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Gregory S. Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia.* Norman: University Of Oklahoma Press, 2009. 278 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-4027-8.

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Visions of Roman Urbanism?

Aphorisms of the city of Rome pepper our everyday communication: "All roads lead to Rome." "Rome wasn't built in a day." "When in Rome ..." As Gregory Aldrete describes in the introduction to *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*, these commonplaces "reflect the cultural, religious, and historical significance of the city" (p. 4). More than this, these phrases indicate the formative role Rome plays in the modern conception of urbanism. The city is both the origin and destination of infrastructure; a constantly changing entity that involves both logical planning and organic evolution; the provider of both the strictures of behavior and freedom of expression that can define a civilization. As masses of contradiction and compromise, all cities in this way defy linear scholarly analysis, and when the city in question is buried beneath two thousand years of urban accretion, the task becomes even more daunting. Aldrete has thus set himself the admirable task of making the myriad perils and pleasures of the Roman urban experience accessible to general readers and students of Roman civilization, so that "by studying how the Romans faced these problems, we can perhaps gain some insights into how to handle them today" (p. 23). While Aldrete succeeds in providing a thoroughly readable reference work supported with notable statistics and thought-provoking anecdotes, *Daily Life in the Roman City* omits many broader issues that could provide a theoretical underpinning for the work, the "visions of Roman urbanism" claimed in the conclusion.

The subject of Roman daily life, and specifically in the urban environment, has been the focus of many useful volumes published in the last twenty years. Several of the seminal works in English are cited in the bibliography but Aldrete's most obvious cohorts are J. E. Stambaugh's *The Ancient Roman City* (1988), Amanda Claridge's *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (1998), and Peter Connelly and Hazel Dodge's *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens and Rome* (1998). These earlier books are typically required reading for undergraduate courses on the city of Rome, and thus focus specifically on the monuments of the capital, their visual relationship to each other, and their diachronic evolution. Aldrete, as a historian and professor of Western culture and classical civilization, has created a text for use in these broader fields, with greater emphasis on major cultural themes rather than chronological or topographical analysis. In this way, *Daily Life in the Roman City* can also be likened to the thematic sourcebooks dealing with Roman culture, such as Jo-Ann Shelton's *As the Romans Did* (1998) and David Cherry's *The Roman World* (2001), and indeed Aldrete quotes or paraphrases a wide array of primary-source materials throughout.

Despite the similarities to many existing works, Aldrete's volume departs from its predecessors in his attempt to craft a work that is both comprehensive and systematic. Following a detailed historical overview (chapter 2), the volume includes chapters on many typical subjects, such as "The Roman Government," "People," "Entertainment," "Religion" (chapters 4, 5, 9, 10), but these seemingly mundane themes are studded with gems of information not often described with such precision and clarity (for example, Aldrete's detailed account of the Roman ritual for declaring war). The chapters that form the core of the book, "The Dangers of Life" and "The Pleasures of Life" (chapters 7 and 8), are also the most original and successful at conveying the complexities of both living in and studying the ancient Roman city. The former chapter partly draws on Aldrete's particular expertise in the history of the floods of the Tiber River,[1] making fascinating connections between disasters and the urban systems treated elsewhere in the volume, such as the sewers (in chapter 3) and the food supply (in chapter 12). "The Pleasures of Life" includes a lengthy section on Roman sex and sexuality, employing the poetry of Catullus

and Ovid in a typical fashion but then offsetting this elite evidence with data concerning birth control and prostitution from medical sources and inscriptions. Aldrete takes great pains throughout the volume to reiterate key pieces of information and anecdotes, thus for the most part the chapters and sections may be read independently or out of sequence. Yet Aldrete's creative organization loses its cohesion towards the end of *Daily Life in the Roman City;* several topics without logical positioning elsewhere (Roman dress, Roman money, etc.) are relegated to appendices. The final chapters on Ostia and Pompeii (chapters 13 and 14) are also somewhat motley, primarily presenting evidence not well represented in Rome itself (apartment buildings, guild structures, graffiti etc.). While the individual histories of these two cities are recounted in some detail, their urban environments are not systematically analyzed to provide meaningful comparison or contrast with the capital. Aldrete seems aware of this situation in his final pages, and here attempts to draw out Ostia and Pompeii's contrasting "visions of urbanism," but in the end undercuts their significance. "What gives them their similarity is what bound together all cities across the empire: a uniformity of Roman culture and architecture that was derived from the capital city" (p. 237).

Thus *Daily Life in the Roman City*, while providing a wide array of information about Roman daily life in an eminently practical arrangement, does not truly delve into the complex topic of urbanism. While Aldrete presents several effective contrasts between individual features of ancient and modern cities (for example, Roman vs. Victorian sewers), the comprehensive function (or dysfunction) of these features within an overall system remains a cipher. The thematic organization creates the opportunity to create interesting data clusters, but it diminishes the physical and topographical experience of the Roman city, and the absence of diachronic or relational plans and drawings further contributes to this limitation; for example, the plan of Ostia could demarcate the particular buildings or general types discussed within the text to give some indication of their distribution and relationship.[2] Furthermore, Aldrete does not provide his readers access to the considerable scholarship exploring the theories of Roman urbanism. His chapter on the Roman economy broadly alludes to the "consumer city" debate explored by major urban theorists such Max Weber and Moses Finley,[3] but does not present it as a means to rigorously explore the integration of the various social, economic, and cultural systems at work within the city and the empire. Similarly, the much-contended concept of Romanization[4] is described in a simplistic manner that undermines its many complexities: the contradiction inherent in the systematic replication of an organically developing city, and the resulting influence of provincial culture and architecture on the monuments of the capital, just to name a few. Finally, by relegating the subsequent history of the city to an appendix, the influence of modern visions of Rome formed in various media from medieval poetry to fascist-era architecture and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) are not thoroughly acknowledged.[5] Admittedly, Aldrete does not have urban theorists as his intended audience, but an exploration of any of these topics could have provided students and general readers with a springboard for debate, particularly if comparative urbanism is of interest.

Of course, in dealing with a topic as vast as Roman social history and as fraught with lacunae as the urban fabric of the ancient city, an author is required to make choices and interpretations that may not please every reader. Thus despite its shortcomings, *Daily Life in the Roman City* provides a solid and practical foundation for research into virtually all aspects of Roman society. Each individual student or reader must simply look elsewhere for the theoretical framework in which to illuminate and expand that foundation (see suggestions for further reading in the notes below), and in a way, by not including a particular theory within the text Aldrete leaves the subject open to wider interpretation.

Notes

[1]. Gregory Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

[2]. For works focusing on the physical and visceral experience of the city in particular eras, see Diane Favro, *The Urban Image of Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) for a scholarly approach to the topic, and Alberto Angela, *A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome: Daily Life, Mysteries, and Curiosities* (New York: Europa Editions, 2009), for one directed at a popular audience.

[3]. This concept as it relates to the Roman city is explored in depth by C. R. Whittaker and L. Capogrossi Colognesi in *Urban Society in Roman Italy*, ed. T. J. Cornell and Kathryn Lomas (London: University College London Press, 1995), 9-26 and 27-38.

[4]. The works of Ramsay MacMullen are particularly notable on this topic, such as *Romanization in the Time of Augustus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000; see also Valerie Hope, "The City of Rome: Capital and Symbol," in *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity, and Power in*

the Roman Empire, ed. Janet Huskinson (London: Routledge, 2000), 63-94 for the cyclical relationship between the city of Rome and the provinces.

[5]. Catherine Edwards, *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); for a discussion of Mussolini's impact on Rome and its ancient monuments see Luisa Quartermaine, "Slouching towards Rome: Mussolini's Imperial Vision," in *Urban Society in Roman Italy,* 203-215; and Borden Painter, *Mussolini's Rome: Rebuilding the Eternal City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

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