman was in many ways defined by these elements, and one of the most distinguishing features of the elite was their avoidance of and distance from plebeian smell. Toner discusses the role of appropriate sensory experiences as an educational and political control tool, dispersed by the emperors among the people to ensure that the public was maintained in correct social order. He also covers perfuming of the male elite, woman's hairstyling, and the very earthy realities of kitchen smoke, sewers, flatulence and forged gemstones. Of particular note are his quotes related to the various interpretations of dreams, showing how the imagination was shaped by smells, colours and the sensual.

The chapter on popular resistance discusses the subtle acts of defiance by the non-elite, nibbling away at the fringes of power and testing the boundaries of the rich. Toner provides many examples of popular opposition including quotes from Aesop's fables to philosophical advice to grassroots humour, and shows how slaves were at times even able to manipulate their owners. His section on women's power is too short although this has been covered elsewhere. Of particular interest is his analysis of various religious cults including Christianity as subversive movements, and his discussion is well-nuanced and insightful.

The chapter on mental health discusses the oft-neglected subject of how people coped with the many stresses of a life of near-poverty. Bringing insights from modern psychology together with Roman advice on mental health reveals some fascinating clues about how Romans felt and coped. His chapter on problem-solving likewise discusses the everyday realities of how to understand painful events and prepare for the future, and Toner's use of sources in relation to the use of oracles etc is marvelous.

He writes about Roman popular amusements with humour and irony, making connections to schoolyard joking today. His presentation of how the rich perceived the humour of the poor adds to the vibrancy of the picture of class distinctions which is demonstrated throughout the book. Nowhere is the material dry, indeed Toner analyses and demonstrates the implications of all his material.

Toner uses frequent quotes to exemplify his points, including many extensive passages from key Roman historians. These quotes do not overwhelm but enhance the discussion and demonstrate an excellent depth and breadth. There are good endnotes and some telling pictures which in total create a rich mosaic of how life was for the non-elite. This is an excellent book for its wealth of detail and depth of insight. Toner has succeeded in bringing to life the everyday experience of the Roman masses in vivid colour.

John D'Alton  
Monash University