

THE PLEASURE OF RUINS

(A non-boring non-academic Fanzine devoted to archaeological trivia)

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NON-BORING?

I once bought a hardcover book on the early Chinese dynasties. Must have cost me sixty bucks or so. I looked forward to humorous insights into Imperial politics, descriptions of fortresses and palaces, fascinating artifacts, all kinds good stuff. Giddy with anticipation I was.

Shoulda looked more closely before I bought it. Hundreds of pages devoted to different kinds of stone axes, flint arrowheads, etc. Dull and dry. Dry and dull. So I tossed it. Not what I wanted.

In other words, screw the academic approach. I don't know if any of you remember Paul MacKendrick or Michael Grant. These were tenured Professors of classics who wrote books for the general public in a detailed yet entertaining manner. Other scholars looked down on them as mere populists, but dang it I hung on every word. Good stuff.

For instance, these words by MacKendrick: "*Hadrian's most baroque flights of architectural fancy are to be seen at his villa near Tivoli, where the various complexes of buildings are scattered over an area 1000 yards one way by 500 yards the other. The buildings, which far outdid Nero's Golden House in extant and grandeur, include palaces, large and small, for manic and for depressive moods...*"

Now we're talking! Chatty, informative, opinionated – brings the past to life. In fact, sounds exactly like the sort of summer cottage I'd build if I had the means. A different building for every mood? Damned good idea! To hell with subtle differences between flint arrowheads. I want to know what it was like to live life back in the day. Were our ancestors as weird and buggered in the head as us moderns? You betcha!

So what you're going to find in these pages is my personal take on whatever fascinates me about the ancient past. Nothing objective. Nothing subject to scholarly review. Just whatever gobsmacks me.

"Come and see my flying soldiers!" – Julius Caesar.

LET US REVIEW ROMAN SEX

That got your attention, didn't it?

The Romans, and here I'm talking about the rapaciously greedy and hopelessly degenerate Senatorial and Knight classes, thought of sex as a thoroughly delightful form of recreation. No sin involved, as the concept did not exist. Sex was something you did in front of the slaves. Heck, it was something you did WITH slaves. In a sense, the entire Roman upper class was a gigantic Hippie commune. Great fun to be had if you were rich and powerful (admittedly the same today), which makes their puritanical streak all the weirder.

Yes, a puritanical streak, arising from their sense of propriety. Take Cato the Elder, a less than empathetic jerk who recommended selling your slaves as soon as they got sick so that you would realize at least some profit before they died. He proudly claimed to be heartily ashamed of having been seen kissing his wife in public. What a killjoy. What a prude. And yet, if you think this, you are mistaken.

Or take masturbation. Any soldier caught doing this was put to death. Rather extreme enforcement of public standards of morality wouldn't you say? Far from it.

The Romans didn't give a hoot about sex. Great fun, in their opinion. Heck of a hobby. What offended them was lack of self-control. In their eyes self-discipline was its own reward. It implied you were strong-minded and decisive, pre-eminent Roman attitudes to be encouraged and emulated, the cement with which they built their empire. It was "weakness" that was "sinful," giving into temptation that was unforgiveable. Something too selfish for the good of the nation.

What you did out of the public view was another matter. Any young man of the upper classes, once married, was expected to spawn successors and be content to confine his lust to slaves, concubines and mistresses. Have at it, in other words, but keep it private. Only fools wanting to cut short promising political careers would let themselves be seen cavorting in public. There was a class reputation to uphold.

Mark Antony? An exception. Ultimately did him in though, in terms of public perception. His opponent, Octavian, had as many if not more lovers than Antony, but kept quiet about it. This is the difference that led to him being named "Father of the Country" as opposed to being forced to kill himself. Amazing to what you can accomplish if you refrain from boasting.

Back to the soldiers. Not upper class. True. But the very survival of a legion depended on a cult of strength and discipline. So no masturbation. Nor marriage either. Viewed as another form of weakness hurting the unity of the legion. Marriage illegal (till late in the empire when rules relaxed) while you served. Okay to marry when you retired, assuming you survived long enough to receive your diploma, obligatory savings, and a plot of land.

Does this mean the Roman Legion entirely banished sex? Of course not. Every soldier was free to indulge in sex (without relationship entanglements) when off duty. An approved outlet you see. Every permanent camp, base and fortress had its own shadow legion of prostitutes, many of whom would travel with the army when on campaign (as followers with the baggage train) to ensure that lack of sex was never a morale problem. Practical people, the Romans.

"*Quicker than a boiled asparagus.*" – Emperor Augustus.

THE FORUM OF CUPID

One of the delights in my library was published in 1903. Titled **Rambles in Rome**, it is a guidebook written by S. Russell Forbes, P.H.D., who apparently made his living giving tours and lectures in Rome for well-heeled tourists. In fact, the book gives the impression that's all he did, which conjures up visions of a tipsy gentleman alcoholic, a scholar on the decline, nevertheless donning his threadbare best suit to overawe the ignorant. (I am probably wrong about this.)

Anyway, C.H. Spurgeon writes "*Try it, and see the difference between a mere guidebook produced by the trade to sell, and the chatty, masterly production of a writer of ability and taste.*"

There is a great deal of truth in this. The book is jammed with information from the latest excavations, crammed with appropriate classical quotes, and infinitely superior to a recent guide to Rome which summed up the Emperor Caligula as “*not being very nice.*” I’ll take erudition over condescension any day.

Not everything in the book is 100% accurate. After all, early archaeologists were still struggling to make sense of an extremely complex, multi-layered set of ruins within the context of surviving classical references. This, the ninth edition of the book, had been rushed to print with information “hot off the presses” so to speak, producing the following delightful error:

“THE FORUM OF CUPID AND ITS BASILICAE miscalled the Temple of Venus and Rome.”

The Temple is known to have been designed by the Emperor Hadrian, but because its “*remains consist of two large tribunals, back to back, with a portion of the lateral walls and vaults*” Forbes believed it could not possibly be a temple, but rather a ‘*delubrum*,’ “*an isolated building, surrounded with an area, dedicated to religious purposes.*” Forbes also seems to have believed the double-ended apse in the centre of the temple was a complete building in itself that was “*surrounded by a colonnade of grey granite, numerous fragments of which still lie about, and there was probably a forum or market place for the sale of fruit and toys.*”

Truth be told, the “colonnade” was simply the forest of columns which held up the roof of the temple. Apparently Forbes couldn’t grasp the concept. Instead he cites the following as “evidence” for his interpretation: “*Varro, Propertius, Terence, Eunuchus, contemporary writers, all speak of a macellum and forum of Cupid upon the Sacred Way. Festus, who lived in the fourth century, speaks of them under the same name; so that we may conclude that the ruins before us are the Basilicas of the Forum of Cupid, restored by Maxentius, and dedicated by Constantine.*”

This is a bit like assuming the Capital building in Washington D.C. is in fact the original Toys ‘R Us store. One of the largest and most expensive buildings the Romans ever constructed, bigger even than the Temple of Mars, does not seem a likely candidate for a relatively insignificant shopping spot dedicated to Cupid. A far more likely candidate would be the confusing tangle of brick shops from different periods located on the other side of the Sacred way a bit further up toward the Forum Romanum, ruins so insignificant in terms of potential tourist attraction they were reburied shortly after excavation.

Still, the concept that later Roman emperors, ruling a civilization whose economy was based on plunder from continuous warfare, would devote the equivalent of billions of dollars to turn a fruit and toy shopping mall into a massive monument of brick, marble, and granite honouring the great and mighty God Cupid I find utterly endearing. I mean, I know the Romans had a soft spot for children and associated kitsch, but really…

“But time will sweep away the very traces of every one of those cities whose splendour and magnificence you nowadays hear.” – Seneca.

LOOKING FOR BIG UNDERWATER LUMPY THINGS

Recently divers completed a season at the celebrated wreck site close to the Greek Island of Antikythera. They were hoping to duplicate the incredible finds when the wreck was first discovered in 1900. Not quite, though bronze rigging fittings, some nice dinnerware, and a two metre bronze spear poking out of the sand were hopeful signs goodies are still to be found.

Back in 1900 “two Greek sailing galleys, each carrying twenty-two oars for use in calms,” manned with sponge divers took shelter from a storm behind the island. Captain Demetrios Kondas figured they might as well look for sponges while waiting for the storm to die down. He ordered diver Elias Stadiatus into his hardhat diving suit to take a look.

“Stadiatis landed in a nightmare. Around him in the sand stood monumental white horses and human figures in the blue gloaming. Some of the horses rolled hoofs up, and nude women, sunk to the waist, stared at him with sightless eyes. Among the white figures he saw the dark, reaching limbs of bronze statues.”

The sponge divers were canny enough to contact the Greek Government. A deal was soon reached. The sponge divers would go back and, aided by a Greek Navy ship with a powerful crane, haul up whatever they could find for a cash fee depending on the nature of the piece. Interestingly “*it was the first time Greeks had run a Greek archaeological expedition.*”

What they found is justly famous. To name just two of the artifacts: A bronze statue fashioned by Lysippus, the court sculptor of Alexander the Great, the only statue surviving of the more than five hundred he is known to have created. And the famous tooth-geared computer astrolabe thingie, revealed once it had been cleared of encrustations. But after one man died from the bends and two others paralysed (the wreck site over 50 metres down), work came to a halt.

Ever since, generations of archaeologists have dreamed of going back. Now that a brief survey has shown the site still holds its secrets, albeit buried beneath the sand, it only remains to return and dredge out the sand. Should be easy. The old sponge divers, with the aid of the crane, had cleared away all the useless giant rocks that encumbered the site, lifting them and carrying them out to sea before dropping them into deeper waters. Nothing but clean, simple sand to dig through.

Here’s the thing. They may be looking in the wrong place. The bulk of the ship had been hidden beneath those annoying large rocks that were so hard to make out in the dim light. Just as the last of them, an especially huge chunk, was being lifted out to sea back in 1901, one of the archaeologists had a sudden thought.

“Despite the Captain’s protests, Stais ordered the block brought to the surface. The steam winch whirred. The ship leaned farther and farther. Then a monumental figure appeared on the surface: a Hercules of marble.”

Those weren’t rocks they’d been throwing away into the depths. They were part of the cargo. Giant statues.

It is to arrggh! Somebody should go look for them. Great big lumpy underwater things. Worth finding.

*“Is it not plain lunacy to lose ten thousand on the turn of a dice,
yet grudge a shirt to your shivering slave?” – Juvenal.*

THE ORIGINAL SIMPLE SIMON

Simon the shoe-maker had a shop in the agora, or marketplace, of Athens in the time of Socrates. In fact, he was a personal friend of Socrates who often used to hang out at his shop shooting the breeze (and annoying) anyone who walked by. This was not at all unusual or uncommon in those days. Citizens loved to spend time cluttering up places of business as if they had nothing better to do (and they probably didn’t).

Theophrastus wrote of gossip mongers “*In what Stoa, in what shop, in what part of the agora do they not spend the day?*”

And Isokrates commented “*We sit in the shops denouncing the present order.*”

What drove people nuts about Socrates was that he would ask simple questions which inevitably lead his listener to denounce the present order very much against their will. No wonder they had him executed. Too much of a smart ass was Socrates.

Anyway, archaeologists believe they found Simon’s shop, which, typical of most shops, was built into a small house of few rooms, but in this case equipped with its own well and cesspit. Just think! Socrates may have drank from this well. He may have... never mind.

Assorted finds including cobbler’s nails, bone rings (eyelets for sandal laces) and a fragment of a cup with the name “Simon” incised on it, which, while not definitive proof, combined with the shop’s location at the southwest edge of the agora and the era the shop existed certainly suggest it was indeed the famous haunt of Socrates as mentioned by Diogenes Laertius centuries later. The latter apparently found it amusing Socrates would discuss philosophy with a mere cobbler, but Socrates probably considered Simon wiser than many a self-important “better” citizen.

Anyway, if you are ever in Athens, find the site of Simon’s shop in the agora and engage the first person to wander by in a conversation to prove he’s an idiot. You’ll be carrying on a hallowed tradition more than 2,500 years old. Just be prepared to take to your heels quick like a bunny. People don’t like being tricked into revealing how dumb they really are, as Socrates ultimately discovered. Hemlock, anyone?

“*This ‘Know Thyself’ is a silly proverb in some ways, to know the man next door is a much more useful rule.*” – Menander.

STONEHENGE BULLSHIT

Something about Stonehenge discombobulates people and sends them raving off in all directions. Recently a rather breathless announcement on Facebook spoke of some scholar (probably a student) translating an old English poem dating from the dark ages which he claims describes Stonehenge. After all, its reference to “uncapped stones” couldn’t possibly refer to anything else. With a little further mental effort the translator hoped to tease the “name” of Stonehenge out of the poem, in other words whatever people back in the dark ages called the site.

Probably: “*useless heap of bloody stones too big to move,*” or “*some idiot’s monument to himself,*” or “*most expensive gazebo I’ve ever seen.*”

Thing is, I know this poem. It’s titled **The Ruin** and is believed to be the oldest surviving English poem. It was composed about three centuries after the Romans left Britain. Here are a few bits of it as translated by Michael Alexander for Penguin Classics.

*Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst...*

*Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
The work of the Giants, the stonesmiths,
Moulderith.*

*Wall stood,
Grey lichen, red stone, kings fell often,
Stood under storms, high arch crashed –
Stands yet the wall stone, hacked by weapons,
By files grim-ground...*

*Therefore are these courts dreary
And that red arch twisteth tiles,
Wryeth from the roof-ridge, reacheth groundwards...
Broken blocks...*

*Stood stone houses; wide streams welled
Hot from source, and a wall all caught
In its bright bosom, that the baths were
Hot at hall's hearth; that was fitting.*

*Thence hot streams, loosed, ran over the hoar stone
Unto the ring tank...
...It is a kingly thing
...city...*

Exactly. Talking about the ruins of a city, a Roman city, evidently noted for its still functioning hot spring. This can only be Aquae Sulis, now known as Bath, and STILL known for its hot spring.

Nothing at all to do with Stonehenge. Nothing.

Sure is one heck of an evocative poem though.

“To refrain from imitation is the best revenge.” – Marcus Aurelius

TO SUM UP THIS NONSENSE

I love archaeology and will read a six hundred page textbook just to come away with a single anecdote shedding light on the dim and distant past.

Properly presented, I believe the ancient world can be quite entertaining to read about, especially the obscure stuff that never gets into the movies and is rarely mentioned in TV documentaries.

I like to think that my slightly-off-the-wall take on things adds to the amusement value.

This short first issue, a mere 6 pages, is a trial run at producing a humorous newsletter for people who've never been exposed to just how much fun archaeology can be. I find it stirs my sense of wonder every bit as much as science fiction does. How does what you read here appeal to you? What do YOU think of this?