

From Buyers to Shoppers? The Evolution of Shopping Streets in Roman Ostia

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Marketing historians have recently challenged the orthodox view that shopping streets – streets characterized by a high density of shops with architectural installations, which facilitate the activity of shopping – were a modern innovation tied to the “retailing revolution” of the mid-nineteenth century. Their work demonstrates how the dramatic improvement of streetscapes in many pre-industrial European towns between the sixteenth and eighteenth century promoted the growth of shop economies, in which the permanent shop was the basic unit of urban distribution.¹ Perhaps, however, shopping streets have an even earlier origin: many imperial Roman towns had paved streets lined with porticoes, sidewalks, and, of course, shops. Roman streets were often embellished with street fountains, benches, sculptures, and shrines. The textual sources even provide some evidence for street lighting.² If shopping streets existed in ancient Rome, did the act of ‘shopping’ ever become a cultural activity?

This paper investigates the historical development of the shopping street in Ostia’s retail landscape from the mid republican through late antique periods. The urban renaissance initiated by Augustus in the first century BC and urban reforms instituted in the first century AD triggered a new urban planning environment in Rome, which linked the shop – and the act of shopping – to leisure activities (e.g. the theatre and circus) and an emergent cultural identity that reflected the prosperity and sophistication of the empire.³ We see the maturation of this trend at Ostia where, starting in the second century AD, standardized shopping streets appear and undergo a process of monumentalisation. The east *Decumanus* and north *Cardo Maximus*, for instance, received colonnades and porticoes.⁴ Common in eastern cities of Hellenistic origin, the colonnaded axis was a rare investment in towns in the Roman west.⁵ Over the course of the second and third centuries AD, porticoes, sidewalks, balconies, and benches also appeared on secondary streets. These architectural installations encouraged pedestrians to spend more time in the streets by offering them a protected, more pleasant area in which to stroll.⁶

Shopkeepers, whose businesses profited from the increased pedestrian traffic facilitated by shopping streets, contributing actively to the construction of new “leisure landscapes” by embellishing their shops with polychrome marbles, black-and-white mosaics, and painting styles popular in public and domestic architecture.⁷ Streets, then, as a destination, encouraged people to consume space and time alongside the goods and services offered in the shops that flanked them. This process affected a shift in consumer behaviour, as buying transformed from a purely functional act into shopping as a cultural activity that some groups undertook for enjoyment or as a social signifier.⁸

Ostia underwent a large-scale reorganization of the street network in the late antique period due to natural disasters and a shrinking population. Street blocking contributed to the creation of new ‘pedestrian zones’ in central areas, which maintained their monumental appearance, but no longer functioned as landscapes of consumption. Instead, with a few exceptions, commerce was now relegated to open-air markets on secondary streets and confined to new commercial zones in abandoned areas of the city.⁹ Since shopping streets contributed to the visible prestige of Ostia in the imperial period, transforming the major armatures, and even secondary roads, into pleasurable arenas for socialization, their disappearance in the late antique period may have resulted in a shift back to functional buying for the majority of the population.

Past approaches to Roman shops focused on detailed typological studies of space and function, which underscored the diversity and ubiquity of commercial architecture in Roman towns, but did little to inform on a shop’s social and economic activities: i.e. the human element.¹⁰ In the last ten years, however, a new wave of scholarship has established that retailing was significant for urban economies, highlighting how shops and shopkeepers actively shaped urban space and society.¹¹ In addition to confronting entrenched views in marketing history, this research uses consumer culture theory, environmental psychology, and phenomenology to demonstrate how the physical remains of Roman streets and shops, as active agents in shaping urban experience, can be used to reconstruct past consumer behavior.¹²

Notes

¹ E.g. Furnée and Lesger 2014, 1-15.

² E.g. Dig. 9.2.52.1.

³ Vennarucci 2015, 143–146.

⁴ DeLaine 2002, 96.

⁵ Burns 2017, 301.

⁶ E.g. Tac. Ann 15:43; Suet. Nero 16.

⁷ For a survey of shop décor in Ostian shops see e.g. Hermansen 1981, 125–184.

⁸ E.g. Martial Epig 9.59.

⁹ Gering 2012, 255. 265.

¹⁰ E.g. Girri 1956.

¹¹ E.g. Ellis 2018; Wilson and Flohr 2016; Tran 2013; Holleran 2012.

¹² See e.g. Veitch 2017 for a phenomenological approach to a shopping street in Ostia.

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