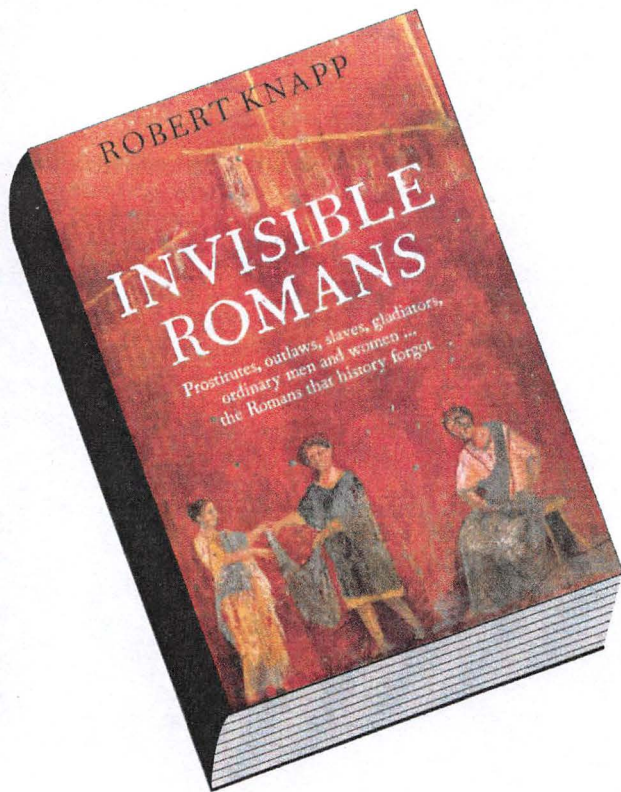


How the other 60 million lived

Tom Palaima discovers the hopes, dreams and lives of ordinary people living under Imperial Rome



Invisible Romans: Prostitutes, Outlaws, Slaves, Gladiators, Ordinary Men and Women... The Romans That History Forgot
By Robert Knapp
Profile, 384pp, £25.00
ISBN 9781846684012 and 9781847654472 (e-book)
Published 16 June 2011

The lowly and invincible of the earth – to endure and endure and then endure, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” It takes writers with profound human sympathies, such as William Faulkner, to capture what the mass of humanity do with their lives in any period of human history. Faulkner’s short story *Tomorrow*, quoted here, is one of this earth’s most curiously moving stories about a father’s love for a son. Faulkner calls “invincible” the forgotten and nameless poor whom Robert Knapp calls “invisible”.

In *Invisible Romans*, Knapp

finds ways of making the lives of the non-elite citizens, freedmen and slaves, men, women and children, who lived during the first three centuries of the Roman Empire, more than visible. In direct, almost storyteller-like prose, he makes us feel what life was like for ordinary people living between the ages of Augustus and Constantine, what troubles and sorrows they had daily, with what mindsets they faced their tomorrows, what joys they took from life, how they got by – or didn’t.

Knapp sometimes sacrifices rigour by referring generally to sources. For each of his nine chapters, however, he does give intelligent guidance to readable scholarly treatments. There is also a useful “who’s who” and “what’s what” of literary evidence.

Why is such a book called for? To answer that, one picture is worth a reviewer’s paragraph of words. Go to David Lebedoff’s

2008 parallel biography of Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell, *The Same Man*, and look at the photograph of the Bright Young Things who, one early morning in London after a Mozart costume party, commandeered jackhammers from a crew of nameless and, even in the photograph, all but faceless street workers.

As Knapp notes, some 50 million to 60 million ordinary people lived out their lives in a Roman Empire dominated by “a tiny, self-perpetuating elite that was limited and defined by wealth, tradition, blood and power”. The super-elite senators and equestrians and the lesser elite members of the decurial order who ran things in cities and towns taken together numbered no more than 200,000. Yet they controlled 80 per cent of the wealth of the Empire. How did we ever come to use the expression “how the other half lives”?

Knapp ferrets out how the other 99.5 per cent lived by mining inscriptions, mostly funerary; graffiti; papyrus letters; sources, such as magical papyri and the 1st century AD *Carmen Astrologicum*, that reflect the concerns of ordinary people seeking to ward off ever-threatening misfortunes, get love or vengeance, or grab hold of rare good luck; New Testament stories naturally directed at working-class (if they were lucky) Christian communities; the comprehensive collection of Roman legal materials known as the *Digest*; Greek romance literature;

Roman baths offered ‘for the ordinary and elite alike, not only social interaction but a dangerous lack of hygiene’

Apuleius, Petronius, Phaedrus and Plautus; and standard works from the canon that mention in passing how the other 60 million live.

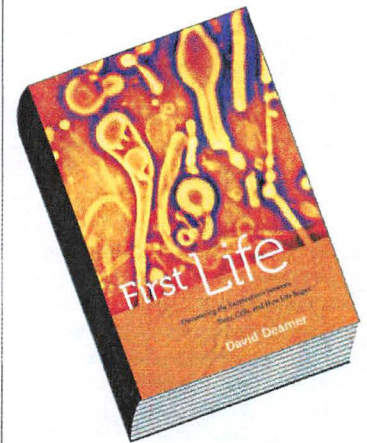
Read *Invisible Romans* and you will be disabused of any fantasies of going to Roman baths. They offered, as Knapp describes, “for the ordinary and elite alike, not only social interaction but a dangerous lack of hygiene shocking even to contemplate”. You will also find out why, in an age of constant underemployment, a career as

a soldier was coveted, despite the long-term commitment, danger, separation from family and the legal celibacy that it imposed.

A photograph of the signatures that two women slaves named Delftri and Amica, working together in a roof-tile factory, crudely scratched into the soft clay of one of the tiles alongside the imprints of their tiny shod feet speaks volumes about the todays and the hopes for tomorrows of Knapp’s Romans made visible.

This is a remarkably kind and thoughtful book.

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First Life: Discovering the Connections between Stars, Cells, and How Life Began
By David Deamer
University of California Press
288pp, £19.95
ISBN 9780520258327
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First Life opens with a beautifully evocative anecdote. Taking a night-time swim off the coast of Baja California beneath a clear starry sky, David Deamer was struck by an overpowering sense of oneness with the Universe. Starlight from the bright constellations above had travelled hundreds of light years to mix with the flashing luminescence of aquatic living organisms as he swam in the bay. Could there really exist a link between the stars and life, in a scientific sense rather than astrological?

Deamer certainly thinks so, and in this insightfully written book he explains how over recent decades we have come to understand how the roots of life on Earth reach back out into the cosmos. The chemical elements needed for life – carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and so on – are