

insulae: how the masses lived

Waste, washing & hygiene

With no indoor toilets and usually no running water in *insulae*, the people living in these apartments had to dispose of their waste and get their running water outside.

Source 1: Using the public latrines



These latrines in Ostia had space for 20 people at once. Water ran in the channels in front of the seats in which users could rinse the communal sponges used for cleaning oneself after using the facilities.

Public latrines, Ostia.

Despite needing to pay for entry, conditions inside these latrines would not have been pleasant. There was nothing between the customer and the sewer, and so the smell would have been considerable. Additionally it meant visitors had to worry about rats and any other creatures threatening to come up and bite their bottoms. Most dangerously, customers had to risk flames exploding between their legs from the seat openings. These were caused by explosions of hydrogen sulphide and methane which would have built up in the sewage system below.

Source 2: Dumping waste

This notice from Herculaneum, affixed to a water tower, warns people not to throw excrement into the road on penalty of a fine (for freedmen) or a beating (slaves).

M(arcus) [Alf]icius Pa[ul]lus aedil(is)
is velit in hunc locum
stercus abicere nonetur n[on]
iacere si quis adver[sus ea]
i(u)dicium fecerit liberi dent
[dena]rium n(ummum) servi
verberibus [i]n sedibus admonentur.

*'Marcus Alficius Paulus, aedile,
(declares): anyone who wants to throw
excrement in this place is warned that
it is not allowed. If someone shall
denounce this action, freeborn will pay
a fine of [...] denarii, and slaves will be
punished by [...] lashes.'*

Public notice, Herculaneum.

This sign suggests that there was a need to legislate against dumping waste - it must have happened regularly enough. The reason for the placement of this particular notice, on a water tower, might be a fear of contaminating the town's drinking water.

Source 3: the fullers

Roman fullers washed and scoured cloth and linen, both cloth as it came from the loom (to smooth it out as part of the manufacturing process), and clothes that had been worn and needed to be cleaned. In a time before washing machines, hot water taps or soap, they used different alkali, and washed clothes by treading and stamping on them in vats. The most commonly available cleaning product was urine - harvested from animals and humans! The fullers would put pots outside their establishments where passersby could donate their urine... The emperor Vespasian even went so far as to tax the fullers for allowing them to collect urine this way. Money doesn't smell, was the emperor's view.



The *fullonica* of Stephanus, in Pompeii. The basins were used for different stages in the washing process. The smells of the urine-filled vats, and the physical nature of the work must have made this a particularly unpleasant place to work...

Fullonica of Stephanus, Pompeii.

Source 4: public bathing

With no bathing facilities in most *insulae* (apart from a few exceptions of larger complexes that had their own baths attached), most inhabitants would need to go out to bathe. Public baths meant that, for a fee, all could enjoy exercise and cleanliness, but attending the baths was not necessarily as hygienic as one might think.

The baths were full of standing water that was not refreshed terribly often, and soap was not in use. Bathing therefore happened in the same bathwater as those who had come before you. The Roman doctor Celsius warns about the dangers of going to the baths with open wounds: infections must have been very common.



The women's baths in Herculaneum. The basin at the back has no mechanism for being drained. Coming to the baths early in the day would probably have made for a healthier experience.

Women's baths, Herculaneum

Source 5: the public water supply

The lack of a private water supply, made the aqueducts and fountains supplying water for public use to the city crucial to the survival of the inhabitants of towns and cities. Every effort was made to bring in fresh drinking water, from sources often dozens of kilometres away. However, the busy use of public fountains made them potentially dangerous places too.

The accumulation of garbage and excrement (and the occasional corpse and carcass) in the streets combined with overflow from the water outlets to contaminate street surfaces, created an environment that was conducive to the spread of gastroenteritis, typhoid, diarrhoea, salmonellosis and worm infection. The availability of fresh water did not automatically translate to sanitary storage and consumption!



*Pont du Gard
aqueduct, France.*

How “hygienic” were the Romans in your opinion?

Considering the sources above:
What were the dangers associated with living in an *insula*?

In what ways would people living in the grander
town houses have been better off?

Further reading:

- On the hygiene of latrines:
<http://www.popsoci.com/roman-toilets-made-public-health-worse>
- On the Herculaneum inscription:
<https://pompeiiinetworks.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/no-shit/>
- On the fullers:
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Fullo.html
- On Roman baths and hygiene:
<https://www.thoughtco.com/hygiene-in-ancient-rome-and-baths-119136>