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# Review of: Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World

Max Nelson  
*University of Windsor*

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**Andrew Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Pp. x, 335. ISBN 0-415-18624-2. \$35.**

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**Reviewed by Max Nelson, Department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies,  
University of British Columbia**

Word count: 1726 words

In 1990, Oswyn Murray suggested that the history of pleasure be "established as an autonomous field of investigation", particularly in terms of pleasure "as an essential motivating force in the development of cultures".<sup>1</sup> Murray's student James Davidson has written an exciting history of pleasure in classical Athens, concentrating especially, though not exclusively, on food, drink, and sex.<sup>2</sup> Andrew Dalby (D. henceforth), though he does not explicitly place himself within this scholarly tradition, certainly is closely linked to it.

D.'s *Empire of Pleasures* is in a sense a companion volume to his *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (London and New York 1996) (reviewed by Gwen Compton-Engle at BMCR 96.04.29). Just as the latter is a useful starting point and sourcebook for any investigation into food in ancient Greece, *Empire of Pleasures* is a solid introductory study of food in the Roman Empire. It is an ambitious, attractive, and sensuous work full of a great deal of very fascinating and wide-ranging material, beautifully presented, nicely written (with lively translations), and extremely well cross-referenced between pages (though a reference to the elusive p. 000 appears at 155, 189, and 241). It is a book which causes one to be hungry and thirsty, and which makes the Roman world come alive as few non-fictional monographs can.

In the introduction (Chapter 1) D. explains that his enterprise is an attempt at reconstructing the mental "geography of luxury" as portrayed in the literature of Imperial Rome; thus he is dealing not with how things were but how they seemed or how they were sensed or imagined by the average ancient reader (ix and 2) and how they were portrayed by litterateurs or "generalists" rather than experts (see 228-229 on the poetic imagination). D.'s maxim is "never trust documents" (248). The main sources of the book are thus the poetry and literary prose of the Roman Empire, mostly from about 50 B.C. to A.D. 150 and mainly in Latin and Greek, but also Aramaic (3); other literature (called "secondary" sources) are used to clarify but not, at least ostensibly, supplement this evidence (273, n. 4). In fact this book is on the whole an impressively large collection of sources, and one which often goes beyond a Greco-Roman purview: for instance, we find Arabic (3-4 and 184), Armenian (4 and 185), Anglo-Saxon (13 and 99-101), Indian (14, 191, and 194-195), Syriac (131-132, 188, 194, and 244), and Chinese (199, 268, and 295, n. 9) evidence as well.

Chapter 2 (*Imperium sine fine*) is a brief but interesting look at the general nature of the Roman Empire, including its vastness, uniqueness, and greatness, but also its immorality, greed, and

love of luxury and power. D. describes an evolution of the Roman people from a frugal society to one plundering from others (beginning with the defeat of Carthage in 146 B.C., or perhaps even the victory over the Galatians in 189 B.C.) and finally gradually expanding into an Empire of reciprocal pleasures in which wealth flowed freely in and also out of Rome across a vast network of roads and sea lanes. A brief look at travel and tourism in the Roman Empire (14-20) demonstrates clearly the links between center and periphery.

The main body of the book, as with *Siren Feasts*, is a listing of foods, as well as other products, presented geographically. First D. deals with mainland Italy, except for Rome (Chapter 3: Ausonia), with an overview of the nature of the land, especially its fertility, the country versus the city life, and then examinations of Italian produce both generally and in specific areas. D. vividly guides the reader on various journeys along the most important roads of Italy. Thus, for instance, one is led through the Porta Capena in Rome, the "loading point for carts", down the Appian Way, by Egeria's spring and the long lines of tombs redolent with incense, past the beggars waiting for those dismounting at the hills of Virbius and Aricia, the latter town being the site of the inns a day's trip from Rome, on to Lanuvium filled with pear orchards, and then to the frog-infested Pomptine marshes and the vine-topped slopes of Setia, and so forth (42-44). Detailed maps here (as throughout the book) carefully include all the locations discussed, and one especially useful map (no. 2 at 33) includes all the main products found in Rome's neighborhood.

In the next chapter (4: Vesper) D. moves on to various places and their products in Western Europe (specifically Gaul, Britain, and Spain) as well as North Africa and the islands of the Mediterranean (except Crete, Cyprus, and the other Greek islands, which are reserved for the following chapter).<sup>3</sup> D. then deals with Greece (with a digression on philhellenism), Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt (Chapter 5: Aurora), all other locations in and even outside the Empire, including Africa, Arabia, Armenia, and Parthia and Persia (Chapter 6: Barbaricum), and, finally, Rome itself (Chapter 7: Saeva urbs). All these sections work best as a sourcebook to answer such questions as: "What was the main product of Corduba?" or "In what area of Rome was the best smoked cheese made?"<sup>4</sup> For the most part the detailed index is very well suited for such inquiries.<sup>5</sup>

As with most of the chapters, the subject of the final one (Chapter 8), on the use of the resources of the Empire, is mainly gastronomic, but D. manages to add some information on aromas (244-247) and love affairs and conceptions of beauty (257-266; see also 124-126 on prostitutes) and ends with a conclusion of sorts on what it meant to be Roman (266-272).

There is so much material in all these chapters (which truly deserve much reading and rereading) that D., though helpful in pointing the reader toward the sources, is inevitably sometimes mistaken when it comes to details. Though I could not possibly comment on even a small part of all the material in this book I can best demonstrate D.'s occasional foibles from a few statements that he makes about certain alcoholic beverages. D. has a lot of good material on ancient wine (see, for instance, 133-138), which one would like to see expanded into a full monograph,<sup>6</sup> but sometimes he goes astray with other intoxicants.

D. says: "Roman soldiers stationed here [i.e. Britain], unless of high enough rank to command supplies from abroad, had to learn to like British ale brewed from braces, i.e. 'malted barley.'" (102) This material, strictly speaking is not from poetry or literary prose (the ostensible scope of the book), and in fact, in the corresponding footnote (285, n. 62) D. says: "This name is a loanword from Celtic: the modern Welsh form is brag. Vindolanda writing-tablets 190; cf. Pliny 18.62. Meyer-Lübke 1930-1935." This tablet (II.190 = I.4) in fact lists both measures of beer and wine and makes no mention of braces.<sup>7</sup> Other Vindolanda tablets mention beer and brewers, and a brewery at Vindolanda has also been tentatively identified.<sup>8</sup> While braces are mentioned in Vindolanda texts,<sup>9</sup> nowhere can this be identified specifically as malted barley, and Pliny in fact speaks of it (as braxis or brace) simply as a Gallic term for a type of wheat (with no mention of malt). In fact, we have evidence only for wheat beer in ancient Britain,<sup>10</sup> and this is likely what was drunk at Vindolanda (and other British military posts). Similarly, D. says that Spanish caelia is "a drink made from barley", citing Pliny 22.164 (285, n. 63). Pliny actually does not mention the cereal out of which this beer was made, and in another passage, in his section on wheat, he speaks of Hispanian wheat beer. Furthermore, it is known in later sources that caelia was in fact a Celtiberian beer made from wheat.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, D. claims that the Scythians did not drink grape wine but "a brew made from the fruit of the sorbus (serviceberry or sorb, *Sorbus domestica*)," based on Vergil, *Georgics* 3.349-383 (200). It has been elsewhere suggested that this was in fact a reference to the rowanberry (*Sorbus aucuparia* L.).<sup>12</sup> In any case, there is considerable evidence for Scythians drinking grape wine as well as other intoxicants.<sup>13</sup> Because this evidence is not found in poetry or literary prose D. may be justified in not citing it, but by neglecting it he also misinterprets Vergil, who simply says that the Scythians imitate wine with sour rowanberries but not that they do not have grape wine at all (this is a mistake of interpretation also made by Servius).

Though D. has an admirable grasp of a very broad range of primary material he relies on it almost entirely without reference to modern scholarship. D. plainly states in a footnote, "I have cited modern scholarship very little" (273, n. 4), but does not justify this decision. In fact D. cites barely more than one hundred modern books and articles, and these are not always the most fundamental or important works on his topic. It is, for instance, somewhat incongruous to cite Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson* (297, n. 50, on parrots) and Lambraki's *Ta khorta* (291, n. 81, on Chian mastic) and yet overlook J. P. V. D. Balsdon's standard *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London 1969) and J. P. Toner's excellent *Leisure and Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 1995). This neglect of secondary sources is certainly the greatest weakness of *Empire of Pleasures*; one sometimes feels cheated that only half the expected research for this book was completed. If anything, wider reading would have led D. to many more primary literary sources<sup>14</sup> and would have provided him with important supplementary archaeological evidence.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally D. even presents totally unsupported material, especially when dealing with linguistic matters (see, for instance, 61, 65, 72, 84-85, 99, and 117).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, a few trivial typographic errors: "Parthain" should be "Parthian" (190); "the the" (196); there is a missing " " before "girls of Subura" (217); Pliny 14.73 should be 14.97 (249); a period is missing after "hunted for" (266); "Chencines" should be "Chenciner" (287, n. 126); there is a superfluous ) (300, n. 18); "Greeek" (307); and "Witteveen" is not placed in the proper alphabetical sequence (309).

In sum, D's *Empire of Pleasures* is highly recommended as an evocative introductory work on the foods of the Roman Empire, but one that must sometimes be taken with a grain of salt.

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## Notes:

1. O. Murray. "Symptotic History." in idem, ed. *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposion* (Oxford 1990). 3-13, at 4-5. Murray expands upon this in "Histories of Pleasure." in Murray and M. Tecusan, eds. *In Vino Veritas* (London 1995) 3-16.
2. J. Davidson. *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London 1997).
3. At 112 D. mistakenly says that Sardinia is the largest island of the Mediterranean. In fact it measures 23,813 square kilometers (or 9,194 square miles) while Sicily measures 25,460 square kilometers (or 9,830 square miles).
4. The answers are sheep (106) and Velabrum (209, 251, and 253), respectively.
5. However, for instance, under the heading for Gades (324) one could add 124, 223, 230, 231-232, 236, 252, and 253.
6. The only general account of wine in antiquity remains C. Seltman. *Wine in the Ancient World* (London 1957), which is not cited by D.
7. This tablet is more aptly cited in A. Dalby and S. Grainger. *The Classical Cookbook* (Los Angeles 1996) 116.
8. Beer: Tab.Vindol. II.186, l. 11 and II.482 and 2, l. 4, and 3, ll. 13-15 in *Britannia* 27 (1996) 312-314. Brewers: Tab.Vindol. II.182, col. ii, l. 14 and 2, ll. 6 and 17 in *Britannia* 27 (1996) 312. Brewery: R. Birley. *Vindolanda: A Roman Frontier Post on Hadrian's Wall* (London 1977). 45-46, with pl. 17 and fig. 11.
9. Tab.Vindol. I.5, l. 16 (= II.191, l. 16), II.343, col. iii, l. 25, II.348, l. 2; *Britannia* 25 (1994) 431, no. 1, l. 6 and no. 4, l. 14 (where it is read as Britem; it is read as bracem in *Britannia* 27 [1996] 326 [and see 328]).
10. *Dioscorides, Materia medica* 2.88 Wellmann. Malted wheat, perhaps used for beer, dating to Roman Imperial times, has been detected in Wales: H. Helbaek. "The Isca Grain, A Roman Plant Introduction in Britain." *New Phytologist* 63 (1964) 158-164 and G. C. Hillman. "Evidence for Spelt Malting at Catsgore." in R. Leech, ed. *Excavations at Catsgore 1970-1973* (Bristol 1982). 137-141.
11. Florus 1.34.12, Orosius 5.7.13 (copied by a number of later authors), and CGL V.653.45.
12. E. Abbe. *The Plants of Virgil's Georgics* (Ithaca 1965). 106-107. It should be noted, however, that Servius (*Comm. ad. Verg. Georg.* 3.380) apparently took this to be a reference to beer.
13. I cite here only sources from the Roman Imperial period. Grape wine: Athen., *Deipn.* 10.427a-c, Aelian *Var. Hist.* 2.41, and Cass. Dio 51.24.2; millet beer: P.Oxy. XV.1802.ii.41-42; mead and barley beer: Priscus fr. 11.2, ll. 278-280 Blockley. Incidentally, one Latin source not exploited at all by D. is Palladius, who provides much information on various types of intoxicating drinks (for instance, cider and quince wine [3.25.19], a reference to which could round out D.'s discussion at 152-153).
14. For instance, R. M. Geer. "On the Use of Ice and Snow for Cooling Drinks." *The Classical Weekly* 29.8 (Dec. 16, 1935) 61-62, would have lead D. to further references (see 34 and 248 for

his treatment of cooling wines).

15. Thus, to give but one example, on taverns (which D. discusses at 218-219) one should hardly pass over the important work of T. Kleberg. *Hôtels, restaurants et cabarets dans l'antiquité romaine* (Uppsala 1957) and G. Hermansen. *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life* (Edmonton 1981). 125-205.

16. See also, for instance, his discussion of barrels at 90, where D. evidently has Strabo 5.1.12 in mind, but where he does not cite this or any other source on such containers.