Alexandra Croom

*Running the Roman Home. History Press Series.*


Alexandra Croom, Keeper of Archaeology at Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, presents in this volume a useful synthesis of current scholarship concerning daily lived life in ancient Rome. As her introduction points out, the ‘everyday life’ of Romans is usually presented to us as continual trips to the amphitheatre and eating to excess at orgiastic dinners. Croom’s subject is the more mundane: ‘doing the washing up and taking out the rubbish’. Her subject is also universal, covering the wide strata of Roman urban society as well as rural areas and middling sized towns across the Empire. She also indicates where practices have changed over time, though many seem to exist over long spans with little change at all. The introduction also serves to delineate her sources and methodology offering references to what little previous work there is on the subject, much of which she notes is brief or examines particular aspects such as women or slaves; supplying the army; the work of professional fullers; and the disposal of pottery.

Croom’s sources are literary, archaeological and artistic. While acknowledging the rarity of the mundane aspects of Roman life as a research topic, she draws her evidence from objects often familiar to us from their presentation as museum exhibits dissociated from their original purpose and place, bellying their origin as humble domestic tools and utensils. By utilising evidence from relief carvings on tombs, parallels from anthropology and ethnography and the results of experimental archaeology, everyday items are given their proper context.

Housework, as might be expected, is almost never referred to or described specifically by Roman authors or represented by artists but is alluded to fleetingly. Archaeolog-
gy, especially in previous generations, may have often overlooked evidence for many quotidian housekeeping practices (for instance, river stones used as linen ‘smoothers’ have probably been routinely overlooked as artefacts). As such, this book is a timely reminder of the necessity for a closer and more informed examination of sites and artefacts.

Croom’s approach is highly structured. She deals with ‘Supply’ (with chapters on collecting water and fuel, producing flour and cloth); ‘Maintenance’ (chapters on cleaning, lighting and washing clothes and utensils); and ‘Disposal’ (chapters on waste water and sewage and rubbish). The chapters are also structured internally as outlined in the Introduction. While this necessarily leads to some overlap and duplication of basic information, it also facilitates ‘dipping in’ as each chapter is arranged under similar headings.

Croom also makes excellent use of analogies with what we know of human practices across time and space. She cites as an example the collection of urine to finish home spun tweeds in the Hebrides as late as the 1930s, or the amounts and kinds of fuel necessary to run the public hamams of Morocco. These comparisons allow for deductions as to how long these tasks took in Roman times; what effort was necessary to accomplish them; the impacts they made on the lives of those carrying them out; and on the environment in which they occurred. The statistics on the amount of firewood needed to fuel an oven and the costs of procuring it (especially in the city); the quantity of water that had to be fetched daily for cleaning, cooking or washing; and the hours of labour necessary to produce flour for daily meals reinforce the necessity of slave labour to accomplish these tasks, leaving free Roman citizens to run an empire.

Twenty colour illustrations inserted centrally in the book are well chosen, as are the line drawings and figures used liberally in the text. The index is clear and comprehensive, and an eclectic bibliography (to 2009) complements the text. The presence of some obvious typographical errors (‘mangers’ (8); ‘he is put some effort’ (88); ‘Euxdoxus’ (56)) does not greatly detract from the overall impression of clear and accurate text. The text is probably not as comprehensive as it could be but Croom admittedly deals with the very basics of daily necessities, and not with every activity
that took place in a household.

Overall this is a fascinating compendium and a clear signpost as to where the gaps in our knowledge lie, along with suggestions as to where to look for the evidence to fill them. If you are keen to learn how the Romans polished ivory (using rough fish skin and radishes), fumigated for bugs (by roasting leeches or centipedes) or what they used for nappies, I recommend this book to you.

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