Ever since I read Homer’s *Iliad* in translation and Mary Renault’s classic Classical historical novel *The Last of the Wine*, I have longed to go back in time to see what ancient Greece and Rome would have looked like. Thanks to a wealth of written documents from that period, and the rich archaeological remains, we can make a fairly good guess at what 5th century BC Athens or 1st century CE Rome would have looked like.

Or can we?

When I go into schools to talk about my books - *The Roman Mysteries* - and about ancient Rome, I tell the children that my biggest wish is to have a time-machine to go back for just one day. (My time machine would be an invisible transportation bubble in which I could float and observe unseen. I would be able to hear, smell and see through this bubble but it would protect the ancient Romans from my bacteria, stray arrows, ravening beasts in the arena, slave-dealers, pyroclastic surges, etc.)

I tell the kids my theory. That as I floated around first century Rome in my invisible time machine bubble I would see many things I was expecting. I would say to myself: ‘Yes, this is just as everyone said it would be. Classical Archaeologists got this about 90% right!’ But I think there would be some surprises – maybe 10% – which would cause me to exclaim: ‘Great Juno’s beard! I never expected THAT!’

The problem is, we cannot know what that 10% is until someone invents a time machine. And that is not going to happen any time soon.

The two books mentioned above inspired me to study Classics at U. C. Berkeley. A year or two into my course - I saw a film depicting ancient Rome that ‘blew my mind’ (this was the 70s). It was like a curtain being pulled back. It was a horrible, fascinating, concept-overturning revelation. It was Fellini’s *Satyricon* and it made me think ‘THAT is what first century Rome would have looked like!’

Fellini famously said: ‘It was like speculating about life on Mars, but with the help of a Martian, so *Satyricon* satisfied in me some of my desire to make a science-fiction film.’

This was no clean, white-columned world of pristine togas and Marlon Brando enunciating ‘Friends, Romans, Countrymen…’ This was a dimly-lit, colourful, sweaty, perverted place of jewel-coloured mini-tunics, smoky night-time scenes, boy-love, casual violence, cheap human life, the disabled and the disfigured. It stank of incense, sweat, lamp-smoke, open sewers and sacrificial blood. The music was strange and discordant, the language a strange babble.

In the spirit of Time Travel and inspired by Fellini, I have come up with a possible list of things that might surprise a 21st century time traveler if he went back to first century Rome around the time Vesuvius erupted.

1. **The smell.** One of the creators of *HBO’s Rome* said, ‘You would smell Rome before you saw it.’ Open sewers, dung in the street, smoke from oil-lamps, pine-pitch torches, urine from the fullers, rotting fish entrails from the *garum* factory, blood from hundreds of daily sacrifices, frying onions and sausage from fast-food joints, etc. People did not wear deodorant and many must have had rotting teeth. We know from the poet Martial that some Romans had such bad breath that they added perfume to their wine. Others chomped *mastic*, the ancient version of chewing gum. It is where we get the word ‘masticate’ and you can still buy it today if you know where to look.

2. **Sacrificial smog.** In first century Rome there were dozens of temples. Most of them sacrificed animals and then roasted them. This was probably a main source of cooked meat in Roman times. There would also have been smoke from a thousand braziers, outlets from the hypocausts at the baths, daily funeral pyres, small-scale industry like pottery kilns and glass-blowers, plus pine-pitch torches burning at night. Rome probably had a permanent cloud of smoke hanging over it.

3. **Animals in the forum.** The best thing about *HBO’s Rome* was the set dressing. They scattered chickens in the forum,
furiously scavenging dogs in the market and rats in the sewers. Romans used mules or oxen to pull the carts, rather than horses, but there was no wheeled traffic in Rome during hours of daylight. This caused too much congestion. An ox who had trampled a child wore hay on his horn as a beware sign, but was not banned from the streets. In her book *Pompeii*, Mary Beard points out that Roman hitching posts were the holes you can still see drilled in the pavement edge.

4. Bodies on crosses and beggars in the gutter. The mouldering bodies of crucified slaves and criminals would have lined the streets in and out of Rome, along with the tombs of the dead. The areas behind the tombs were probably used as shanty towns by the poor and unwanted babies were often exposed there. We know from Martial that there were beggars everywhere, many of them would have been child beggars, but you would also find the crippled, blind and otherwise disabled. Not to mention the lowest class of prostitute.

5. Ubiquitous infections and disease. The worst diseases killed off a good percent of the population but those who survived would probably be suffering much more than we allow for in our TV and film depictions. Skin ulcers from poor nutrition for all but the richest Romans, spotty skin (Martial tells us skin patches were fashionable at this time), pink-eye would probably have been the most common affliction. Today we can easily get something over the counter to quickly stop eye-infection and a tube of Savlon for wounds. Then, the tiniest cut opened the possibility of a life-threatening infection. Also, chillblains from the cold and verrucas from the unhygienic baths. And did I mention worms?

6. The cacophony of the city. Greek and Roman music would have sounded discordant to our ears. It was mainly banging, jingling and plucking. Maybe some strange singing, like a combination of Indian and Arabic music, alien to our Western sensibilities. The town crier - or town criers - would constantly be parolling the streets, shouting out the hour and the latest news. You would have heard asses braying, donkey bells, priests chanting and shaking tambourines, dogs barking, babies crying, couples arguing, roosters crowing. All in the heart of the city.

7. Gaudy Rome. Colour was everywhere. Blood-red paint on walls and on the bases of every column. Mustard yellow and black were also popular colours for walls. Mosaics, frescoes, graffiti on the walls. Statues were painted. If marble in the forum wasn’t exotic green, yellow or pink, then it was coloured by hand. Michael Scott was absolutely right when he said the Parthenon would have been comic-book bright, not pristine white. In the film *Gladiator*, Ridley Scott consciously drained Rome of colour, to make it look almost black and white. It’s a nice idea but deeply misleading. The set designers of HBO’s *Rome* and *The Roman Mysteries* did better. Fellini’s *Satyricon* probably did best. Rome would have looked more like Mexico City on fiesta day or Calcutta during Diwali. Mary Beard notes that Pompeian frescoes show us how colourful Romans’ clothes would have been. White was the colour of the candidate (the word comes from Latin candida: white) and was only achieved with much effort and use of chalk. It was a rarity.

8. Vermin. Rats in your apartment. Feral cats scavenging in rubbish tips. Possibly feral dogs, too. Flies everywhere. Lice in your tunic. Fleas on your animals. Mosquitoes in the summer. In the hotter Roman provinces they had scorpions and snakes, too. You never walked alone. Oh yes: let us not forget intestinal worms, etc...

9. Long-haired-boy love. In Rome a man was considered strange if he was sexually attracted only to women or only to adolescent boys. The norm was to desire both. There was no concept of child rights or child abuse in ancient Rome. Children were mini-adults. It was accepted that pre-pubescent boys would be openly courted by older men. Martial himself was one such man. In his mid-forties, he sulks because a beardless boy rejects his advances in favour of another middle-aged man. When a boy started his first beard, only then did he cut his hair. This is the main reason Roman boys had a *paedagogus* accompany them to school. To protect them from the attentions of randy adult suitors.

10. Child labour. If a boy was not being accosted on the way to his school (often nothing more than a screened-off section of a colonnade in the forum) he was
probably working for his father. Girls were indoors weaving, if they were lucky. Childhood officially ended at 12 for girls (when they could legally marry) and 16 for boys, (when they put on the toga virilis). But that was only in families rich enough not to have to put their kids to work, perhaps 10% of the population at most.

11. Superstition, superstition, superstition. Almost every waking action was accompanied by some ritual to avert bad luck or disaster. The Romans did not believe in an infinite and benevolent God, but in a world of peevish gods to be appeased and astrological forces to be observed. Almost every emperor had his astrologer. Shrines were like ancient cashpoints, but you made deposits there, not withdrawals. Daily offerings were made in your household shrine, apotropaic charms were worn, blood spilt on temple altars, the sign against evil performed without thinking, as regularly as we rub our nose or scratch our chin today. Step over the threshold with your right foot. Do not even leave the house on inauspicious days. An eclipse? Disaster!

12. The crumbling city. Rome was not a 'nanny state'. There were very few regulations about building. Fires were a daily occurrence. Apartment blocks often crumbled and collapsed without warning. Chamberpots were emptied out of windows. Shop displays and tavern tables spilled out onto the pavement. Roads and sidewalks would have been obstacle courses of uneven paving stones, sleeping dogs and even human feces. Who repaired potholes in the street? Or a dangerously leaning wall? Many buildings were probably being built or undergoing repair, covered in scaffolding and/or the ancient equivalent of the bright orange plastic netting you see all over Rome today. One of the most memorable scenes in Fellini Satyricon is of a lofty zigzagur-like apartment block crumbling away, sending men, women, children and animals screaming for safety.

13. Four Humours. A subtle but powerful surprise might have been the Classical mindset. For example, the Greeks and Romans had no concept of sickness as being caused by infection from without. For them it was about an imbalance of the four elements that made up the world: fire, air, earth and water. Spring was moist and hot; summer dry and hot; autumn wet and moist, winter was wet and dry. The four ‘juices’ or humours that made up humans matched those four seasons. Optimistic sanguine types had too much blood; Choleric temperaments were hot and dry with a surfeit of yellow bile; phlegmatics had a preponderance of phlegm or mucus that rendered them calm, gentle and loyal, but also easily swayed. Melancholics have too much black bile. They are realists rather than pessimists; perfectionists who see every flaw and point it out. Think of Hector and Andromache saying farewell at the Gates of Troy in Iliad VI. A pair of melancholics who both see the other’s doom. Then down the hill bounds golden, laughing sanguine Paris. He and Hector are off to fight choleric Achilles, enraged because his plegmatic sidekick has been slaughtered.

14. Nebuchadnezzar not Roddenberry. Where are we going? The Old Testament book of Daniel, written in the Hellenistic period, gives us the image of a colossus of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, with feet of clay. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is interpreted by Daniel as representing the ages of man. Our ancestors were golden but we are becoming more and more base. We see this attitude hinted at in Virgil and explicit in Ovid:

\[\text{The Golden Age was first; when Man yet New; No Rale but incorrupted Reason knew;}\]

(Ovid Metamorphoses, Dryden’s translation)

But Freud and Darwin changed our thinking. They maintain that people are getting better as we learn about psychology and evolve. The obvious end point is a future hinted at by Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek, where pyjama-clad Earlings are non-violent, racially integrated and preach ‘love’. Ancient Romans thought we were getting worse, we hope we’re getting better. Another subtle difference in mindset, but a powerful one.

All these things might have surprised a time traveller, and I’m certain there are more, but I’m also convinced that the clay of human nature has stayed pretty much the same in 2000 years; only the cultural glaze has changed.

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