

Merde Alors! An interdisciplinary conference
on excrement, past, present, and future

SOAS, University of London – 21-22 October 2023

LIST OF ABSTRACTS

[in alphabetical order of author]

1. Breaking the silence on gendered sanitation taboos across urban Africa

Adriana Allen [University College London] *

ABSTRACT: Despite the commitment expressed by African leaders through the 2015 Ngor Declaration, to achieve universal access to adequate and sustainable sanitation and hygiene services, and eliminate open defecation by 2030-later endorsed by the international community as part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6-the sanitation 'crisis' is far from vanishing in African cities. In their rich historical interrogation of the global sanitation crisis, Black and Fawcett (2008) frame this crisis as a 'taboo', an unspoken subject across almost every culture. We talk, plan, and manage cities and urban life as if faeces and urine were not part of them. Building upon this framing, we argue that rather than approaching the sanitation crisis as a site marked by a lack of facilities, infrastructure, technologies, and investments, the real question lies in understanding why urban sanitation has been historically relegated to a 'taboo'; an unpleasant topic rarely tackled in its own right and complexity and pushed aside in favour of clean water, water-based sewage systems and water-intensive hygiene practices.

Drawing from a three-year action-research project entitled [*OVERDUE: Tackling the sanitation taboo across urban Africa*](#), we argue that sanitation taboos are deeply gendered, and dive into an exploration of how they are reinforced or challenged through social norms, community and municipal bylaws. Framed from a feminist political ecology perspective, the discussion takes us to the experiences of women and girls across the cities of Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Antananarivo (Madagascar), Beira (Mozambique), Bukavu

(DRC), Freetown (Sierra Leone) Mwanza (Tanzania), and St Louis (Senegal).

CV:

Prof Allen leads the OVERDUE project at UCL The Bartlett Development Planning Unit. She has over 30 years of international research experience in more than 25 countries across the Global South. Adopting a feminist political ecology perspective, her work looks at the gendered interface between everyday city-making practices and planned interventions and their capacity to generate transformative social and environmental relations. Her most recent books include: [Untamed Urbanisms](#) (2015), [Environmental Justice and Resilience in the Global South](#) (2017) and [Urban Water Trajectories](#) (2017) [Handbook of Urban Global Health](#) (2019) and [Routledge Handbook of Urban Resilience](#) (2020).

* On behalf of the OVERDUE team, The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London (UCL)

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2. From the privy to the paper: Excrement, public health, and discourses of race in the Progressive Era U.S. South

Jared Kazik Asser [University of Georgia]

In 1909 the Rockefeller Sanitary Commission (RSC) embarked on a massive public health campaign to eradicate hookworm – a parasite that spreads through eggs laid in human excrement. A blight on the Southern U.S. states, in some places hookworm infestations tormented 75% of the general population. The RSC aimed to eliminate the parasite by disciplining Southern defecation practices, largely through campaigns of free public education and the construction of ‘modern’ privies. Taking this campaign as its focus, ‘From the Privy to the Paper’ deals with excrement at the intersection of the history of medicine and the politics of race during the Progressive Era.

It builds on the work of Nayan Shah (2001) to understand how public health shaped constructions of race. While science has always helped shape race, public health was a new and intimate kind of knowledge and this research shows how it brought domestic life to the forefront. The paper accomplishes this in two moves; first, it draws on the professional and administrative papers of a key scientist and public health reformer for the RSC to examine the

development of a public health campaign to end hookworm, through defecation education. It then proceeds to use newspapers to examine how this medical discourse changed once in public: blaming Black Americans for the origins and spread of this parasite – ultimately this discourse framed hookworm as a Black assault on the white community. This investigation moves outward from North Carolina, during the years 1898-1930.

Finally, it concludes with directions for future research.

CV:

Education

The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 2020- PhD – History
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario 2018-2020 - M.A. – History
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario 2011-2016
B.A. – Combined Honours in Music and History.

Publications

Eight book reviews in peer-reviewed journals. One article and book chapter manuscript in progress.

Presentations (one of seven)

“Emotions in the Reconstruction Archive,” at Louisiana State University Special Collections 2022

3. “Boys will be boys”: *the putto pissatore* in European Renaissance art

Charles Avery [Independent researcher]

ABSTRACT: First popularised by the Italian sculptor Donatello (1386-1466), the *putto pissatore* (latterly *manneken pis*) has been an enduring presence in figurative art down to the present day (including as the national emblem of Belgium). This paper explores the various manifestations of that figure through the ages.

CV:

Charles Avery is a specialist in European – especially in Italian – sculpture. A Cambridge Ph. D and Courtauld M.A.; then Deputy Keeper of Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1966-79), and a Director of Christie's (1980-90), he has been an independent

historian, consultant, writer and lecturer.

His books include *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture* (1970) and *Donatello: An Introduction* (1994); *Giambologna, the Complete Sculpture* (1987); *Bernini, Genius of the Baroque* (1997); and *A School of Dolphins*, (2009). He proudly contributed 'The Elephant and its ivory in the sculpture of Western Europe' to the *SOAS Elephant Reader* (2021).

4. Alternative sanitation histories: lessons from Chinese farmers

Nicole Elizabeth Barnes [Duke University]

ABSTRACT: The flush toilet masquerades as the pinnacle of sanitary civilization, but it supplies cleanliness at great expense to our planet and obscures better options that also have historical precedent. This paper explores the sanitation history that might have been, had the Earth Closet triumphed over the Water Closet in England, had London and Paris managed their Great Stinks without costly sewer systems, had miasma theory not combined with new medical discoveries to fuel frantic policing of odors, had the 'culture of flushing' that supports fantasies of resource wealth in the face of actual resource exhaustion not prevailed, had many colonised peoples not used 'humanure' (human excrement and urine) to nourish their fields and had colonizers not used this fact to shame them.

It traces a concatenation of historical forces that coalesced in water-based sanitation systems that treat farmer's gold as disgusting discards, leaving waterways depleted and soils exhausted. It takes Chinese history as a case study to re-think human relationships to land and our bodies' daily emanations. For over a millennium, Chinese farmers incorporated humanure into their fertiliser regimen to feed one of the world's largest populations. Their system, far from perfect, spread pathogens and relied on brutal exploitation of labourers, but today we can avoid those pitfalls. Pathogen-free, nutrient-rich fertiliser is readily at hand. Our bodies produce its raw material every single day, and the mesophilic and thermophilic bacteria that transform it into safe humanure have lived on this planet for nearly four billion years.

CV:

Nicole Elizabeth Barnes is Associate Professor of History and Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at Duke University in

Durham, North Carolina, USA. Her book *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China* (University of California Press, 2018) received the Joan Kelly Memorial Prize from the American Historical Association and the William H. Welch Medal from the American Association for the History of Medicine. She is currently writing a book about the history of nightsoil and toilets in modern China.

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5. ADCO and the case of a patented artificial manure

Tad Brown [University of Cambridge]

ABSTRACT: With the sale of Lawes' Chemical Manure Company, its founder established a trust for the Rothamsted Experimental Station in Harpenden, England. In 1923, two researchers employed at the station patented a method for turning straw into a substitute for farmyard manure. They claimed an invention for recovering nitrogen from soluble solutions through aerobic fermentation. Within a year, the same Rothamsted scientists filed a similar patent on behalf of the Agricultural Developments Company Ltd (ADCO), an organization founded by Rupert Edward Guinness for developing commercial products from scientific research. The scope of this expanded patent included a fertiliser product in addition to the method of manufacture.

ADCO became the trade name for the artificial reagent, a powder which when added to straw and wetted, caused the rapid decomposition of organic waste. In this talk, I consider how the ADCO product came to be—a history based on experimental research for dealing with the dwindling manure supply around London—and its commercial markets, including overseas. I also examine how ADCO compared to the Indore Process attributed to Sir Albert Howard, a leading British figure in the organic agriculture movement, who promoted a two-step composting method devised during his tenure in India. While these alternatives abided by the same scientific principles, their make-up, as well as contexts of invention, differed by a factor of excrement.

CV:

2022 PhD, Law, The University of Queensland
2015 PhD, Anthropology, University of Georgia
2005 BA, History, University of Georgia

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6. Cess pits and society

John Collis [University of Sheffield]

ABSTRACT: For many ancient sites we do not know how excrement was dealt with; in both hunter-gatherer and farming societies settlements are usually marked by high concentrations of phosphates, implying that defecation by both humans and livestock was simply in the open in and around the settlement or was collected and used as manure on the fields; the size of the compost heap could be an indication of status (e.g. the number of cattle). But as settlements became larger and population more dense, and especially with urbanisation, dealing with excrement started to become a problem, especially in terms of smell and as a health hazard. Ways of dealing with it vary, from open drains in the streets to the provision of sewers flushed by water as in the classical towns of Rome and Greece.

One common feature of urban sites is the digging of cess pits, something which could be organised at the household level where there was access to open spaces such as gardens, but this gradually evolved into more comfortable indoor solutions with stone- or wood-lined pits which could be emptied when convenient (the removal of 'night soil'), and with the provision of special vessels for use in bedrooms – the chamber pot or 'gazunder' (goes under the bed!). These various solutions give us indications of the level of community organisation (or the lack of it), and how this may have evolved over time; I shall discuss examples with which I am familiar, in Exeter and Winchester. But there are also examples which do not fit the accepted pattern, and I shall also discuss an example of a Roman rural settlement at Owslebury near Winchester which at one period had deep cess pits which could not have been emptied to provide manure – why?

CV:

John Collis, Prof emeritus, Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield.

I completed my doctoral thesis on urbanisation in Iron Age temperate Europe at Cambridge in 1984, and taught the Iron Age at Sheffield from 1972 to 2005, and have written numerous articles and some books on archaeology, especially the Iron Age and the Celts and excavated across Europe, mainly in Britain and France.

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7. From gunpowder to fertiliser: How Confederates used human waste during the American Civil War and Reconstruction

Andrew Loyd Craig [University of Georgia]

ABSTRACT: The American Civil War changed the South's relationship to human and animal excrement. Wartime blockades and exigencies that limited access to international guano markets required the Confederate States of America to develop new sources for saltpeter – a key ingredient in gunpowder. In service to the Confederacy, chemists in the Nitre & Mining Bureau, like Joseph LeConte and Nathaniel Pratt, developed methods to produce saltpeter from human and animal waste. Through the labor of enslaved men and women, they collected nightsoil from latrines and nitre pits built on the region's plantations and coordinated the process of transforming the contents of these waste-filled pits into saltpeter.

In the Postwar period, Emancipation and guano's high cost left planters searching for a different method to fertilise their fields. In response, former Confederate scientists established fertiliser factories and phosphate mines using the knowledge they had gained from their war time experiments producing saltpeter. The production of commercial fertilisers dramatically intensified cotton and tobacco production throughout the South. As the use of commercial fertiliser and agricultural debt increased consequently, many agricultural reformers lobbied southern legislators to enact legislation that policed livestock fencing to encourage the collection of manure. They also lobbied for the creation of agricultural experiment stations to develop better fertilisers and police the content of commercial mixtures. This set the stage for multiple environmental disasters that emerged in the region during the twentieth century as the relationship of Southerners to human and animal excrement continued to change over the next century.

CV:

Education

University of Georgia – Ph.D. History 2021-
UNC at Wilmington – Master of Arts History (2021)
UNC at Chapel Hill – Bachelor of Arts in History (2015)

Publications

"Bigfoot Swims" in "Life With and Without Animals," special issue, *Humanimalia* 13 (forthcoming 2023).

Recent Conference Presentation

"Improving the Pig," Commodities of Empire International Workshop, Free University Berlin, 2022.

Grants and Awards

J. Donald Hughes Graduate Research Fellowship, ASEH, 2023

8. The case against Anglia Water

Al Dixon [Little Blue Dot]

9. The 'Dirty Strike' of Irish Republican prisoners in British jails, 1976-81

Ed Emery [SOAS, University of London]

ABSTRACT: The 1976 decision by the British government to end political-prisoner ("special") status for Irish Republican prisoners led to a five year campaign in Long Kesh prison that included refusal to wear prison clothing and refusal to use prison showers. In response to the beating of a cell-mate, prisoners refused to leave their cells to use toilets. This turned into a shit strike, with prisoners defecating in their cells, and smearing the walls with their shit. Women prisoners in Armagh jail joined the protest. These events will be examined in the light of other shit protests, and also in light of notions of "bare life" and biopower

CV:

Ed Emery is co-organiser of the Interdisciplinary Animal Studies Initiative at SOAS. Since 2000 he has organised a series of international conferences on elephants, camels, donkeys, mules, war horses, and sponges. He maintains a long-standing diary rubric *De stercore quaero* and is the moderator of the Shitology discussion list. At the present time his principal research activity is around the Arabic and Jewish dance songs of medieval al-Andalus.

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10. The remarkable preservation of excrement in the archaeological record and what can be done with it

Eleanor Green [University of York and Natural History Museum, London]

There are a surprising number of ways faeces can be preserved in the archaeological record forming a coprolite - I will introduce some of these different methods and discuss the type of biomolecular analyses which I have applied to these samples. Desiccated coprolites, often formed in caves, have been the subject of ancient DNA investigations in the past, but waterlogged coprolites - more commonly found in European contexts - are yet to be thoroughly explored. I have gathered around 40 European coprolites to be investigated. The samples come from early medieval Coppergate (England) and Moynagh Lough (Ireland): both sites with outstanding preservation of organic material due to waterlogging.

By extracting DNA and proteins preserved within these samples alongside more traditional archaeological approaches, I have determined most of these coprolites were deposited by dogs who ate a largely meat-based diet. Furthermore, analysis of preserved bone fragments embedded with the coprolites suggests that dogs were eating butchered cuts of meat which contained large pieces of bones - perhaps bony cuts considered unsuitable for human consumption. There is very little evidence for plant consumption at either site. Some have argued that archaeologists often overlook cess, considering it a mundane find but cess, and specifically coprolites, can offer a wonderful glimpse into everyday life in the past. After all, what is archaeology if not the study of ancient waste?

CV:

Eleanor is currently a PhD student at the University of York and the Natural History Museum, London who specialises in the extraction of degraded DNA and protein from archaeological material. Her work focuses on samples or substrates which have not been favoured for intensive post-excavation analysis due to a lack of context information or a lack of confidence in a method or material. Eleanor has been investigating preserved faeces using genetic methods since her Masters research project. This work has continued during the course of Eleanor's PhD research where additional methods have been applied to these unique bioarchaeological archives.

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11. Excrement in the City: Tokyo, 1867–1933

David L. Howell [Harvard University]

ABSTRACT: By the end of the nineteenth century, Edo lingered on the surface of Tokyo only as a palimpsest, but in the city's privies it survived as an infrastructural coelacanth. The night-soil economy was a product of Edo that persisted more or less intact well into the modern era. This persistence is remarkable not because the Edo system did not work well—quite the contrary—but rather because infrastructure was just the sort of arena in which Meiji Japan's modernising leaders sought most eagerly to emulate the West. Yet neither the awesome engineering of the London and Paris sewers nor the genuine fear of pestilence occasioned by repeated cholera epidemics prompted the state to consider fundamental changes to the mechanism for disposing of excrement in the city.

Only in 1914, when it had become clear that the city would soon outgrow the hinterland's capacity to consume its shit, did the authorities undertake construction of modern sanitary sewer facilities. The first fruits of that effort, a pumping station at Mikawashima, went into operation in 1922, but beyond a few neighborhoods in central Tokyo, flush toilets would not become the norm until after World War II. This presentation will use the persistence of the night-soil economy as an entrée into questions of Meiji Japan's engagement with Western-style modernity and progress.

CV:

David L. Howell is the Robert K. and Dale J. Weary Professor of Japanese History at Harvard University. He is the author of *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (University of California Press, 1995) and *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (University of California Press, 2005), as well as numerous articles, including "Fecal Matters: Prolegomenon to a History of Shit in Japan," in *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*, edited by Ian J. Miller, Julia Adney Thomas, and Brett L. Walker (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

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12. Shit and civilisation – Western reports on nightsoil in 18th and 19th century China

Jörg H. Hüseemann [Leipzig University]

ABSTRACT: Human excreta were sought-after and widely used fertilisers in Chinese agriculture, employed since antiquity and mentioned and discussed by agronomists since the Song Dynasty (960-1279). By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) at the latest, the collection of nightsoil in urban areas and its transportation to the countryside had evolved into a well-organized business that would survive into modern times. In contrast, with the growing awareness of the importance of public health and hygiene in 18th- and 19th-century Western European countries and the development of agricultural chemistry, the importance of nightsoil as a fertiliser in European agriculture gradually declined; excreta were turned from a valuable substance into waste, from a resource into a nuisance.

This paper will show that this change in attitude is also reflected in the writings of European travellers and missionaries who visited China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Using accounts on Chinese agriculture, I will ask, what criteria contributed to the creation of categories such as waste and value? How did the treatment of waste in China foster othering and strengthen hierarchies? In my presentation, I will argue that European accounts on Chinese usage of human excreta show that their authors also took it as a measure of or as a means to emphasise European cultural as well as scientific and technological superiority.

CV:

Joerg Henning Huesemann works as a lecturer for Chinese culture and history at Leipzig University. He received his PhD from Hamburg University for a dissertation on the 6th century Chinese geographical writing Shuijing zhu. Currently he is working on his second book, tentatively titled "A Matter Difficult to Handle – Soil, Fertilisers, and the Rise of Scientific Agriculture in Middle and Late Imperial China," a study in which he explores the historical development of scientific agriculture in China through the lens of fertilisers.

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13. Between economic and hygienic reasons. Recovering and using excrement in Italian cities and countryside in the late

19th century.

Luciano Maffi [University of Parma] and Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro [University of Perugia]

ABSTRACT: Before chemical fertilisers, the fertility of the land depended on the use of the organic excrement of people and animals. During the 19th century, the issue of the recovery and use of droppings generated intense debate in countries for economic and hygienic reasons. Our paper analyzes the phenomenon in Italy by following two lines of research. Agronomic literature accorded great importance to the modernisation of stables and peasant houses to collect urine and droppings. It was necessary to build modern manures. At the same time, companies were established in the cities to contract out the cleaning of public baths and mattresses. In this way organic material was obtained for sale. The Italian case demonstrates the intertwining of economic and hygienic reasons in the management of manure. Through a case study, we will illustrate the collection, sale, distribution, cost and market systems of organic fertilisers.

CVs:

Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro is Associate Professor in Economic History at the University of Perugia, Italy. He studies Economic and Social History, with particular attention to agriculture in late-nineteenth-century Italy. He has recently published: Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro - Paolo Tedeschi - Luciano Maffi, *A History of Italian Wine. Culture, Economics, and Environment in the Nineteenth through Twenty-First Centuries*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Luciano Maffi - Paolo Tedeschi - Manuel Vaquero Piñeiro, *A New Wine for the International Market: Italian public institutions' initiatives supporting the oenological sector (1870-1910)*, in S. Lachaud, C. Marache, J. McIntyre, M. Pierre (eds.), *Wine, Networks and Scales. Intermediation in the production, distribution and consumption of wine*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2021, pp. 115-29.

Luciano Maffi: I am a Lecturer in Economic and Global History at the University of Parma (Italy). I was previously a Lecturer at the University of Salento and before that a research fellow at Bocconi University in Milano (2020), at the University of Genoa (2017-20) and at the University of Brescia (2011-13). I study the primary sector and food production in Early Modern and Modern history and the history of tourism, especially in relation to demographic trends and infrastructural and economic changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I deal with economic, financial and social history, with particular attention to private bankers in the

nineteenth century. Another topic of my research is tourism history and disability.

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14. Brown Gold? Reconciling existing practices and new innovations for shit re-use

Lyla Mehta (Institute of Development Studies) and Tanvi Bhatkal (Institute of Development Studies), et al.

ABSTRACT: The concept of the 'circular economy' has gained significant traction in recent years, emerging as a powerful force in policy narratives on sustainable development across sectors, including sanitation. However, what does this mean in terms of delivering sustainable and socially just outcomes, and what are the barriers to implementing equitable interventions that can be scaled up and out? This paper moves beyond a techno-centric lens of the 'circular economy' towards a wider interpretation of diverse circular pathways to address the socio-cultural-political dimensions of circularity in sanitation.

Our research in Ghana, India, Nepal and Tigray reveals that various communities engage in shit reuse practices, including biogas for cooking and as fertiliser. These (often informal) practices in some cases safely produce value from waste; in others pose varying health and safety risks. We trace experiences of shit reuse across different contexts of the urbanising global South and examine processes shaping perceptions and narratives of value and risk in circular economy practices and innovations. Drawing on the lessons from existing community practices and emerging experiments around shit reuse, this paper reconciles different perspectives on circularity and calls for a move beyond binaries of formal / informal, centralised / decentralised. By analysing perspectives of existing practices and new innovations together, we propose the notion of 'brown gold' and outline an integrated approach for policy innovations that address the physical, socio-cultural, economic, political, environmental, institutional and technical processes along the sanitation chain to unlock the full potential of safely (re)using shit and wastewater.

CVs:

Professor Lyla Mehta is a Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She is a sociologist working on sustainability, resource politics, gender, water and sanitation, climate change and uncertainty. Steering committee member of the Bretton Woods Project (2002-11) and Mistra Urban Future (2016 -). Team leader of the UN High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition on Water and Food Security. Involved in advocacy in Europe and India with social movements and NGOs on water, sanitation, displacement and development issues. Editor of *Environment and Planning E* (Nature and Space).

Dr Tanvi Bhatkal is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Currently, she is currently working on the project '[Towards Brown Gold](#)' which seeks to reimagine off-grid sanitation and address challenges of marginality and faecal sludge/ wastewater reuse in urbanizing Asia and Africa. Her research takes an intersectional approach to examine the political economy, cultural politics and everyday lived experiences of urban infrastructure. Her doctoral research at the University of Cambridge examined everyday gendered politics of urban belonging at the intersection of gendered and minority rights in Mumbai, India.

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15. Open the blackbox: toilets, gender and sanitary waste regimes in 18th century London

Franziska Neumann [Technical University of Braunschweig]

ABSTRACT: Scatological texts were *en vogue* in the 18th century. The variety of titles ranged from *Meditations on a Turd, Wrote in a Place of Ease* (1726) to the popular *The Benefit of Farting Explained* (1722). Excrements were equally repulsive and sparked a curious interest: their shape, versatility, and especially their high symbolic power as a link between nature and culture were a source of fascination. Through the medium of excrements, the *conditio humana* could be discussed in a fundamental way: whoever spoke about excrements also implicitly spoke about the relationship between nature and culture, between body and mind. One of the most prominent features of these debates was the examination of

the relationship between gender, latrines, and excreta. The spectrum of positions taken was wide, ranging from Jonathan Swift's rather cynical observations about the fundamental corruption of the female body and the hypocrisy of female decency to more balanced considerations of the relationship between gender, culture, and shame.

However, these discussions did not necessarily reflect the experiences of all city dwellers. The issue of female decency, for example, was discussed mainly in relation to middle-class women. It is not clear whether the armies of maids who emptied the chamber pots every day or the nightmen who laboriously emptied London's latrines with buckets and shovels were also plagued by shame. Using the example of 18th century London, the proposed paper wants to explore the complex relationship matter, latrines and gender in London's 18th century sanitary waste regime combining the history of ideas with a social history of the toilet.

CV:

Franziska Neumann is a Junior Professor of Early Modern History with a focus on comparative urban cultures of knowledge at the Technical University of Braunschweig. She was Joint Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies of University College London and the German Historical Institute London for 2019/20. She is currently working on a project on Early Modern Urban Waste Regimes. Her research interests include the history of waste, environmental history and urban history. Her first monograph has recently been published as *Die Ordnung des Berges: Formalisierung und Systemvertrauen in der sächsischen Bergverwaltung (1470-1600)* (2021).

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16. *Merda Pompeiana*

Laura Nissin [Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies]

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the treatment of excrement in ancient Pompeii from the sensory point of view. Smelling and other sensations that are often considered solely physiological phenomena are in fact deeply influenced by culture and history, and without understanding the ancient sensory landscape, our knowledge of the past inevitably remains limited. In this paper, I explore the olfactory nuisances in one Pompeian city block (IX, 3). I examine the area's stench by tracing and mapping the sources of

smells, focusing on those that in previous scholarship have been considered to render ancient towns foul-smelling.

The special focus is on the Pompeian toilets, their function, and their role in the management of excreta and other waste. The previous scholarship asserts that Roman cities, including Pompeii, must have been malodorous, given that they relied on cesspits to deal with human waste rather than sewers, which would carry excrement away from the living quarters. Such presumptions, however, tell more about us than ancient Romans. For a modern Westerner who has never experienced a cesspit toilet, the sewage system might seem far preferable, but this judgment reflects our own preferences rather than Roman ones. My paper contests the views of malodorous Roman urban space presented in previous studies and suggests that the smellscape of urban Pompeii was not a constant reek but milder and manageable. However, the analysis also reveals that social hierarchies and power relations played a part in Pompeian odor control, and the olfactory landscape was not the same for all inhabitants.

CV:

LAURA HELENA NISSIN (formerly Nissinen)

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PhD 2016

Latin Language and Roman Literature
University of Helsinki (UH)

Assistant professor, AIAS-COFUND fellow
Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies
02/2022 - 01/2024

University teacher (Latin)

UH

08-12/2021

Project researcher

Foundation *Institutum Romanum Finlandiae*

05-06/2021

08-12/2020

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Visiting Research Fellow

University of Kent

2019

Junior Researcher

Public and Private in the Roman House Project UH

2012-2015

Wihuri PhD fellow
Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, Rome 08/2009-07/2010
Junior Researcher, Project secretary, Research assistant
Pompeii Project of UH
2002-2012 (part-time)

For a full list of research activities see: lauranissin.fi/laura-nissin/

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17. "Shit business is serious business": Isaac Durojaiye Agbetusin ("Otunba Gaddafi") and the business of mobile toilets in Lagos (Nigeria) since the 1990s

Ayodeji Olukoju [University of Lagos]

ABSTRACT: A comprehensive history of sewage management in urban Nigeria has yet to be written. In precolonial Lagos, faecal matter was buried outside the settlement but this became increasingly impracticable under colonial rule and in the face of population explosion. From the colonial period (up to 1960), human waste was deposited in pit latrines and bucket latrines, evacuated by night soil men (*agbepo*). Middle and upper class homes had modern water closets. Spatial, cultural and management aspects of sewage management have been studied, but there is no study of it as a business enterprise.

A major turning point came in 1992 when Isaac Durojaiye Agbetusin (better known as "Otunba Gaddafi" from his earlier career as a bodyguard) pioneered mobile (public) toilets in Lagos. His entry addressed two issues: the huge demand for (non-existent) mobile public toilets and the odious image of the *agbepo*. He demonstrated that sewage management was "serious business", and that it was as respectable and profitable as any other ("shit money does not smell"). After his pioneering effort, more mobile toilet operators emerged to meet the demand for their services as Lagos became a megacity and played host to major outdoor sports, religious and political meetings. This paper fills a gap in the literature on urban sewage management in Nigeria by examining the neglected socio-economic dimensions of the subject, with Agbetusin's career as entry point.

CV:

Ayodeji Olukoju (PhD, History, Ibadan, Nigeria) is University Distinguished Professor of Maritime and Economic History at the

University of Lagos, Nigeria.

A Fellow of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, he is the author of several books and monographs, including *Infrastructure Development and Urban Facilities in Lagos* (2003), *The Liverpool of West Africa* (2004) and *Culture and Customs of Liberia* (2006), book chapters and articles in journals. He is the co-editor of seven books. Olukoju served on the advisory board of *Journal of Global History* (2021-23).

Research Publications Profile:

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<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=hZEUghAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

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18. Science and the 'shit': what we know about elephant dung

Sanjeeta Sharma Pokharel [Kyoto University]

ABSTRACT: The escalating rise in human-elephant adverse interactions has been a major concern for many conservation biologists and policymakers in elephant-range countries. With many researchers attempting to investigate different aspects of elephant ecology with one of the key motivations of facilitating conservation and welfare, elephant science has advanced to different fields. However, how elephants perceive different challenges, both ecological and human-induced, is less explored. One of the techniques to address the internal (physiological) changes is to assess different biological markers without interfering elephants' natural behaviours. The most convenient and reliable method to assess the markers is to collect the fresh faeces of elephants. Faeces of elephants have different metabolites of important physiological markers and tells us the stories of what elephants have been through 30 to 40 hours ago (the gut retention time). In this talk, I will emphasize how faeces are the crucial matrix to address different physiological and behavioural questions pertaining to conservation and ecology.

CV:

Dr. Sanjeeta Sharma Pokharel is an elephant biologist who is working to decipher how elephants adjust (physiologically) to the rapidly changing environment. She uses their faecal matters as a mode of understanding hormonal fluctuations. She is also a member of the IUCN Asian elephant specialist group. She is currently at Kyoto University, researching to develop new tools for assessing physiological histories in large mammals. Besides research, she is a cartoonist

(<https://bhuntelephant.wordpress.com/>), a poetess

(<http://sanjeetapokharel.blogspot.com/>) and a blogger

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19. How latrines lost the war: Race, waste, disease, and demoralisation in the Confederate Army

Benjamin Roy [University of Georgia]

ABSTRACT: The improper handling of human and animal waste led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands during the American Civil War. Historians understand the Confederate Army's reforms regarding latrines as part of the effort to control disease. But the significance of these changes in terms of discipline has yet to be explained. Curbing waste-related disease in army camps required asserting unprecedented power over the white Southern man's body.

In the antebellum South, waste practices were divided along racial lines. The racialisation of waste was challenged during the Civil War when white Southern men were subjected to restrictions similar to those imposed on the enslaved. The Confederate Army's efforts to maintain a healthy military force challenged common soldiers' conceptions of white supremacy. When the opportunities presented themselves, soldiers resisted military authority by relieving themselves where they wished.

Using court martial records, military regulations, and the writings of common soldiers, I argue that the ways soldiers did (or didn't) use latrines influenced a unit's military effectiveness. During campaigns, soldiers exploited indiscipline and lack of permanent camps by ignoring latrine regulations. These practices aggravated existing epidemics, which often compounded the demoralization of defeat and retreat. In contrast, when the use of latrines was

enforced in permanent encampments, the decline of disease and stricter control of behaviour stiffened a unit's disciplinary posture.

Slavery shaped how white Southerners relieved themselves, which influenced how they conceived of themselves. That ideology proved incompatible with the latrine, and the consequence was a war partially lost by waste indiscipline.

CV:

Education

2025 (Expected) – Ph.D., History, University of Georgia
- 2023 International Law Certificate Program
2021 – B.A., History, Minors in Civil War Era Studies and Public History, Gettysburg College Summa Cum Laudes

Publications

2022 – “Smoking War: Civil War Soldiers and Tobacco” *Civil War Monitor* 12 No.3, Fall, 2022.

Forthcoming

2025 – “‘The Ideal Pleasures of Dreamland’: The Experience of Tobacco in the Civil War Era” in *The Civil War on Drugs*.

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20. Dump and pump: The impact of COVID-19 and income on septic system pumping patterns in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia

Julia Sharapi [University of Georgia]

ABSTRACT: Municipal septic systems are used widely for wastewater treatment in the United States. Approximately 25% of households, and 33% of new housing and commercial developments use septic systems for wastewater treatment. As suburban development continues to radiate out from urban centers into more rural areas, watersheds are becoming dominated by complex networks of septic- and sewer-sheds. In many areas of the United States, septic systems are not monitored by local governments, so regular maintenance is usually the responsibility of individual landowners. Anecdotal evidence indicates that following COVID-19 stay at home orders in the spring of 2020

increased the need for septic system pumping, the process of removing sludge from a system before there is a build-up that can cause leakage and system failure.

Pumping can be prohibitively expensive for some people (~\$200 - \$500) and this high cost of system maintenance means that pumping often only occurs after system failure. The subsequent pollution from septic failure events increases community exposure to fecal waste and associated pathogens, which poses a serious threat to public health. Several studies have also shown a correlation between low-income communities and poorer local wastewater infrastructure functionality, which has concerning environmental justice implications. Therefore, this paper aims to: (1) quantify the COVID-19 stay at home orders influenced the frequency of septic pumping and (2) the relationship between septic system function and household income in Athens-Clarke County (ACC), Georgia. ACC has wastewater infrastructure representative of many jurisdictions, with a mixture of both septic systems and sewer lines.

CV:

Education

Master of Science, Ecology Expected – May 2024

University of Georgia

Bachelor of Science, Environmental Studies – May 2022

Gettysburg College

Minor: Chemistry

Select publications and presentations

Sharapi, J. (2022). "Estimating Fish Diet in Lake Turkana, Kenya." Student Publications.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/1007

Sharapi, J. and N. Gownaris. August 2022. ESA & CSEE Joint Meeting 2022, Contributed Talk, Montreal, Canada.

Sharapi, J., S. Malkin, G. Silsbe, E. Brownlee, and J. O'Neil. May 2022. Joint Aquatic Sciences Meeting 2022, Virtual Presentation.

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21. Building protection: Public bathrooms and boundary making in United States history

Bryant Simon [Temple University]

These days finding a public bathroom in any city in the United States isn't easy. Sometimes the absence of a clean and accessible toilet is the punchline to a joke, but other times it is something far more menacing, like when two Black men asked to use the Starbucks bathroom in downtown Philadelphia in 2018 and ended up in handcuffs and then on the nightly news.

"America," NYU sociologist and toilet scholar Harvey Molotch told the *Washington Post* after this incident, "has a public bathroom problem."

But the US didn't always have this problem. In the early years of the 20th C., cities from Philadelphia to Lincoln, NE to San Francisco built public bathrooms. And these weren't just metal stalls and sinks with concrete floors. They were "comfort stations". Local officials bragged about the size, central location, and brass and marble finishes of these facilities. At one point, the New York Subway system had more than 1200 public bathrooms. Today there are less than sixty public bathrooms in the entire city and most of them are locked up tight or hidden from sight.

So what happened? Why did US policy makers tear down what they had once built? What does this officially sanctioned, systematic destruction of these key pieces of the urban "social infrastructure" tell us about the building and maintenance of border and boundaries in everyday life in the US, because that's how public bathrooms operated. They were – and are – essential entry points to public life. When policy makers wanted to block people of color, the homeless, and those with fluid notions of sexuality from view, they closed off the bathroom.

My paper will explore these questions by looking at two or three specific bathroom battles that broke out around questions of race, bodies, and segregation (not just in the American South) in 20th century America. It will frame these conflicts as moments of boundary making, and as such, my submission will explore how ideology, conflict, and even systematic humiliation get inscribed into the built environments and public spaces.

CV:

Bryant Simon is the Laura H. Carnell Professor of history at Temple University, (Philadelphia, PA) and an Organization of American Historians Distinguished Lecturer. He is the author of four books and a number of edited collections. Mostly recently, he is the co-

editor with Anke Ortlepp of a special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* on "Bounded Spaces." Currently he is working on a history of the public bathroom in the United States.

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22, There is something *fenny* (糞) about warfare in the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644): Bio-chemical weapons of Imperial China

Benjamin Avichai Katz Sinvany [Columbia University]

The importance of excrement as fertiliser in Chinese history has been widely recognized by economic historians and environmental scientists researching sustainable agriculture. Kenneth Pomeranz among others has argued that fertiliser, including so-called nightsoil, was the requisite environmental 'pressure' valve for maintaining soil fertility in Chinese agricultural regimes (in northern and southern China), and thus parity with Europe (specifically Northern England and the Netherlands) until the divergences of the 1800s. Other scholars, such as Ruth Rogaski, Yongmin Xu, and Amy Zhang, have explored how Chinese officials and hygienists in late imperial and republican China grappled with the urban sanitation problems posed by excrement.

But what of possible links between human waste and other industries? David Cressy's work on the saltpeter men of England suggests the diverse applications possible for excrement, both urine and feces, including its use as a feedstock to produce potassium nitrate—a key ingredient of gunpowder. Daoist texts suggest similar industries existed in Tang China (618-907 AD). Taking as my case study a recipe recorded in the Northern Song (960-1127 AD) for a *fenpao* (糞砲), literally a "shit bomb," and a late Ming (1628-44) treatise that instructs how to put the excreta of soldiers to use during a siege, I build on the work of Francesca Bray and Jacob Eyferth identifying texts as a fraught locus between tacit and intellectual knowledge to propose a more capacious approach to the study of excreta in Chinese history—one that includes bio-chemical warfare of the middle period (900-1400).

CV:

Columbia University in the City of New York | 2020-2027
East Asian Languages and Cultures-History PhD student

Johns Hopkins University (SAIS)-Nanjing University | 2018-2020
Master of Arts: Chinese Studies (*with distinction*)
Emory University | 2011-2015
Bachelor of Arts: History and Environmental Studies (*summa cum laude*)

Publications

2020. "Revisiting the Dazu "Bombard" and the World's Earliest Representation of a Gun." *Journal of Chinese Military History* 9.1, 99-113.

2019. "Notes on the Invention of the First Gun: Conflict and Innovation in the Song Warring States Period (960-1279)." *Journal of Chinese Military History* 8.1, 1-

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Ends