



Imperial Rome and Ostia

Water and sanitation in Imperial Rome

COLIN CHANT:

Bath buildings were directly connected to Ostia's public water supply, as were some wealthy people's houses like this fairly late example, the so-called House of Cupid and Psyche. This area of the house is the nymphaeum, the main function of which was the ornamental play of water. Connected to terracotta water pipes, the ends of which are visible in the marble-clad podium, there would have been ornamental water spouts. The terracotta pipes in their turn connected to lead piping running behind the podium. Lead pipes carried water within the city from the aqueduct which supplied Ostia. One actual piece of lead piping remains, though most of this valuable material has been stripped from the remains of the city. A private supply like this was untypical of imperial Rome and Ostia. Most inhabitants of insulae carried their water from public or communal fountains.

JANET DELAINE:

According to our literary sources, which again fill us in on the details which don't appear in the archaeological record, there were certainly night soil carts to remove human excreta from the city of Rome, and there are sufficient jokes about chamber pots, particularly in apartment buildings, for us to realise that this must have been a very common part of Roman life. There were however latrines in many of the apartment blocks at Ostia that we've been able to discover and there were also public latrines particularly situated, near the baths and around the forum, that is in the two areas where you get the greatest concentration of people.

COLIN CHANT:

At this public latrine in Ostia, running water was used to flush the excreta away into the main drains and thence to the river Tiber. Members of the public using the latrine could dip sponges in water running down these channels, in order to clean themselves. As well as public latrines, large pots were sunk into the ground beside streets, or by shop entrances, to collect urine for the fullery.