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## The Roman Retail Revolution: The Socio-Economic World of the Taberna

By Steven J.R. Ellis. Pp. 320. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018. \$85. ISBN 978-0-19876-993-4 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Ray Laurence](#)

Ellis has produced a very thoughtful and rather compelling monograph on the subject of shops in Roman cities from the third century B.C.E into the second century C.E. He is careful to shift the discussion of retailing and urbanism beyond that of Pompeii, Ostia, and Rome, and the range of sites studied is impressive (table 1.1, 16–18): 44 from Italy, 10 from Spain, 12 from Gaul, 27 from Africa, 8 from the Balkans, and 22 from the Eastern Provinces. Hence, the book, although in some ways still focused on his studies and excavation in Pompeii, looks to a wider history of retailing across the Roman empire.

The introduction opens with the importance of retail sales as a human activity, which after language, he argues, is “as common and culturally charged as eating” (8). As he suggests in this book, the process by which the selling of goods from a shop became an integral part of the Roman urban experience is of considerable importance. He clarifies that the book is not about “trade” per se but about retail as an urban phenomenon that he associates with the nonelite or “middling-group/s” (12). The precise definition of the social status of shoppers or retailers is a distraction from the role of retail in urban history (26). This seems in line with a shift from the “daily life” of the undefined inhabitant of a Roman city to a history of urban phenomena that is grounded in archaeological evidence available to us.

Chapter 2 discusses the archaeology of Roman retail outlets. Here, Ellis draws on his experience of directing excavations of such structures in Pompeii, emphasizing that remnants and material culture or both found in shops can seldom be directly diagnostic of the activity in the shop (76–83). He thus makes a distinction between “stray” and “stratified” finds. Closer inspection of the former points to actions of those fleeing the eruption of Vesuvius, whereas stratified finds tend to have a closer association with the activity of construction and need not have any relationship to “use” in the shop. As a result, the archaeology of shops is still very dependent on the presence of thresholds indicating wide openings for display, counters, and positioning on the street. The author includes a detailed discussion of literary texts and rental notices from Pompeii. What I missed, though, was a wider discussion of epigraphy, in which we can find over 100 mentions of *taberna*, including some building inscriptions (see below), in contrast to the epigraphic absence of references to words such as *popina*, designating a more specific form of shop.

With chapter 3, Ellis critiques the idea that shops were located to gain an economic profit, whether from passing trade or through location in busier parts of the city. Here, he shifts the emphasis to cause readers to contemplate why houses in Pompeii in the second century B.C.E. were built with shops along their facades. Rental of the shops is considered (103–4) but questioned: would the returns from selling lamps really have covered the rental of a shop (105)? However, this also causes us to think through the creation of the House of the Faun—the owner or builder thought it appropriate to include shops as part of what is today the largest remaining house in Pompeii. Looking ahead in the book, we find that the idea of building shops in this format was a relatively novel idea in the second century B.C.E. Hence the question arises: who occupied the shops when the House of the Faun was first built? We might posit the idea of dependents—clients or freedmen—and perhaps an underdeveloped concept of “profit” from retail sales. We might consider the selling of goods along the frontage of the House of the Faun as adding to the prestige of the owner of the house. It is also possible that these early shops were established to make

available, at a price, novelties or goods of a rarer nature or perhaps those derived from production of ceramics or wine on the major estates.

The following chapters, 4–6, delineate three retail revolutions underpinned by the careful study of shops in Pompeii, including excavation, and through a wider study of shops at numerous archaeological sites. The first establishes the shops in streets during the second century B.C.E. The second revolution, ranging from roughly 50 B.C.E. to 50 C.E., was characterized by greater specialization, in particular the development of bars. The third revolution diffused a standard pattern for shops across the empire. The argument, embedded within the detailed study of dated archaeological contexts, is careful and rather compelling. There is not space in this review to do justice to every step of the argument and, instead, I wish to discuss the implications of the findings for the study of urbanism.

In chapter 4, the first retail revolution is defined by the fact that shops are very hard to find in the archaeological record prior to the second century B.C.E. Ellis has looked diligently for these. Equally, the shop is not really a feature of the Greek or Hellenistic city and, importantly, we cannot see the rise of the shop as a phenomenon of any form of Hellenization. The author seems tempted to see the new retail landscape of cities as a by-product of the influx of material goods in the form of war booty (134–38). The observation of shop building in the second century B.C.E. is significant and includes examples ranging from the Stabian Baths to some of the most famous houses in Pompeii (e.g., the House of Sallust) as well as to Ellis' own excavations near the Porta di Stabia. The author integrates these phenomena with wider urban change at Ostia, Minturnae, Fregellae, and other cities. However, he does not fully explain: why were shops built on streets in this century? The pattern is there, but what caused this massive change in the landscape of cities?

Moving forward in time, in chapter 5, working from his excavations in Pompeii, Ellis provides a detailed chronology of a shift from workshops to shops as places for the consumption of food and drink. The bar counter as a new widespread urban phenomenon in Pompeii is firmly placed earlier than the earthquake of 62 C.E. and can be associated with the reign of Augustus. The author carefully notes the presence of a market for upcycled building materials dating back to the first century B.C.E. (*CIL* 4.7124) that were effectively used to create the surfaces of bar counters. For him, the explanation of this phenomenon lies in an overall economic upturn (175), but it also involves a cultural change or a shift in lifestyle. I am not certain that the two are as intertwined as Ellis suggests.

Chapter 6 brings with it the third retail revolution: “homogenization” and the development of a standard retail architecture. By the beginning of the second century C.E., the shuttered shop, as indicated by its special cut-stone threshold, had proliferated and can be found in a variety of cities, whereas it had appeared only as a novelty in Pompeii during the first century C.E. (201). The phenomenon is seen by Ellis, in part at least (207–11), to be a product of the new building codes established following the Great Fire in Rome (64 C.E.). This new set of laws is linked in the book to streets lined with shops, which can be found in numerous famous and more obscure places across the Roman West and to an extent in the Roman East. They are, as Ellis states, “Here, there, (but not) everywhere” (212–19)—for example, in Lambaesis but not in Timgad just 25 km away. The author rejects any role for the Roman elite in this process of proliferation (225), but there is evidence of a Roman governor in 101 C.E. building shops in the remote town of Fele in Pisidia (*IK* 62, 631; *AE* 1979, 620): “Imp(erator) Caes(ar) Nerva divi | Nervae f(ilius) Traianus Aug(ustus) Ger(manicus) pontif(ex) | max(imus) trib(unicia) pot(estate) co(n)s(ul) IIII p(ater) p(atriciae) Q(uintus) Orfitasius | Aufidius Umbrus leg(at) Aug(usti) pro pr(aetore) | tabernam cum porticibus a novo fecit.” This evidence actually adds to Ellis' argument for the creation of urban homogeneity. The inscriptions in this town point to a concerted effort to establish retailing—which goes some way to supporting Ellis' argument.

The book concludes with a chapter that focuses on the shops and bars of Roman cities as “the index of urban life” (244–48). In reading this final section of the book, I was reminded of Burns' recent book, *Origins of the Colonnaded Streets in the Cities of the Roman East* (Oxford 2017), which locates the origins of the colonnaded street in the porticoes of Rome or even the stoas associated with the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean. Reading these two books together points to the development of a new history of the

streetscapes of antiquity. Ellis' book provides the basis for the consideration of shops as a fundamental feature of Roman urbanism and will become a building block for further studies.

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*American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 123, No. 2 (April 2019)  
Published online at [www.ajaonline.org/book-review/3848](http://www.ajaonline.org/book-review/3848)  
DOI: 10.3764/ajaonline1232.laurence