

Old Rome's Floods and New Rome's Earthquakes

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Throughout its chapters, my dissertation, “Palimpsestuous Urbanism: Infrastructure and the Watery Underwriting of Late Antique Rome,” will channel the tempestuous hold that the Tiber River had over the lives and imaginations of the city’s inhabitants. In “Old Rome’s Floods and New Rome’s Earthquakes,” I will examine the aftermath of the tumultuous period when Visigothic (410 CE), Vandalic (455 CE), and Ostrogothic (546 CE) invasions breached Rome, when natural catastrophes, particularly floods and earthquakes, powerfully shaped the urban imagination.

My dissertation will interrogate the relationship of Roman society to the city’s water infrastructure and geology in the transitional era between the late imperial and early medieval periods (circa third to seventh century CE). This project will turn an ecocritical lens on the entanglement between vulnerable urban communities, water, and the volcanic ash from which the city of Rome was constructed, focusing on the lived experiences of enslaved maintenance workers, migrant laborers, and the Eternal City’s many impoverished and unhoused inhabitants. My chapters evoke the smells and environmental hazards involved in the labor of scraping clean the Cloaca Maxima, Rome’s oldest drain, which enabled the very foundation of the Eternal City, yet carried the corpses of executed criminals into the Tiber River, ‘celebrity dead’ like emperor Elagabalus and the Christian saint Sebastian among them. I will follow unfree workers inside the walls and beneath the pools of the city’s grandest imperial bathhouse, the Baths of Caracalla, which, before the disruption of their water supply in 537 CE, were heated daily by tons of cut lumber hauled in by the cartload through a gargantuan network of subterranean tunnels.

During the Byzantine occupation of the city in the mid-sixth century, water-scarce and earthquake-prone Constantinople imposed the image of its own body politic upon Rome. Yet many of these Byzantine infrastructural alterations were also architectural misreadings of Old Rome’s ecology. By intervening in the city’s water supply and relocating its aqueduct-powered grain mills to the banks of the capricious Tiber River, the Byzantine occupation threatened the Eternal City’s inhabitants with increased food scarcity and housing insecurity. My project will examine ancient literary evidence, from Aristotle’s *Meteorology* to the sixth-century Byzantine court historian Procopius of Caesarea’s treatise on *The Wars of Justinian*, alongside urban archaeological records to argue that, while the Byzantine occupation of the city in the sixth century aimed at positioning Constantinople as a ‘New Rome,’ it often did so to the detriment of the inhabitants of ‘Old’ Rome.

To anthropomorphize Rome as a body is of course problematic and invites a discourse of social malignancies that must be treated or excised. Yet this was how Roman and Byzantine elites understood their political world and the imperial geography it encompassed, or fantasized about incorporating. To its early medieval invaders, Rome was both a font of legitimacy and a captive urban body whose anatomy was to be carved into a symbol of their occupation. The city’s water infrastructure and hydrogeology were vital nodes in demonstrating its successful subjugation. My project will consider the repercussions of those fantasies upon urban life, most keenly felt by the city’s poor, who inhabited the low-lying regions of the city; by those most dependent on the public grain mills; and by the city’s infrastructure maintenance workers. I will argue that, as a prophylactic against earthquakes in water-scarce New Rome, Old Rome, once cast as the ‘belly of the empire’ by ancient authors, was subjected to a gastric bypass surgery by means of its water supply.