

Emilia Åkerman

Historical Reality in Modern Fiction

An analysis of Hedningarnas förgård

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Supervisor: Arja Karivieri

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1. Introduction

In the curriculum for the subject of history for the Swedish *grundskola*, the elementary school system, there is only about eleven hours spent on studying all of antiquity.¹ It is not possible that this is enough for the student to get a well-rounded view of what life during antiquity was like. Although further time is spent on antiquity during history studies during upper secondary school, the issue is that history as a subject is no longer mandatory in upper secondary school and therefore many do not receive this further education and understanding. Due to the general public's foundation of knowledge being rather small, it is not hard to imagine that their greater view of antiquity is based more on stories that are visible in popular culture, such as books, tv, and computer games, rather than from fact-based teaching. These stories are more often than not completely fictional and made up in the modern age.² Many of them have ended up being blockbuster hits, *Gladiator*, *300*, *Troy*, and *Rome* are only some examples. What all of these have in common are some of their major themes. They all centre around men, the military, emperors, and the acquisition of power. Within the English and Swedish speaking spheres there is great hardship when trying to come up with examples that do not feature at least one of these as a fundamental theme. Due to their prevalence, other themes are disregarded and not featured. Unfortunately, they tend to coincide with topics that have not received as much scholarly attention as, for instance, military history. Examples being groups such as the poor, women, slaves, e.tc.

This thesis will be going between being a receptive study and a historical study. It will revolve around Vibeke Olssons 1982 book *Hedningarnas förgård* and how antiquity has been used in it, as well as attempting to recreate and discuss the historical reality of the situation depicted in the book. To aid in the study three main research questions have been developed:

1. What topics regarding Roman life are present in *Hedningarnas förgård*?
2. What can be understood about these topics through ancient sources and modern research?

¹ Hagman 2019.

² Although in recent years the book genre of retellings of classical myths has seen a massive gain in popularity, arguably with Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles* at the helm.

3. Is there value in studying historical reality in regard to modern fictional media, and if so, what?

The nature of this essay is not the most traditional and its disposition will not be either. While all of the traditional elements are there, the presentation of theory and method, previous research, discussion etc, they will in most cases not be separate chapters. Instead, the division of parts and chapters is thematic. Because of this the separate parts will feature as elements throughout the entirety of the essay. This is to ease readability. Instead of having, for example, all of the research history together as one chapter, the research history regarding for example housing will be in the housing chapter and the research history for the study of women will be presented in that chapter. This is due to the overarching structure of the essay which is split in three major parts:

1. A theoretical background of reception studies and popular history,
2. *Hedningarnas förgård* and the ancient reality,

and

3. A discussion regarding the relations between the previous two parts.

2. Reception studies and public history

Reception studies and the study of the history of media is, in a sense, a rather new field, and great strides are still to be made.³ In Sweden and in the world at large the interest for reception studies rose quickly in the early 1990s.⁴ In 1993, for example, Charles Martindale's *Redeeming the Text* was published, where he called for the acceptance and further development of reception studies as a legitimate field of research within the greater sphere of classical studies. Since then, a great number of strides have been made to achieve that goal. More and more universities are adding reception elements to their course plans and an increasing number of academic texts are being published.⁵ Before his *Redeeming the Text* there is one central moment that he describes as symbolically pivotal for the emergence of reception studies as a field of research. At the University of Constance in April 1967, Hans Robert Jauss held his inaugural lecture which argued for a shift in literary interpretation to *Rezeptionsästhetik*. It called to acknowledge the "historicity of text" while it also would "allow for the aesthetic response of readers in the present", whatever the present was that the reader was currently in.⁶ However, the area of reception studies that has conducted studies in regards to books has been focused on how ancient texts and literature is perceived today,⁷ not, as this essay intends to do, focus on the book version of a historical 'epic', which is of great focus when conducting reception studies in regards to film and tv. A definition of reception studies is the studying of "the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented".⁸ Despite this essay using a fictional book as its basis, for the rest of this chapter the focus will be on antiquity in fictional film and tv. This is due to most academic research on books having been done on ancient books and the manner in which they have survived. Because *Hedningarnas förgård* is not based on any ancient literature or myth, it is more similar in its portrayal of antiquity to film and media, only in another medium.

³ Michelakis 2020, 1.

⁴ Aronsson 2012, 34.

⁵ Martindale 2006, 1-2.

⁶ Martindale 2006, 3.

⁷ Martindale 2006.

⁸ Hardwich & Stray 2007, 1.

Isak Hammar and Ulf Zander bring in the introduction to *Svärd, sandaler och skandaler* up a fundamental problem as to why the relationship between the historical reality of antiquity and the representations of it in popular culture media is strained. Namely that in most cases it is not historical facts that constitute the framework of what is depicted, implying that it is rather the entertainment value that has the final say.⁹ There is quite an openness within the film and tv industry that they hold no wish to present history “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, or, as it is referred to as in this essay: historical reality.¹⁰ Conversely, however, using phrases such as “based on a true story” and “inspired by real events” have proven to be quite a bringer of profit from the audiences. This has led to what can fairly be described as a tense relationship between the academic scholars and filmmakers, where scholars have taken to remark on any small detail that could be incorrect.¹¹ This field that has emerged where non-academically trained individuals spread information of history to the public so that it is widely available has started to become known as “public history”. Simply stated it is when some parts of the public transmit representations of history to other parts of the public.¹² While not necessarily being historically correct, they still work to drum up attention and interest for the field of classical history as a whole.

To aim for historical correctness could in and of itself be problematic in nature. The word “correctness” itself implies that it is at all possible to freeze one specific moment in time and be completely certain of all aspects of that specific moment, which is not true. Another implication is that nothing would be available or possible to reinterpret, since their meaning and worth becomes solidified by the freezing of time.¹³ Although this thesis aims at studying historical *reality* it does not necessarily look at historical *correctness*. The two *could* be interpreted as synonyms, but they do not *have* to be. For this study the distinction between them is that the search for historical reality is open to the fact that it is not possible to know everything one needs to know in detail in order to call something completely historically correct. To be open for alternative interpretation and acknowledge where the use of the artistic licence is more appropriate than aiming for hard facts, for example regarding topics

⁹ Hammar & Zander 2015, 10.

¹⁰ Hammar & Zander 2015, 11.

¹¹ Hammar & Zander 2013, 11–12.

¹² Cufurovic 2018, 2.

¹³ Hammar & Zander 2015, 18.

where the actual facts are impossible to find out and only can be estimated. In movies and tv specifically there are more parts that impact the final product and the experience of it than the facts a historic consultant could supply. For example, the lighting and camera work play just as big of a role to create a historic atmosphere as how the set pieces look. They do not work independently of each other.¹⁴

Even though reception studies had already started to gain traction in the early 90s, it was not until the release of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* that a greater interest was created amongst both scholars and the general public, creating what has been called "the *Gladiator*-effect".

Through "the *Gladiator*-effect" universities saw an upswing of applicants to their courses and moving pictures entered the focus of studies done within reception studies in a way it had not been seen as before.¹⁵ Quite quickly the scholarly debate of film moved on from the historicity to questions of what movies and tv can inform the viewer of about their own contemporary environment. What can a specific portrayal of a theme reveal about the modern world and the struggles it faces?¹⁶

It is not surprising that it was only with the release of *Gladiator* that the study of antiquity on the screen became a matter of interest. Before its release in 2000, there had been no (successful) historical 'epics' released since Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was released in 1964, more than thirty years previously.¹⁷ For historians it became quickly apparent that the discussion and conceptions of classical history were being shaped by how the big box office hits treated history.¹⁸ There are different opinions of what part historical debate among academics plays on having input on the general conception of history. While a documentary filmmaker claims that historians tend to only speak with each other, not reaching out and becoming available and approachable to the public, historians have claimed that actually the opposite is true. That it is the film industry that makes history harder to comprehend for the general public due to only displaying one non-challenging narrative at a

¹⁴ Hammar & Zander 2015, 18.

¹⁵ Östenberg 2015, 242.

¹⁶ Östenberg 2015, 249.

¹⁷ Cufurovic 2018, 1.

¹⁸ Cufurovic 2018, 1.

time. Meanwhile debates between historians allows for many perspectives and interpretations.¹⁹

Another popular cinematographic work that has been highly acclaimed and whose subject area is ancient Rome is HBOs tv-series *Rome*. For the production of both *Gladiator* and *Rome* academically trained historical consultants were employed, however the two give different accounts as to what their role was. Jonathan Stamp, the historical consultant for *Rome*, has said that while the filmmaker's role is to entertain, the role of the historical consultant is to "find ways of presenting an authentic past", not to say yay or nay as to what and how things happened.²⁰ To create an authentic past the consultant should focus on the details, rather than the bigger picture. That is where the historian is able to form debate among the audience on the representation of history. The historical consultant for *Gladiator*, Kathleen Coleman, asked for her name to be removed from the credits due to her experiences on the film and the way she had been treated during production. She felt as though her contributions were only for show, her input had not made any difference to the final product.²¹ One area of improvement might be at what stage the historical consultant enters the production. Oftentimes as it is now, they join the production long after the script has been written, sometimes even after filming has begun. The historian thus becomes an edge player. Could not some of this tension thus be lifted if they started consulting when the ideas for the story were being made instead of as it is now, when they join after the story is already in the process of becoming realised?²²

While praising the fact that reception studies have grown in popularity since the early 1990s, Martindale is critical of studies that aim to recreate the-past-as-it-was.²³ However, that criticism is posed in the context of recreating the-past-as-it-was of the classic texts and the ancient authors. For this study, stories originating from the ancient past have been categorically dismissed. What is of interest is not how ancient literary works and the memory of their authors have lived on, but rather how the memory of antiquity itself has survived and is being treated in modern times. Part of Martindale's criticism is that it "may not attract

¹⁹ Cufurovic 2018, 6

²⁰ Cufurovic 2018, 5.

²¹ Östenberg 2015, 242-243.

²² Cufurovic 2018, 5.

²³ Martindale 2006, 4.

tomorrow's students".²⁴ Since this study is based on the small amount of teaching Swedish students receive regarding ancient history, it seems pertinent to delve into this specific point a little further, seeing as this is not only presented by Martindale as a conceptual flaw, but a pragmatic one as well. The aim for this study is to be an evaluative one and, in some respects, even speculative. What is it that the general public, that is not academically trained historians, learn about antiquity? What version of antiquity is presented to them? The goal of this essay is not to "attract tomorrow's students" but to form an idea of what tomorrow's students already interested in the field know beforehand when entering a course or a programme on the subject of antiquity. It is also to form an idea of what their non-interested peers understand about the subject without necessarily trying to learn anything further through schooling, so that the trained historian can gain a general understanding of the already out there perceptions of the field.

²⁴ Martindale 2006, 4.

3. A note on methods and materials

Before any detailed study of *Hedningarnas förgård* takes place, a note on the methods and materials used is of value. The study of *Hedningarnas förgård* itself is done in order to use it as a tool for the study of the ancient material and the modern research and to bring about the larger discussion of historical reality in relation to modern fiction. Although the review of the novel takes much the shape of a study of a piece of source material, it is done in effort to be able to use it in order to later understand the actual ancient sources and what the modern research says. The focus of the study of *Hedningarnas förgård* is on the parts of the book that touches on the three main areas of study for this thesis: everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite, social relations of slaves and women, and living conditions of early Christians.

Seeing as *Hedningarnas förgård* is set in 249 and 250 C.E. the intended timeframe is to look at sources only from between 150 C.E. and 350 C.E., within the one hundred years before and after the book's setting. Some divergences will be made. In most cases this will be in order to create a background to phenomena present during the middle of the third century. The antique material used for this study will mainly be legal texts, primarily from Justinian's *Digest*, Gaius' *Institutes*, and the *Rules of Ulpian*. Other sources will also feature, although, with the exception of Martial's *Epigrams*, only documentary ones and not literary texts. For the chapter of everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite, focus will also be brought on architectural remains and some mention will be made of archaeological finds.

Both Gaius and Ulpian are active within the set timeframe, Justinian is of course not. It is however still applicable to use the *Digest* despite it being published in the sixth century due to the fact that much of its contents are compiled and edited texts from the second and third centuries.²⁵ There are many traps that are easy to fall into when studying ancient texts. As mentioned, it is important to always keep in mind that the text might have been taken out of its original context and/or edited to fit new situations. To create the *Digest*, Justinian's legal scholars used the much longer original texts and distilled them to only keep the parts still

²⁵ Evans Grubbs 2002, 2.

applicable in the sixth century. While they made careful note of what original work each excerpt belonged to, in many cases it is not possible to reconstruct the originals due to the rest of them having been lost to time.²⁶ When only smaller parts of a larger whole remain, it is much harder to know what interpretations are the most “correct” and most closely aligned with the author’s original intention. Another issue is the availability of the existing sources. It is not uncommon for sources regarding more “forgotten” societal groups such as women, both documentary and legal ones, to be underutilized. They are generally not considered as interesting, and it is not uncommon that there are no translations of good enough quality. This means that even *if* someone wanted to study them further, they might be unable to do so.²⁷

Another limitation is the topics that the texts address. All topics chosen to investigate further, life of the poor, women, slaves, and the sub-culture of early Christianity, are all topics that contemporary writers, who often were part of the elite themselves, did not comparatively pay much attention to in their writings. Take the topic of slaves as an example. Despite the group as a whole being of great significance economically, they were not viewed as worthy to be remembered by those outside of the slave group itself. One written source that the poorer classes were able to use to cultivate their own memory was through tombstones. However, in many cases the slaves were too poor even for that.²⁸ They had no one that wrote about them, and they were unable to write for themselves. Much information about them have been lost with no possibility of ever reconstructing it.

The method used to conduct the study of the ancient first-hand sources and to gain understanding of the historical reality falls under that of interpretative phenomenology. Julie Frechette *et al.* states that the aim of an interpretive phenomenological study is “to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon, representing an individual level of analysis with an understanding that social contexts are embedded within an individual’s being”.²⁹ In their article they use the researcher’s “I” as the basis of the lived phenomenon. As it is not possible to undergo the lived experience of ancient Rome today, the “I” used for this essay will be that

²⁶ Evans Grubbs 2002, 1–2.

²⁷ Evans Grubbs 2002, xi.

²⁸ Schumacher 2012, 594.

²⁹ Frechette *et al.* 2020, 5.

of Callistrate. It will be her experiences described in *Hedningarnas förgård* that will shape the historical research in order to reconstruct, to the greatest extent possible, the lived experiences of actual Romans. To find the historical reality of her fictional life.

4. *Hedningarnas förgård*

When trying to evaluate where *Hedningarnas förgård* stands in relation to historical reality, a good place to start would be to examine what the book says and what its major themes and motifs are. It is a story that is completely free standing from any of the classical stories and ancient accounts, and has been created from scratch, so to speak, in modern times. It even differs from other fictional stories that also are modern day fiction. While the likes of the movie *Gladiator* or the tv-series *Rome* are also modern fabrications, what propels the story forward are prominent persons and events of the ancient period. In *Gladiator* the antagonist is the emperor Commodus, and the course of events is triggered by the death of Marcus Aurelius.³⁰ The HBO-series *Rome* follows historical events and figures through the perspective of two soldiers of the military, Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo. One example of how this is done is when one of the two soldiers, Lucius Vorenus, is tasked to follow Julius Caesar as one of the people that accompanies him to the Senate house on the Ides of March. It is when he steps away from his post that Brutus gets his opportunity to strike. This character is thus portrayed as the catalyst of Caesar's death.³¹ What the frame of interest is for this study, though, is how stories that are not so closely connected to it, treat the time period it is set in. Where it is not historical figures or major events, but rather the made-up characters and the environment that propels the story forward. Another important aspect is also themes and motifs. Many of the most popular and most well-known modern stories about antiquity feature men, emperors, and the military in a very prominent way, as exemplified by both *Gladiator* and *Rome*. More examples of the same calibre are not hard to find, *Clash of the Titans*, *Hercules*, and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* are just some further examples. Of course, there exists other examples of modern fiction in the form of books that address antiquity than *Hedningarnas förgård*. Maja Lundgren's *Pompeji* (2001), Kerstin Ekman's *Tullias värld* (2020), and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) are some of them, but they only act to further the portrayal of antiquity where the focus is on prominent historical figures and events. Since these stories are among the most popular ones, they are also the kind of stories that have received the most scholarly attention. It is for this

³⁰ How his death, or as it is in the movie, his murder, is portrayed could however be described as the movie's greatest factual flaw, but this is not a topic of discussion here.

³¹ Cufurovic 2018, 7.

reason that this study will be based on an admittedly lesser-known work of fiction, the novel *Hedningarnas förgård*.

Hedningarnas förgård is written by Vibeke Olsson and was published in 1982. It is the first of six books in a series. What is interesting about this book is that it is such a complete juxtaposition to the themes present in the more popular historical epics. Instead of men, power, and military, its major themes are women, belonging, and the life of the everyday man. Another point of interest is that it only utilizes the emperor, for example, in relation to how he affects their life, despite being far removed from him in societal status. Although popular at the time of its release in its origin country of Sweden,³² no English translation was ever made. Therefore, translations of most shorter quotes will be done in conjunction to the quote within the main-body text. Translations of all longer quotes and the rest of the shorter quotes can be found in the corresponding footnote.

One path that could have been interesting to study could have been to investigate the author's background, biases, and intentions. The author became a pastor in the Baptist church and worked as a pastor for quite a few years before she became an author full time. Vibeke Olsson was born in 1958 and seeing as *Hedningarnas förgård* was published in 1982 it was most likely being written during or right after her pastor's education.³³ Presumably as part of her education she had courses on church history and the historical context of the biblical books. Even if she was not taught specifically about the contexts portrayed in her book, it is not hard to imagine that she would have at least been given the tools on how to find it out. At least if one looks at what courses are part of pastoral studies today in the Uniting Church in Sweden (or Ekumeniakyrkan in Swedish), the denomination that the Baptist Union of Sweden, the United Methodist Church, and Mission Covenant Church of Sweden merged in to in 2011, courses on Christian and church history are both obligatory and cover the entire first term of the pastoral programme.³⁴ One can only assume that similar subjects were allocated as much, if not more, time in the late 1970s and early 80s. This part of her

³² No number of sold copies has been found, but it has been reprinted several times in different editions, indicating its popularity.

³³ Albert Bonniers Förlag, Vibeke Olsson; Lindh 2023.

³⁴ Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm, Teologiskt program, inriktning pastor.

education must have influenced her writing, more or less consciously. For this study, however, what courses the author may or may not have studied will not be a factor of the discussion. The aim is not to find out *why* something is presented in a certain manner, but rather to discuss *what* it is that is actually written and the ramifications of it. What does the reader see, with or without any background information on the story or its author? The author is not the focus, what is written on the page is.

The main character of the book is a seventeen-year-old slave woman named Callistrate. She was born into and has spent her whole life in the household of Aulus Plinius, working mostly as a dishwasher. Aulus Plinius is a very wealthy military officer living in a grand house close to Trajan's forum. The collection of slaves that Callistrate is part of is so great that Aulus Plinius himself is incapable of controlling them, instead employing one of his former slaves, the freedman Quartus, as their overseer. Other than the obvious difference in hierarchy between Callistrate and Aulus Plinius and Quartus, Olsson also illustrates a strict hierarchical order in the slave group as well.

Hennes herre vet inte om att hon föder, ty huset är stort och han har många slavar. Och vad bryr han sig om slavbarnen som föds i det mörka rummet bakom köket? Kammarjungfrur och påkläderskor, baderskor, danserskor och älskarinnor föder inte sina barn där. Åt sådana slavinnor finns det bättre läger än den smala sovbänken i skrubben bakom köksornas rum. Men hon som föder idag äger inga vackra kläder och får sällan visa sig i atrium. Det tillkommer inte henne som bär ved till värmeugnen i källaren, skurar golven, nackar fjäderfä, kolar kökshärden och sköter grovdisken att visa sig för sin herre. Hennes händer och lukten av hennes kropp är inte sådana att det skulle passa sig.³⁵

³⁵ Olsson 1982, 5: Her master does not know that she is in labour, for the house is large and he has many slaves. And what does he care about slave children being born in the dark room behind the kitchen? Chamber maids and dressers, bathers, dancers and lovers do not give birth to their children there. For those slaves there are better cots than the narrow bench behind the kitchen maids' room. But she who is giving birth today does not own any beautiful clothes and is rarely permitted to be seen in the atrium. It is not becoming to her who carries wood for the heating oven in the basement, scrubs the floors, neck poultry, brings coal to the hearth, and takes care of the dishes to show herself in front of her master. Her hands and the smell of her body is not of a kind where that would be appropriate.

Despite them all being slaves in the same household, their tasks and duties separate them. If she instead of being a kitchen worker had been a chambermaid, dancer, or a lover there would have been two major differences in the birthing scenario that is being described in the quote. Then the master would have taken an interest in her, and she would have been in a more comfortable environment. But because she is nothing more than one of the many slaves doing the physical labour of keeping the house warm, cleaning, and working in the kitchen her situation looks vastly different. Also, some of her station outside of the birthing scene is revealed. Someone with her place in the slave hierarchy is not allowed the pretty clothes or to be seen in the atrium. This implies that she is seen as an invisible part of the house's inner workings. The ones actually keeping the household running, those who cooks, cleans, and make the house liveable, are overlooked for the beautifying ones, those who entertain. This is something that can be recognized in modern society as well. It is not the nurses and supermarket shelf-stockers that are given most recognition in the social zeitgeist. That space is given to models, actors, and artist, who, while making society more *enjoyable* to live in, are not necessary for the survival of those living in it. The structure of the hierarchy within the slave group becomes somewhat of a microcosm of the society of the outside world. This is mirrored much later in the book long after Callistrate reflects on the differences between the poor neighbourhoods versus her earlier life with Aulus Plinius. Despite all the life and interaction between neighbours, there is no one that is able to keep track of everything and everyone, which is posed in contrast to her earlier life where the slaves in the atrium house had created "en egen liten värld", their own little world.³⁶

The book starts with Callistrate in the midst of childbirth in a small room behind the kitchen. While not described directly, the Roman Empire is described through the use of similes.

Hon tycker att smärtorna vältrar sig över henne och krossar henne, smular sönder henne. De rullar fram i ett ändlöst tåg, ändlöst som soldaternas led i militärparaderna förra året då rikets tusenårsminne firades. Eller också våldsamt galopperande som hästarna på Circus kommer smärtorna över henne³⁷

³⁶ Olsson 1982, 84.

³⁷ Olsson 1982, 6: She thinks that the pains welter over her and crush her, crumble her to pieces. They roll over her in an endless procession, endless like the soldiers' columns in the military parades last

The pain of childbirth is described as if she's being trampled by the military processions that marched through Rome the year before when the Empire's thousand-year jubilee was celebrated. The contractions are likened to the violent galloping of the horses at the Circus Maximus. This, as well as the time period being situated as the year that Decius was made emperor by his troops,³⁸ Olsson makes the reader aware of both the political situation, but also makes the reader aware of what kinds of spectacles that even the lowest ranking slaves could enjoy in the cultural life of the city. If Callistrate had not been able to go see the jubilee procession or had not visited the horse races of the Circus, she would not have been able to compare anything to them, since the story is through her point of view with a third person narrator that is all-knowing in terms of her thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

The child she births is born disabled. It is a daughter who is missing her right arm from below the elbow. In her labour Callistrate is aided by two older slaves, Sabina and Prisca. Despite the child being otherwise healthy, the two other slaves' reactions are ones of pain and horror. They cry out to the gods, "O Isis, du barmhärtiga, utropar Sabina med skräck och fasa",³⁹ and the virtually instantaneous reaction is to call for the killing of the child, "Sabina, säger Prisca skyndsamt, knäck nacken".⁴⁰ However, Callistrate is adamant that she should be kept alive, no matter the cost. That determination, which she is steadfast in also in front of Quartus, the overseer, and is whipped because of, leads to the overseer's decision to sell both mother and child. In his decision to sell them, he does acquiesce to waiting until the child is two weeks old. This is so that the new owner would lose the right to kill the baby without consequence. After the two week mark the child gains the rights of a living child, not one in the limbo between life and being put out. Callistrate gives her daughter the name Sabina, after the older slave who works with her in the kitchen. This is motivated by her having stepped into a maternal role for Callistrate after her mother's death a couple of years prior.

year when the realm's thousand-year jubilee was being celebrated. Or violently galloping like the horses at Circus do the pains come over her.

³⁸ Olsson 1982, 5.

³⁹ Olsson 1982, 7: O Isis, you merciful, Sabina cries out with horror and fear.

⁴⁰ Olsson 1982, 7: Sabina, says Prisca hurriedly, snap the neck.

Mother and child are sold in the slave market to an older man. When he leads her over the river and far into the neighbourhoods in Trans Tiber, Callistrate realises that her new master is a very poor one. Through the exposition of the environment and timing of their walk, Olsson enlightens the viewer of cultural norms in Roman society. “Strax före solnedgången, vid den tid då de fattigaste brukar begrava sina döda”.⁴¹ It is just before sunset, the time when the poorest people is able to bury their dead. The world building is added where it is not necessarily needed, she could have left it at stating the time of day, but uses it to extend the description so it not only covers the time, but also society and cultural norms at large. This specific example is particularly interesting, as it is not a fact that appears in the book again at a later point. The previous instance of opportunistic world building, when the pains of labour are likened to both the military processions during the jubilee and to the horses at the Circus, uses parallels to events that are referenced later. The thousand-year jubilee becomes important for the situation of Christians since they did not partake in it, and while the Circus does not come up again, the games at the Flavian amphitheatre are, both belonging to the same category of societal function. The description here, however, is not some foreshadowing, only a description of general society for the interest of the reader.

When walking through Trans Tiber Olsson presents the reader to the reasons Callistrate is clued into the fact that her new owner is very poor largely by appealing to the senses. While the types of houses present act as clues,⁴² it is the smells that confirm it: “Jag tror att gödselhögarna i gathörnen här är fler än annorstädes, det kommer fler elaka lukter från rännstenen och jag vet nu att mannen som köpt mig är en fattig man”.⁴³ The presence of many different stench and their plentiful origins. The new owner, whose name is Isak, finally brings her into one of the many apartment houses. He is not the owner of it, as she had hoped, but rather lives in a small apartment on the fourth floor. He is however the owner of a tailor’s shop in the same building in which three other slaves work. Callistrate will be the only slave working in the home, not in the shop, and is thus kept separate from them. In the same building there is also a small carpenter’s workshop, a bakery, and a fishmonger. Once

⁴¹ Olsson 1982, 33.

⁴² Olsson 1982, 33.

⁴³ Olsson 1982, 33: I believe that the piles of manure at the street corners are more plentiful than elsewhere, there are more mean stench coming from the gutter and I now know that the man who has bought me is a poor man.

they have climbed all of the stairs, they reach a small apartment where Isak's wife Monnica greets them. The apartment is small, with only one room, and the constant soundscape that surrounds them from so many people living so close to each other is overwhelming and is particularly dominated by the sound of children and babies crying, "Trapphuset är fullt av barngråt".⁴⁴

Callistrate's new owners turn out to be Christians, something she finds foreign and hard to know how to relate to. She has never knowingly encountered any Christians previously. All she knows of them are hearsay and prejudiced stereotypes, such as them being dirty for not visiting the *thermae* on a regular basis and having heard that they did not attend the previous year's jubilee and were therefore ungodly. That last claim is one that Isak directly refutes. That they were seen as being against the emperor and the Empire, he says, is because they do not relate to their god in the same manner as everyone else does to theirs. The reality being that they prayed just as much as all other inhabitants of Rome, just without the public aspect of going to a temple. However, their absence from the public celebrations created distrust toward them in fear of them making the gods turn against the people. In the end this led to two of their daughters being killed for being Christians, and thus becoming martyrs, inside of a milk shop.⁴⁵ Although they encourage her to join them and make sure to take any opportunity to teach her the beauty of their ways, they never force it upon her. While she initially decides to keep somewhat of a distance between her and this new, strange religion, one aspect endears her to it more than any other: "Hör på Callistrate. Vi är kristna människor. Vi tar aldrig ett barn från dess mor".⁴⁶ They would never think to take her child away from her.

After entering the apartment building, before she even reaches the apartment, she encounters Eunicius. He is also a slave and belong to the owner of the building. His task is to supply all the shops and craftsmen with all the water that they need. They form an instant connection, and it is not long before he invites her to the Flavian amphitheatre to watch one of the games.

⁴⁴ Olsson 1982, 35.

⁴⁵ Olsson 1982, 63.

⁴⁶ Olsson 1982, 36: Listen here, Callistrate. We are Christian people. We never take a child from its mother.

This particular event is one of the first that the new emperor hosts and is present for himself, having spent the first month of his reign at war. Through having the emperor appear in person, albeit at a far distance, Olsson creates the opportunity to solidify his presence and to give more weight to later events in the book, since he at that point already will be familiar to the reader. After leaving the theatre the two of them spend the rest of the day together, initiating a physical intimate relationship. Then visiting the theatre is something Callistrate feels the need to hide from her masters. Practically the only thing she actually knows about them, and Christians in general, is that they vehemently avoid going to any form of public spectacle, be it theatre, the Circus, or public holidays, and she therefore draws the conclusion that they would not have let her have the day off if they knew what she was planning to do. Instead, she tells them that she will be visiting her former owner's house and the slaves there that she has grown up amongst. She ends up being correct in her assumption, but despite their disapproval at continuing to see Eunicius, Callistrate begins sneaking out of the apartment and up to his living quarters when Isak and Monnica are out of the house. By Callistrate continuing to meet with Eunicius he becomes the counterbalance to the Christian influences Isak and Monnica bring to her life. He discourages her involvement in the church at every opportunity, not understanding them as a community or Callistrate's growing fascination with them. Despite his aversion to the group, he does however respect them, and to some extent also their customs. When Callistrate and Eunicius inevitably are caught, he does not object when Isak demands that they are married properly. However, it is only the Christians that view it as an actual marriage. As Eunicius' overseer, Fastus, puts it; "Frågan gäller egentligen bara ett boningsrum för Callistrate och Eunicius",⁴⁷ it is in reality only a question of them sorting out a new living arrangement where Callistrate and Eunicius are allowed to live together away from everyone else. No actual nuptials are portrayed, but after this a separate living quarter is prepared for them and Sabina.

Also living in the same building as them is the fishmonger Glaucus, his wife Blandina, and their numerous children. Monnica orders Callistrate to help with their household as well when she has completed her daily tasks. Blandina quickly becomes one of Callistrate's closest friends, despite their differing legal status. Through the relationship with Blandina, Olsson introduces the reader to how food was made available. Food is a recurring topic

⁴⁷ Olsson 1982, 141.

throughout the book, but mostly the cooking of it in the home. Through Blandina the reader is also introduced to how food is procured. Blandina and her husband run a fish stall and therefore, of course, must collect the inventory. Once, when Glaucus is injured and cannot go himself, Blandina brings Callistrate along to buy the fish for the store from one of the ships that has carried the saltwater fish from Ostia. Despite running a store, they do not have enough to be able to feed themselves and all of their children. Therefore, when they are already out to collect the fish, Callistrate gets to come along to collect the imperial handout of grain. It is stated that the handout is given to all that need it. The time Callistrate is allowed to tag along, it has, to Blandina's dismay, been changed to the form of already cooked bread instead of grain from which the people could make what they wanted.

One day Callistrate finds the dead body of a newborn, put out by its family in a pile of manure. She finds this highly distressing and brings the child to Blandina. The reason why Callistrate is at all interested in the faith and customs of Christians is their stance on putting babies out to die. This event is pivotal to Callistrate; after she and Blandina have cleaned and wrapped the baby, Callistrate admits to wanting to become Christian herself. It is after that decided that she will become a catechumen and begin school in the evenings to learn about the Bible and the Christian teachings. In connection with starting catechumen school, she also starts attending the Sunday church services. As she is not yet baptised, which she will be allowed to become after having been in school for a year, she is only allowed to attend the sermon and the teachings. When it is time for the communion all the catechumens and the children must exit the church.

During the winter and before the ships delivering grain and other foodstuffs can go up the Tiber again, hunger spreads in the city, to a greater extent than usual. Discontent is brewing. One day, before Callistrate decides to become Christian, the flour runs out in the magazines where it is being stored long before everyone who has come there to buy it is able to get it. This creates a stampede. One woman is identified by the crowd as a Christian and they decide that she is to blame for why the situation is what it is since she and her kind have not sacrificed to the gods and brought down their ill favour on everyone. She is attacked and Callistrate sees how they beat her until she is dead. The blame being put on the lack of sacrifices to the gods is not an isolated conclusion. During her first church service the priest

Stefanus interrupts it to make an announcement. The emperor has put forth an edict that all inhabitants of Rome on a specific day in June must make a sacrifice to the gods in order to appease them. The refusal to sacrifice shall be punished by death.⁴⁸

A short while later, two Sundays before Easter, Callistrate is once again at church service. All unbaptised members of the congregation are standing outside of the church on the first warm spring day, it is finally possible to bring ships up the Tiber again. While waiting for the communion to end, young, scrappy men enter the small alleyway. One of them trips one of the children running around, who hits his head when falling and dies. This makes one of the male churchgoers go to attack the unfamiliar men. When he does this, it leads to total chaos and countless other people well forth from all directions on to the tiny street. They beat, rape, and throw stones at the people waiting and continue to do so also after the communion has ended. The entire time they are chanting, calling to throw the Christians to the lions, that the Christians should die, and even that they should appease the gods with a proper sacrifice of blood.⁴⁹ All the while this is going on, Callistrate wonders in desperation why the city guards are nowhere to be seen. When the crowds finally dissipate, there they are. Waiting at the side lines, letting the attack continue. They are as much part of a blood sacrifice having been done as the ones performing it.⁵⁰

When the day of the sacrifice arrives, all the Christians gather and spend the day together. Joining in the sacrifice is out of the question. Before they have time to wake the following morning, Callistrate and Eunicius are awoken by heavy pounding on the door. They are from the Praetorian Guard coming to gather all those who have not performed their duty to the Empire and sacrificed to the gods. Before opening the door Eunicius hides Sabina along with (almost) any trace of her, “med ens förstår jag. Spädbarn följer med sin mor till fängelset, han vill bespara Sabina fängelset, han gömmer henne”.⁵¹ If they knew of her existence they would bring her with them as well. Now she can be spared from that. When the door is opened, the guards do not ask her whether she has sacrificed, only that her owner has not and therefore

⁴⁸ Olsson 1982, 175.

⁴⁹ Olsson 1982, 205.

⁵⁰ Olsson 1982, 205.

⁵¹ Olsson, 1982, 251.

possesses no certificate of sacrifice, “Du är Callistrate, Isaks änkas slavinna. Hon har inget offerintyg”.⁵² She along with all the other Christians are taken to the Mamertime Prison. There they are given the choice to either make their sacrifice or be tortured and eventually face death. No one makes their sacrifice, and they are all lead into small cells. One by one they are tortured to see if they desert their faith and sacrifice. Both Monnica and Blandina, who are in the same cell as Callistrate, power through their first torture session. Blandina commits suicide in the night knowing that she is not strong enough to be steadfast for another session, but Monnica is strong in her conviction. She is taken to be killed in the arena in front of thousands. Callistrate does not even make it through one session, and sacrifices to her old gods, the national gods. She is thus an apostate.

For the rest of the study some specific themes have been chosen to study more closely in order to evaluate the representation of ancient reality in *Hedningarnas förgård*. These themes are split into three major parts: everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite, social relations - in particular regarding slaves and women, and living conditions of early Christians. These have all been chosen due to their prevalence throughout the entire book. What is given the greatest amount of descriptive attention is the experience of life in Trans Tiber, an area for the poorer parts of society. There is great attention given to the looks, the smells, and the sounds of the urban living environment. The themes of slaves and women are inescapable. They are a major presence solely based on the fact that the main character is both and it is through their lens that her relations and interactions with the outside world are portrayed through. The theme of the experience of early Christians ties into both of the two previous ones. How does Christianity impact both their living situation and how do the inhabitants of the general society treat them?

⁵² Olsson 1982, 252.

5. Everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite

In order to study the everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite, two main topics have been chosen for closer study due to their presence in *Hedningarnas förgård*. Those are the urban landscape and the access to food, in particular the imperial handout of grain. When studying the urban landscape both public – the street - and private – the own home - spheres will be considered.

The urban landscape

When discussing the urban landscape of Rome there are many avenues one could take. In order to limit the scope of this thesis, the focus will stay on the housing available to the lower social classes as well as how they were situated in the city. Although not a greater focus area, some mention will also be made of the sensory experiences of life in urban Rome. Although the previous chapter stated that most of the first-hand source material will be legal and documentary texts, it will not be the case for this part of this chapter. Although they will feature, great focus will instead be paid to architectural remains.

Like the availability of texts of lower ranking societal groups, source material regarding living conditions of those same groups is for one reason or another often lacking. Heini Ynnilä states that the study of Roman urbanism for a long time has focused on questions of a broader nature, that related to city layouts and the scattered material that was found from ancient cities. It is only relatively recently that scholars have changed their approach and started to realise the flaws of previous work where singular surviving evidence has been used in order to arrive at conclusions of overarching principles.⁵³ The study of *insulae*, the Roman apartment houses, is not a new phenomenon by any means. In the Pompeian scholarly sphere,

⁵³ Ynnilä 2011, 47.

the first such study was published by Ferdinand Noack and Karl Lehmann-Hartleben as early as 1936.⁵⁴

Much attention in both the academic and the popular discussion regarding Roman houses has been directed towards the aristocratic living experience. In many instances specifically that of living in Pompeii. However, since Pompeii was incorporated into the Roman polity at such late of a date as it was, most Pompeian houses predate it. That then begs the question, are they even Roman houses at all? Of course, they were Roman houses in the sense that they stood in what in the end was a Roman city, but it creates an argument for why the aim could be to move away from the view that Pompeii is the automatic thought when someone thinks of a Roman house, as the case to a great extent is today.⁵⁵

While it is quite commonly known that Roman housing can be divided in two main categories, *domus* - mansions and townhouses, and *insulae* - the apartment buildings,⁵⁶ it remains ambiguous to reach a unanimous and full conclusion of the urban topography of Rome.⁵⁷ Something that a conclusion has been reached on, though, is the archaeological truism that in the greatly socially stratified hierarchical imperial society, the greater the fortune, the larger the house. That the size of the house is an indication of its owner's social status.⁵⁸ The reason that this is the subject of a more steadfast conclusion is due to the extent that aristocratic housing has been the focal point of academic and archaeological study. In Rome specifically, the area that has received the greatest attention is that of Forum Romanum, the Palatine, and their immediate surrounding areas, where extensive scholarly investigation has taken place. The main source material used when studying the urban topography are archaeological finds and literary sources. However, as stated, archaeology has tended to stay with the aristocracy and the focus of texts also tend to skew to the elite's experiences.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Ynnilä 2011, 47.

⁵⁵ Storey 2013, 151.

⁵⁶ Storey 2013, 151.

⁵⁷ Dumser 2013, 131.

⁵⁸ Storey 2013, 152.

⁵⁹ Dumser 2013, 131.

In more recent times focus and interest has begun to shift within the field. There is a want to counteract the skewed balance of Roman housing, but in Rome specifically there is one unavoidable problem that inhibits further study of what were the poorer areas of the city: the fact that Rome is and always has been a living city. In many areas of Rome further archaeological study, which is what would be needed to counteract the matter of unbalanced study, is simply impossible. This in and of itself further skews the picture, as studies continue to be done of formerly aristocratic areas, which have been left more or less undisturbed or have been granted such high importance that later structures built on top of them have been removed in order to uncover them, while the knowledge of areas of people further down in social rank continues to be insufficient.⁶⁰

The vast majority of the inhabitants of Rome did not possess the means to live in a peristyle or an atrium house that were available and a possibility for the elite. Instead, they lived in apartment housing. As the Empire grew, and the city of Rome with it, the populace was forced into denser living than their richer counterparts, in apartment blocks. The inhabitants of apartment houses did not own their own housing quarters, they rented from much richer landlords. In fact, according to Roman law, only the ground floor apartment was able to be owned. All others were let out to renters.⁶¹ That the owner of the building lived in the grander ground floor apartment was common, but not a requirement in any way. In some cases, it was straight up impossible for the owner to live in the building. There were no limitations on how many buildings one person could own. If a person owned multiple buildings, it is obvious that they could not use all of them for their own personal living quarters.⁶²

Despite the fact that apartment buildings could reach as high as twenty or twenty-five metres, they could be quite shoddily built, with precarious wooden extensions and balconies jutting out from them.⁶³ The further up in the apartment building one came, the smaller and ricketier

⁶⁰ Dumser 2013, 131.

⁶¹ Ellis 2000, 73 & 180.

⁶² Ynnilä 2013, 82.

⁶³ Aldrete 2014, 48.

they became. Living at the very top of a high apartment building was the definition of true poverty in this time.⁶⁴ The reason for this vertical stratification of wealth is at its core a matter of convenience. In an apartment building today one can expect such luxuries as elevators and running water. This was not the case in ancient Rome. When one has to carry all of the water one needs, and of course all other necessities as well, it is not hard to understand why the apartments on the lower floors became more desirable to inhabit.⁶⁵ Although houses with running water existed, they tended to a great extent to be put into wealthy households, and the decision to install it seems to have been rare, even far up the societal scale.⁶⁶ Based on examples found in Pompeii, running water indoors seems to have functioned more as a display of one's wealth than as a convenient help in the everyday functions of the house.⁶⁷ Martial describes in his *Epigrams* a stark contrast to having running water indoors only for decorative purposes. In a few places he lists what can be described as the very minimum of what the tenant can expect from renting one of the rickety top-floor apartments. The word he uses for these apartments is *cella*. In the Loeb translation from 1993 this word is translated to “dark little room”, very telling for what it was like to reside there.⁶⁸ Despite Martial living approximately one hundred years before the time frame for this thesis, he is worth mentioning as he is the only one making this kind of description. His list of minimum expectations of a *cella* is as follows: a fireplace, a bug-trodden bed, a patched mat, a slave, a key, a dog, a cup, and a jug with a broken handle.⁶⁹ He also gives a view of just how close together the apartment buildings were to each other; “Novius is my neighbour and can be touched by hand from my windows”.⁷⁰ Buildings were so close to each other that despite living in different houses, one’s neighbour was so close that not only could they enter your private sphere through the sounds and smells they emit, but even with their physical being. Among the non-elite Romans, it seems that the most common configuration of a household was that of the nuclear family. They probably were made up of two adults, children, and not uncommonly a slave as well.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Storey 2013, 155.

⁶⁵ Aldrete 2014, 61.

⁶⁶ Ynnilä 2011, 49.

⁶⁷ Ynnilä 2011, 51.

⁶⁸ Mart.*Epigr.*3.30.

⁶⁹ Mart.*Epigr.*11.32;11.56.

⁷⁰ Mart.*Epigr.*1.86.

⁷¹ Storey 2013, 153.

The exact height of apartment buildings has long been a debate. The common and widespread idea, also outside of the scholarly sphere, is that they soared many high floors. This is however not true. Apartment houses of “dizzying heights”, as Storey puts it,⁷² is such a well-established idea that it is a struggle to shift the opinion that has taken a hold of also the general public to a more reasonable understanding.⁷³ One of the greatest clues to solving the mystery of the urban topography of Rome is the *Forma Urbis Romae* (henceforth only called *FUR*). Nowadays it only survives as fragments, but originally it was a large marble plan of Rome. In the early third century it was mounted on one of the walls in the temple of Peace on order of Septimus Severus between 203 and 207 C.E. It survives as the best example for the study of the layout of the typical residential areas in imperial Rome.⁷⁴ Through the study of the staircases depicted on the *FUR*, it can be concluded that most buildings did not exceed two stories. Taller buildings did exist, but to a much lesser extent. However, the thought of them being dizzying heights can most likely be completely forgotten as Storey estimates that only a measly 13 percent of buildings reached five floors or higher. The literary evidence suggests that the very tallest of buildings at this time topped out at eight floors. It seems as though the vast majority of buildings were between one and three floors. Buildings of four or five floors did not dominate the landscape, but at the same time they were also not uncommon.⁷⁵

The facades that Callistrate walk past in *Hedningarnas förgård* are on multiple occasions described as being made of brick and being half timbered.⁷⁶ In fact it is one of the first descriptions the reader gets of what Trans Tiber is like. This rings true of what houses at the time actually looked like. From the first century all the way until the Middle Ages the most prominent construction style was brick-faced concrete. Although this was the most commonly occurring style, other styles also coexisted with it, such as timber-framed houses.⁷⁷ Looking into the homes, in *Hedningarnas förgård* the inside of the single-room

⁷² Storey 2013, 156.

⁷³ Storey 2013, 155-156.

⁷⁴ Lott 2013, 179; Storey 2013, 154-155.

⁷⁵ Storey 2013, 156.

⁷⁶ Olsson 1982, 33; 38; 40.

⁷⁷ Graham 2013, 281.

apartment is described as containing two wall mounted beds, one large window with an ox-hide that can be used to cover it, a long bench along the wall with the wash basin and some buckets and clay jugs on top. There is a shelf on the wall and some chests for clothes along with a few three-legged stools.⁷⁸ It can be hard to identify what the insides of houses looked like with any great certainty. If an archaeological artefact is found inside of a room, it does not necessarily mean that the item belonged to that room. Short of it being mounted to the wall it could have been moved there from its original context. An often-used source on the furnishings of ancient Rome is artworks. That will not be applicable here. To begin with, the probability of art depicting a poor man's house rather than a rich man's is low, and secondly it is not possible to be certain that they are reflections of the actual quotidian life of Romans.⁷⁹

The apartment buildings of urban Rome consisted of more than just apartments. When studying the urban landscape of Rome, it is common that scholars look to Ostia, the harbour city of Rome, for architectural and archaeological remains as it is close to the actual city of Rome but does not pose the same problems as Rome does in regard to it continuing to be a living city. In Ostia apartment buildings can be categorised as three main types:

1. Buildings with a shop on the ground floor,
2. Buildings with an apartment on the ground floor,
3. Buildings with a workshop on the ground floor.⁸⁰

In Ostia there exists also a categorisation of four main types of shops.

1. A stand-alone shop,
2. A shop which has a backroom,
3. A shop with a mezzanine apartment on top of it
4. A shop which has both a backroom as well as a mezzanine apartment.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Olsson 1982, 36.

⁷⁹ Ellis 2000, 145.

⁸⁰ Storey 2013, 161-2.

⁸¹ Storey 2013, 154.

Looking at the evidence from Ostia brings with it the benefit that the physical remains are still standing and available to study further. The problem with studying Ostia is that it is Ostia. If the aim is to study Roman urbanism in Rome, Ostia in some respects might not be good enough. Despite them being in proximity of each other, they were still different cities with different characteristics. The best source there is for Rome specifically is the previously mentioned *FUR*. However, the *FUR* has the problem that it is as good as unverifiable. It is not possible to fact check it, because doing so would mean that an archaeological investigation had to be made, but the impossibility to do so is the same reason why the *FUR* is the best evidence in existence. The *FUR* shows that while the four main basic types of shops are detailed enough for Ostia, it is far from it in Rome. In Rome there are as many as sixteen different configurations of shops, with every thinkable configuration represented by the presence of colonnades or how the shops are placed in relation to each other.⁸² The *FUR* in general shows a cityscape of a varied character. There appears to have been little to no zoning. Houses, workshops, apartments, and shops are all intermingled as parts of a mutual whole.⁸³

The shops, or *tabernae*, also acted as the smallest residential unit.⁸⁴ Most shops acted as both a place of business *and* a residence. The residents were either the shopkeeper themselves or someone working for them. The most common shop configuration was a two-room one. One room acted as the shop and the second as a workshop or as living quarters. This second room could either be a room in conjunction with the shop-room or be positioned as a loft above it.⁸⁵

When moving through the city of Rome there must have been one of the senses whose sensory input was overpowering: the sense of smell. Gregory S. Aldrete estimates that around 1.3 million litres of urine and 45000 kilo of faeces was produced every day only by humans, granted that Rome had about one million inhabitants at the time.⁸⁶ Despite much of it being recycled by, for example, fullers and there being a sewer system in place, the majority of it

⁸² Storey 2013, 155.

⁸³ Storey 2013, 165.

⁸⁴ Storey 2013, 154.

⁸⁵ Ellis 2000, 78.

⁸⁶ Aldrete 2014, 51.

ended up directly on the street as that was the most convenient and efficient method to dispose of it. This practice was illegal; however, its use was anyway rampant. Other sources of stench and impropriety was the presence of corpses, of the homeless or the otherwise too poor for a burial, who were left in the street to rot. When walking through the city you were thus accosted with the stench of human decay, seeing the corpses lying around, while trudging through human excrement, all at the same time.⁸⁷

Jerry Toner describes the Romans as living “in a world of powerful sensory experiences”.⁸⁸ It is due to this, that it is not hard to imagine why eventually also sensory experiences became a medium to differentiate between different social classes. The elite, for example, made associations between themselves and the general populous as a whole based on negative experiences of the senses touch and smell. The living conditions that the poor were more or less forced into created an environment where unpleasant odours were able to thrive. They lived in cramped quarters, the streets were full of refuse, and the hot climate did not hinder the need for them to carry out heavy manual labour.⁸⁹ The cramped living quarters were greatly due to the fast growth of the city where new building work had nowhere to go but up. While the rich elite lived in their grand private houses, commonly on top of the hills, those on the opposite end of the social hierarchy were forced to live their lives in the slums, such as the Subura, or on the slopes of some of the hills; the Esquiline, Oppian, and the Viminal. The *insulae* that have been previously discussed in this chapter were especially common in the valleys between the hills as well as in neighbourhoods where the entire area was populated by the lower classes, such as Transtiberim.⁹⁰ Transtiberim, or Trans Tiberim, is the term most commonly used in academic literature for the area which Olsson in *Hedningarnas förgård* calls Trans Tiber. A small difference perhaps, but still worthy to take notice of. The different smells of Rome were so prevalent that entire neighbourhoods could get associated with specific ones. For example, Transtiberim was associated mainly with the smell of animal hides due to the high number of tanners working in the area. In a similar manner to areas, different trades were also associated with different smells. For example, while tanners reeked

⁸⁷ Aldrete 2014, 51-52.

⁸⁸ Toner 2014, 6.

⁸⁹ Toner 2014, 6.

⁹⁰ Dumser 2013, 144-146.

of animal hides, fullers were instead linked to the smell of urine due to the fact that large amounts of it was used in the processing of wool.⁹¹

Access to food

The number of sources available to understand the grain consumption in Rome are few. There are two main theories based on the sources in existence to gain a greater understanding of the topic. The first is based on four literary sources and the second is based on information of the number of inhabitants.⁹² The problem with the first approach is that the sources are few and very short. So short that the actual information of them can be hard to derive. Since the rest of the texts' contexts are no longer in existence there is also an issue on how the texts should be translated, with different variants of the interpretations of the numbers referenced in the texts providing vastly different results in regard to the amount of grain that was kept in reserves. In Latin one of the sources reads as *moriens septem annorum canonem, ita ut cottidiana septuaginta quinque milia modium expendi possent, reliquit*.⁹³ The traditional interpretation of it reads that an order was given to keep enough grain "for seven years of the rate of 75000 *modii* per day" in the city reserve.⁹⁴ However the idea of keeping seven years' worth of grain in reserve seems preposterous and implausible. Not to speak of the logistical nightmare storing that amount of grain must require. An alternative interpretation of the same source is to assume that the source uses multiple different modes of calculations. The numbers it lists would then instead refer to different parts of the Roman consumption of grain, one referring to the imperial dole-out and one to the total consumption of grain in Rome. Issues of the second approach is that it seems to be hard to reach a consensus of how many inhabitants Rome actually had with the closest figure any form of agreement has been reached as being 800000-1200000 people. It is better than nothing but is still vast in its range.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Toner 2014, 6.

⁹² Tchernia 2016, 188.

⁹³ SHA, *Sev.* 23, 2.

⁹⁴ Tchernia 2016, 188-190.

⁹⁵ Tchernia 2016, 191.

In *Hedningarnas förgård* the imperial dole-out is portrayed as something that is given to the majority of people.⁹⁶ In the novel it is only on the basis that Glaucus, the fishmonger, is injured that it is in any way appropriate for Blandina, with Callistrate coming along as help, to go to receive it. Under virtually any other circumstance a woman going to get the dole-out would be highly inappropriate if her husband is still alive.⁹⁷ However, when they arrive at the dole-out the description of people in line tells a somewhat different story where people from different part of the poorest parts of society is present:

Trapporna upp till de övriga våningarna är fulla med folk som skall hämta sitt understöd. Prydliga trådslitna fattigkvinnor som Blandina i grå eller svart tunika, en del med gnällande eller moltigande barn vid handen. Lappade proletärer som stampar otåligt i trappuppgångarna, otvättade trashankar som håller sig lite på avstånd från de snyggaste proletärerna. Ty skillnaden är stor mellan de fattiga, de fattigare och de fattigaste.⁹⁸

The real dole-out of grain was given out to the male citizens of Rome from the beginning of the late Republic far into late antiquity. While feeding Rome, the motivation behind the dole-out was not humanitarian but rather political.⁹⁹ By feeding the crowds they were kept pacified, a hungry crowd is an angry crowd. Breads and cereals were the most basic of cornerstones of the Roman diet, and there existed no good substitutes for them. The demand for it also remained quite stable, for the people were always in need of grain.¹⁰⁰ The distribution of it happened in the Porticus Minucia in the Campus Martius.¹⁰¹ Up until the third century new warehouses and storage rooms was constantly being built in both Rome and Ostia in order to sustain the whole apparatus of the grain dole-out.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Olsson 1982, 64.

⁹⁷ Olsson 1982, 125.

⁹⁸ Olsson 1982, 131: The staircases to the upper floors are full of people waiting to receive their subsidy. Smart threadbare poor women like Blandina in grey or black tunics, some with whining or completely silent children standing close to their hands. Patched up proletarians who stomp impatiently in the stairs, unwashed ragamuffins who keep their distance to the most well kept of the proletarians. For the difference is large between the poor, the poorer, and the poorest.

⁹⁹ Pomeroy 1995, 202.

¹⁰⁰ Tchernia 2016, 103.

¹⁰¹ Bruun 2013, 303.

¹⁰² Tchernia 2016, 209.

It was the emperors' responsibility that the handouts were made on a monthly basis. From the second century onward, the responsibility had expanded to also include handouts of oil and even later also to wine and pork.¹⁰³ Upwards if 60 million *modii* of grain arrived in Rome every year. However, due to the sensitivity of grain it is simply the number of *modii* arriving, not the total of consumption. There are many factors that would impact the amount of grain that was actually consumable. Some of it spoiled, some during the storing in *horrea*, some due to the damp conditions of thesea voyage to get to Rome. A different factor is the fact that weight is being lost in the process of the grain drying out, yet another different one is the presence of pests. There are different opinions on how much grain was lost during transport and storing, some estimate that the losses amounted to twenty percent while others believe as much as a third to be true. No matter the exact percentage, it would seem that there most years the number of *modii* did not exceed 50 million in terms of what was fit for human consumption.¹⁰⁴ The actual handout that reached the people consisted of 5 *modii* of grain per recipient per month.¹⁰⁵ The handout was known as the *annona*. Ever since the time of the Gracchi, the *annona* was used to gain political power. In the beginning it was sold for a subsidised price, but since the last decades of the republic it was and remained free to receive.¹⁰⁶ Since the time of Augustus the emperors used the *annona* to consolidate their power, as it made the population dependent on them.¹⁰⁷

All grain arriving in Rome had to be imported from the provinces. Farmable land close to Rome was scarce and unable to produce large enough yields to sustain the whole city.¹⁰⁸ The food first arrived in the harbour city Ostia, where it was redistributed from the large seaworthy ships to smaller boats that were able to go up the Tiber and to Rome. The trip up the Tiber took three days to reach Rome from Ostia.¹⁰⁹ When the cargo arrived in Ostia and in Rome it was unloaded into *horrea* - warehouses. If something were to happen where cargo

¹⁰³ Tchernia 2016, 97.

¹⁰⁴ Tchernia 2016, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Tchernia 2016, 190.

¹⁰⁶ Sirks 1991, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Sirks 1991, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Tchernia 2016, 201-202.

¹⁰⁹ Tchernia 2016, 204.

was dropped in the water during the loading or unloading process, there were *urinatores* - divers employed specifically for that situation and they were available to recover it.¹¹⁰ Signs of the import of foodstuffs is still today clearly visible in the urban landscape of Rome.

Monte Testaccio, some thirty-five meters high and having a circumference of 700 meters is made up of shards and pieces of oil amphorae that were imported to Rome, redistributed, and the vessels dumped in one large pile between the age of Augustus and AD 255.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Sirks 1991, 256.

¹¹¹ Tchernia 2016, 195.

6. Social relations

Some of the lowest ranking social groups were slaves and women. In *Hedningarnas förgård*, both groups form the two most overarching of themes, Callistrate being both a woman and a slave are both fundamental to the experiences she has. Although different, there are factors that unite women and slaves in shared experience, especially women of the lower social classes. One uniting factor is the availability of sources and the scholarly interest of them. In 1995, Sarah B. Pomeroy states that recently a new trend had begun to form, where special interest was directed to the lower classes as a whole and to the women of them in particular.¹¹² 1995 is almost thirty years ago now, but in the grand scheme of the entire field, with its origins in the nineteenth century, it is an incredibly short amount of time for such large parts of society becoming matters of interest. For a confirmation of how these groups became of interest in the years before 1995, one can look at the “Select bibliography”-section of Eve D’Ambra’s *Roman Women* (2007). In it she lists eighty titles, all pertaining to women in different areas of Roman society. Of those eighty, thirty-eight were published before 1995, but only eight of them had been published in 1982, at the time *Hedningarnas förgård* was published. The majority of the thirty-eight, twenty of them, are from after 1990.¹¹³ This solidifies the claim Pomeroy makes that the interest of these social groups grew from the mid-1980s and forward and became a matter of interest in a manner they had not been before. Another similarity between the groups is the availability, or rather the lack of, extant source material. While both groups feature in, for example, literature, it is through the eyes of their social superiors, what pleased and displeased them. The point of view is never that of someone from and within these groups, so identifying the details of their lived experiences becomes nigh on impossible to know with any greater certainty.¹¹⁴

Slaves

The discussion on slaves will mainly focus on the life of the city slave, as that is what is portrayed in *Hedningarnas förgård*. Because much of the ancient source material is legal

¹¹² Pomeroy 1995, 190.

¹¹³ D’Ambra 2007, 189-194.

¹¹⁴ Pomeroy 1995, 190.

texts, much of the discussion will of course be on the general legal status of slaves that were applicable to all slaves in the entire Empire. However, no specific discussion will be made of slaves living outside of the city, for example agriculture workers. They are only mentioned in passing. What is also not discussed is the work that city slaves performed, instead focusing on their place, and standing in society and how their legal status impacted that. One somewhat complicating factor of using legal texts as the basis of discussion for a specific category of slave is that the law had to be applicable to all slaves, despite the vast differences in what duties different slaves were expected to perform.¹¹⁵

When considering what makes a slave a slave, one must keep in mind that the current definition used today and what slavery have looked like in modern times is not necessarily the same as what made a slave a slave in Roman society. The established definition in modern times is that to be a slave a person is under the complete domination of another with economic exploitation as its goal and purpose. However, this definition is not fully applicable to ancient Rome. There were large swaths of the population that was not in complete control of themselves, children and wives married *cum manu* was for example under the complete control of their fathers and husbands but were free under the law and were not exploited economically. Likewise, there are converse examples. If one man acted as money lender to another and the loan was of a specific kind where the loan taker was tied to the lender as *nexus*, he remained a free man, but was, despite that, economically exploited.¹¹⁶ Evidently, the modern definition of a slave is not complex enough to account for all different facets of Roman society. One where the slave's legal status is the focus and not the work they perform. The second century jurist Gaius makes in his *Institutiones* a distinction between free men and slaves: *potestas dominorum* - "Slaves are thus in the power of their masters".¹¹⁷ He positions the slave as a legal *object*, not a *subject*, and therefore describes a scenario where the slave is not a full human being with sovereignty of its own life.¹¹⁸ This reveals why slaves sometimes were considered as a speaking tool, *instrumentum vocale*.¹¹⁹ Because a slave is under the control of their master, the master was free to use the slave as a tool for whatever he so

¹¹⁵ Watson 1987, 3

¹¹⁶ Schumacher 2012, 589-590.

¹¹⁷ Gaius *Inst.* 1.9,48,52.

¹¹⁸ Schumacher 2012, 590-591.

¹¹⁹ Schumacher 2012, 589.

desired, despite the slave's physical ability to speak up for themselves if they were allowed. The owner's control of the slave was so great that, bar forcing the slave to join the military, he was able to deploy the slave to any work of his choosing.¹²⁰

Alan Watson describes becoming a slave as “a misfortune that could happen to anyone”.¹²¹ Roman society was always dependent on the availability of slaves, and it was common that even families who were not part of the elite owned one or two.¹²² Initially the greatest source of new slaves was conquests and prisoners of war. In 167 B.C. alone, for example, the victories at the borders brought 150 000 new slaves to the Roman slave market.¹²³ The origin of slaves does not seem to have mattered much to Romans. They could be from faraway lands or as close as other regions in Italy. Their level of education, which normally is considered a marker of social status, did not matter either. They could be stupid or incredibly well educated, if they were captured as slaves, they were slaves all the same and they were nonetheless subject to the will and power of their masters.¹²⁴ A signifier of Roman attitudes to the possibility of everyone becoming slaves is the fact that by *Roman* law, if an enemy captured a Roman, the Roman became a foreign slave and they lost their citizenship. Even if they managed to escape and return to Rome, it was not certain that all the rights and privileges that they enjoyed as a citizen would be immediately, if ever, fully restored.¹²⁵ Other than escaping, the only legal way to stop being a slave was to become manumitted, freed, by your owner. This was solely based on will. If the owner died, the slave's ownership would transfer to the owner's heir.¹²⁶

However, the capturing of slaves through war stopped being a main source of new slaves already in the late Republic. Going forward the main source of new slaves was being born to a slave mother.¹²⁷ Marcian writes that there are three main ways of becoming a slave. Selling

¹²⁰ Schumacher 2012, 589.

¹²¹ Watson 1987, 3.

¹²² Evans Grubbs 2002, 10.

¹²³ Watson 1987, 2.

¹²⁴ Watson 1987, 2-3.

¹²⁵ Watson 1987, 3.

¹²⁶ Schumacher 2012, 590.

¹²⁷ Watson 1987, 8.

yourself into slavery if you were past the age of twenty, being captured, and being born to it. This is described by him as the law of nations.¹²⁸ The reason why the child's legal status is dependent on the mother is of a rather simple nature. There could be endless problems with how to prove who the father was, meanwhile identifying the mother was always possible.¹²⁹

Being a slave prohibited you from entering a legally valid marriage. The jurist Ulpian writes "With slaves there is no marital capacity",¹³⁰ not even with each other. However, instead slaves or slaves and free people could enter *contubernium*, a long-lasting monogamous union similar to a *matrimonium* - a marriage - but without legal validity.¹³¹ Due to its different legal status, incest regulations still applied, but many other features were different.¹³² The woman could for example not be accused of adultery, as shown in Justinian's *Codex*, another of the major legal literary works. Diocletian and Maximian write "Slaves cannot make an accusation of adultery because of a violation to their cohabitation".¹³³ Another major difference was the status of any potential children resulting from the union. Children born in a *contubernium* were not considered legitimate. Instead of being born into the control of their father, as was the case for legitimate children, children born in a *contubernium* followed the legal status of the mother. They were born free if she was free at the time of their birth and they were born slaves if she was a slave at the time of their birth.¹³⁴

To many of the parties in a *contubernium*, it still carried the same worth as a legal marriage, as evidenced by the many epitaphs found where slaves refer to each other as husband and wife.¹³⁵ If both parties were to become manumitted and both wished to continue the union, its legal status would convert to become that of a legal marriage.¹³⁶ The tendency was for slaves to marry within the same *familia*, family or household, they belonged to. If the owner allowed

¹²⁸ D.1.5.5.1 (Marcian, first book of *Institutes*)

¹²⁹ Watson 1987, 10.

¹³⁰ *Epit. Ulp.* 5.5.

¹³¹ Evans Grubbs 2002, 143; Pomeroy 1995, 193.

¹³² Pomeroy 1995, 193.

¹³³ C.9.9.23 (Diocletian and Maximian, AD 290)

¹³⁴ Evans Grubbs 2002, 143.

¹³⁵ Pomeroy 1995, 193

¹³⁶ Evans Grubbs 2002, 144.

it, there was no legal obstacle for slaves to marry a free person or a slave belonging to another *familia*. It seems however to have been uncommon, especially for the owner of the male slave, since the owner would lose the profit any children would bring, since the child would stay with its mother.¹³⁷

There were little in ways of limitations regarding the master's treatment of his slaves. One could have thought that a greater societal change, such as the entering of Christianity in the highest political sphere, could have improved the situation of the slaves. This is however not the case.¹³⁸ It is the first Christian emperor, Constantine, who decrees:

If a master beat a slave with a rod or whip or put him in chains to guard him, and the slave dies, the master need have no fear of prosecution. Distinctions of time and questions of interpretation are abolished. He should, of course, not use his right immoderately, but he will be charged with murder only if he killed the slave intentionally, by a blow from the fist or a stone, or, by using a weapon, he inflicted a lethal wound, or ordered him to be hanged by a noose, or by a wicked order instructed that he be thrown from a high place, or administered the virus of a poison, or tore his sides with the claws of wild beasts, or by burning him with fire applied to his limbs, or if, with the savagery of monstrous barbarians, he forced the slave to leave his life almost in the tortures themselves, with the destroyed limbs flowing with black blood.¹³⁹

It would seem as though the only thing a slave's master was not prohibited from doing was to outright murder them. The list of prohibited means of killing is quite extensive. Constantine's stance on the punishment of slaves seems, however, to have softened slightly over time, making point of the fact that it is in the master's own interest that the slave remains somewhat unharmed.

Whenever such a chance accompanied the beatings of slaves by masters that they die, the masters are free from blame who, while punishing very wicked deeds, wished to obtain better behaviour from their slaves. Nor do we wish an

¹³⁷ Pomeroy 1995, 193.

¹³⁸ Watson 1987, 124-5.

¹³⁹ *C.Th.*9.12.1.

investigation to be made into facts of this kind in which it is in the interest of the owner that a slave who is his own property be unharmed, whether the punishment was simply inflicted or apparently with the intention of killing the slave. It is our pleasure that masters are not held guilty of murder by reason of the death of a slave as often as they exercise domestic power by simple punishment. Whenever, therefore, slaves leave the human scene after correction by beating, when fatal necessity hangs over them, the masters should fear no criminal investigation.¹⁴⁰

Note that Constantine does not decree that slave owners should refrain from using harsh methods to punish their slaves, he merely ascertains the fact that the working of the masters' operations run smoother if their slaves are not hurt - or dead. Although still not what today would be seen as humane, it is a step in that direction.

Women

Sources on Roman women are, compared to those available regarding Roman men, relatively scarce, often focusing on a few larger-than-life persons and not reflecting women as a larger group.¹⁴¹ The jobs performed by women, and to great extent also by slaves, such as domestic house work or working in shops or in manufacturing was simply not viewed as something that merited attention in the source material due to their social status.¹⁴² There is also the issue of the sources that do exist not being utilised properly. Either they tend to not receive the weight in scholarly work as they might deserve or there simply are, as mentioned above, no translations of them of high enough quality.¹⁴³ One way to discern information about the not-so-larger-than-life women is to read between the lines of literary work not necessarily intending to write of the situation of women. Galen's *On prognosis* can be used as an example, whereby simply by stating that a woman was accompanied by midwives he reveals far more than who that woman was accompanied by. He reveals that women were working in the medical field, probably generally considered to be quite knowledgeable at it as well. This latter assumption is based on him writing that he was initially only conferring with these

¹⁴⁰ C.Th.9.12.2.

¹⁴¹ D'Ambra 2007, 2.

¹⁴² D'Ambra 2007, 94.

¹⁴³ Evans Grubbs 2002, xi.

midwives to gain an understanding of the situation. It is only when an emergency occurs that he speaks with the woman who came in for treatment.¹⁴⁴ Despite some attention being directed at specific women already during antiquity, women as a group were a marginalised part of society. The reason for their marginalisation is a common one amongst pre-modern cultures. It is down to the fact that women were viewed as being of value to society for one main purpose: as caretaker of the domestic sphere. It was their responsibility to care for, birth, and rear children and their responsibility to keep the running of the household as smooth as possible. While men were expected to be seen outside of the home, the woman was to stay in it.¹⁴⁵ One source that is remarkably plentiful that reveals the situation of women is the existence of funerary epitaphs. They do not reveal what it was like to live as a woman in Rome, but they do tell what ideals women were measured against, their love of their husbands, their care for the home, and the caretaking of their children. Unfortunately, this was not something seen as worthy of remembering in the shared record, through inscriptions and literature and the like.¹⁴⁶ Some women did exist outside of their private domestic sphere as well. Although not common, it was not unusual for women to work in some sort of small business, be it a shop or a workshop. It was usual that this was alongside their husband, much like the character of Blandina, the fishmonger's wife, in *Hedningarnas förgård*. Looking at, for example, iconographic tropes of small-scale vendors, there is no differences as to what extent women are depicted contra men.¹⁴⁷

The third century writer Papinian writes that “In many parts of our law the condition of women is below that of men”.¹⁴⁸ One does not have to search far and wide to see the truth in this statement. While women of ancient Rome had rights that women did not enjoy as late as one hundred or one hundred fifty years ago in modern time, such as the ability to divorce and stronger property rights, they were still under the suppressing control of men. It was at its core a misogynistic society. There were three kinds of legal power that a man could hold over a woman:¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Milnor, 2012, 610.

¹⁴⁵ Milnor 2012, 610–611.

¹⁴⁶ Milnor 2012, 611.

¹⁴⁷ Milnor 2012, 616.

¹⁴⁸ D.1.5.9 (Papinian).

¹⁴⁹ Evans Grubbs 2002, 20.

- *Patria Potestas* - paternal power
- *Manus* - the husband's power over a wife
- *Tutela* - guardianship for those that were not under *potestas* or *manus*

These are established in the literary sources, Both in Gaius as well as by Ulpian:

Concerning the law of persons another division follows. For certain persons are legally independent (*sui iuris*), certain are subject to someone else's law. 49: But again, of those persons, who are subject to someone else's law, some are in power (*potestas*), some in marital subordination (*manus*), some in ownership (*mancipium*) ...55: Likewise in our power (*potestas*) are our children whom we have begotten in legitimate marriage (*iuste nuptiae*). This law belongs to Roman citizens; for there are almost no other men, who have such a power over their children as we have.¹⁵⁰

For of Roman citizens, some are fathers of families (*patres familiarum*), some are sons of families (*filii familiarum*), some are mothers of families (*matres familiarum*), some are daughters of families (*filiae familiarum*). Fathers of families are those who are under their own legal power (*potestas*) whether they have reached puberty or are still below puberty; similarly mothers of families; sons and daughters of families are those who are in someone else's power. For whoever is born from me and my wife is in my power; likewise whoever is born from my son and his wife, that is my grandson and granddaughter, are equally in my power, and my great-grandson and great-granddaughter and so on with the rest.¹⁵¹

Practically all free women were under one of these. The authority these different kinds of power contained changed over time. Already by the time of Augustus, *manus* was not of relevance anymore and he chose to weaken the form of *tutela* as well by making it so that any freeborn woman who had birthed three children and any freedwoman who had given birth to four were released from the bonds of their guardianship.¹⁵² The power of *patria potestas* were

¹⁵⁰ Gaius, *Inst* 1.48.

¹⁵¹ *D.1.6.4* (Ulpian).

¹⁵² Evans Grubbs 2002, 20.

far reaching, especially in terms of the power a father wielded over his children. He had *ius vitae necisque* - the right of life and death. In theory this meant that a father had the ability to even put his adult child to death. By the imperial period this was rarely, if at all, utilised, normally mainly used to make the decision of whether a newborn child should be reared or not. Women were never able to wield this sort of power, since she never was able to have *potestas* in the same way a father was able to. Even if the father of her children died the power would not transfer to her. Instead, it was inherited by his oldest male ascendant.¹⁵³

Seeing the strict nature of the division of control of the *familia*, it would have seemed obvious that the same could be assumed of the structure of inheritances, but that is not the case. Inheritance in Rome was perishable, meaning that property did not always go to only one child, typically thought of as the oldest son, but rather the Roman could choose to divide his assets between any child of his, even his daughters.¹⁵⁴

Paulus writes that there were three ways to exit a marriage: through death, divorce or through captivity.¹⁵⁵ Rome has always had a quite liberal stance and policy making regarding divorce. Already in the first century B.C.E the right to divorce had been granted to women who had married *sine manu*, and therefore was not under the control of her husband but rather had remained under the control of her family of origin, that is her father or her brother. After the same right had been granted to women who were married *cum manu* as well, divorce remained subject to very limited restriction until the fourth century C.E.¹⁵⁶ Divorce was a rather well accepted fact of life in Rome, but despite this acceptance it is impossible to gain any stronger foundation for conclusion of their actual prevalence. This rings especially true for knowing to what extent women were the instigators of divorce.¹⁵⁷ Neither the literary nor the non-literary sources are of much help. Funerary epitaphs, for example, tend to not mention divorces, only successful marriages.¹⁵⁸ One restriction that did exist for divorce was

¹⁵³ Evans Grubbs 2002, 20-21.

¹⁵⁴ Ellis 2000, 175.

¹⁵⁵ D.24.2.1 (Paulus): Marriage is broken by divorce, death, captivity or another kind of slavery affecting one of the two partners

¹⁵⁶ Evans Grubbs 2002, 187.

¹⁵⁷ Evans Grubbs 2002, 187.

¹⁵⁸ Pomeroy 1995, 204.

that the parties had to actually intend to divorce, rather than just say it. After Paulus defines the ways a marriage can end, he adds:

It is not true or actual divorce unless there is the intention to establish a perpetual parting of their ways. Therefore, whatever is done or said in the heat of anger is not valid, unless the determination becomes apparent by the parties persevering in their intention, and hence where a message of repudiation is sent in the heat of anger and the wife returns in a short time, she is not held to have divorced her husband.¹⁵⁹

Although Roman marriages functioned in large part as a partnership, there existed one overarching, unavoidable purpose of a marriage: producing legitimate descendants.¹⁶⁰ This in accordance with what Ulpian describes as natural law.

Natural law (*ius naturale*) is that which nature has taught all animals: for that law is not unique to the human race, but to all animals which arise on the earth or in the sea; and also common to the birds. From this follows the joining of male and female, which we call marriage, from this follows the procreation of children, and their upbringing: for indeed we see also the other animals, even the wild beasts, are thought to have experience of that law.¹⁶¹

This demand was so deeply entrenched in Roman society that the inability for women to give birth was considered the main criterion for their functional normality. In other words, if a woman was infertile, she was considered disabled. For men the same baseline was the physical suitability to complete military training.¹⁶²

When entering a marriage there were two main considerations to be made: whether all applicable parties consented - that is, the man and the woman and/or, if necessary, her

¹⁵⁹ *D* 24.2.3.

¹⁶⁰ Evans Grubbs 2002, 81.

¹⁶¹ *D* 1.1.1.3 (Ulpian).

¹⁶² Stahl 2012, 719.

guardian, as well as whether they are allowed to be married in the sense of legal eligibility.¹⁶³

In the words of Ulpian:

Legitimate marriage (*iustum matrimonium*) occurs, if the right to marry (*conubium*) exists between those who are contracting marriage and the male is as mature as the female is capable (sc., of intercourse), and they both consent, if they are legally independent, or their parents also consent if they are in (paternal) power. *Conubium* is the ability to take a wife by law.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Evans Grubbs 2002, 82.

¹⁶⁴ *Rules of Ulpian* 5.2.

7. Early Christian living conditions

Adam H. Becker states that “To talk of ‘Christian social relations’ or ‘Christian society’ is to suggest that this was a group distinct from the wider community of the Mediterranean basin at the time”.¹⁶⁵ To be sure, despite having a different world view from their neighbours Christians were very much a part of their surrounding world. In the early days of existing as a group they would have struggled to survive as a community had they not been so well integrated in their community. In fact, their well-established presence in the lives of everyone around them might even have been key to why they were so successful at spreading the Christian faith and making the movement grow. No matter how good they were at proselytising, it stands to reason that one is more easily convinced by someone you already know to be trustworthy than by a stranger. In order to spread their worldview, there was no value of being on the outside of where the largest pool of potential converts was: the general public.

Another reason for why Christians did not section themselves off from society as a group was because the members of the church were from all different spheres of society. Granted, the earliest of Christians did not belong to either aristocracy or the very poorest. The Christian unit actually became somewhat of a forum where members of different echelons of society could meet on the same premises in a way that would not be possible outside of that unit.¹⁶⁶ Being Christian was to add another social category to the others you already were a part of. There were some spheres Christians did not view as benevolently as they did most others, even ones otherwise highly respected, such as service in the military or teaching classical literature. Also, some common forms of entertainment and relaxation were banned with the intent that the missing out of them would make the group more tightly knit. Events such as games and public festivals are examples of this, although the degree to which these bans were followed in practice is impossible to know.¹⁶⁷ The refusal to partake in religious events dedicated to any other god than the Christian one created a sensory difference between Christians and non-Christians. With pagan sacrifices the burning of incense was very

¹⁶⁵ Becker 2012, 568.

¹⁶⁶ Becker 2012, 568–569.

¹⁶⁷ Becker 2012, 569.

common. With the Christians' refusal to partake in them they created a smell-difference between themselves and those who had partaken in it. When Christians were victims to occasional persecutions, the way to keep away from harm was to make a sacrifice to the pagan gods. The prevalence of incense in these offerings were so integrated in the act, that those who made such a sacrifice became known among Christians as "incense-burners", since they now also smelled of it.¹⁶⁸

Early Christian communities were based out of the house church. A common idea has been that gathering inside of homes offered a measure of protection from persecution by the government. However, this is not necessarily true, at least not the whole truth. It was not uncommon for Jews to also gather in houses, which is the religious tradition that Christianity grew out of.¹⁶⁹ Another commonality between the two religions is the view on abortion and the abandonment of children, both of which were looked down on.¹⁷⁰

Despite being well integrated with the society around them, there was a degree of suspicion towards Christians from those not part of the group and they had rituals designed to leave out those who were uninitiated. One was the baptism. The stated purpose of the baptism was to wash the sins off of the initiate, but it also served the purpose of creating a boundary between those who had experienced it and those who had not. Once baptised you became part of a select few. In the second and third centuries a form of halfway group between the baptised and the non-baptised had been established: the catechuminate. The Christian ritual that holds the greatest importance in terms of liturgy is and always has been the Eucharist, where the body and blood of Christ is eaten in the form of bread and wine. It was when you were allowed to partake in the Eucharist meal that the group signalled that you had truly become part of it.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Toner 2014, 18–19.

¹⁶⁹ Becker 2012, 573.

¹⁷⁰ Becker 2012, 577.

¹⁷¹ Becker 2012, 573.

Something widespread about Christians in Rome is the idea that they were constantly persecuted by the state. While it is true that persecutions did occur, it was not constant as is usually believed. Until the emperor Decius in the third century, persecution was more of a sporadic nature. It was with Decius' decree that demanded universal participation in sacrificing to the Roman gods that the worst period of persecutions began.¹⁷² Governmental opposition to Christianity was not necessarily on religious grounds, but on the grounds of them gathering members of the lower class in assemblies without the state being able control over what information was spread during their meetings. The concern was regarding if they amassed manpower enough to be a threat to the state.¹⁷³

Despite Decius' reign being short, between 249 and 251 C.E, he has made a mark on history for trying to reunite the Empire on the grounds of traditional religious observances.¹⁷⁴ This is due to his belief that the decline of the Empire was due to the failure of the people to placate and honour the gods in an adequate manner.¹⁷⁵ Because universal participation was required this initiative posed a problem for all the Empire's Christians. The decree was issued at some point in late 249 or early 250 C.E. A number of *libelli* - certificates of sacrifice - have been found, forty-six to date. They attest to the holder having made a sacrifice to the gods, but the broader purpose of them is unclear. It is unlikely that such certificates were handed out to all who sacrificed since that would create a bureaucratic nightmare, but it is the generally held view. Another problematizing factor is that all *libelli* that have been found are from the summer of 250 C.E, half a year *after* the decree was given and persecution began. There are some alternative interpretations of this lag. One is that the persecution in connection to the universal sacrifice was done in two stages. The first phase when the decree was made public, and the second half a year later when it became obvious that Christians still were not participating as ordered. At that point were the *libelli* in that case introduced, for the Christians to prove to the authorities that they had made the required sacrifice. Another interpretation of the timing of the *libelli* is that it is simply due to the slow-moving nature of imperial communications.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Becker 2012, 581.

¹⁷³ Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 391.

¹⁷⁴ Lee 2000, 15.

¹⁷⁵ Lee 2000, 34.

¹⁷⁶ Lee 2000, 50.

8. Concluding discussion

This concluding discussion will be divided in two parts. The first will discuss the matter of historical reality in regard to *Hedningarnas förgård*, and the other will focus on the value of comparing historical reality with fiction. This is to differentiate between the different nature of the research questions. The first two questions build on each other. What topics regarding Roman life are present in *Hedningarnas förgård*? and What can be understood about these topics through ancient sources and modern research? both need the other one to function without becoming somewhat flat. The third question needs to be separated from the two. Is there value in studying historical reality in regard to modern fictional media, and if so, what? does not on the surface seem to correlate with the other two. They are, however, deeply connected, at least in this context. Much like how the close study of *Hedningarnas förgård* was made in order to use it as a tool to study the ancient sources and the modern research regarding the thesis' main areas of interest - the everyday life and living conditions of the non-elite, social relations of slaves and women, and living conditions of early Christians, the discussion of the first two questions will be used to inform the discussion of this third question.

At first glance it would seem as though *Hedningarnas förgård* in many ways got its facts right. However, there are some seemingly innocuous things that make it harder to believe the wider scope of what Olsson presents as real as actual fact. One such example is the name she uses for the neighbourhood that Callistrate moves to. What she calls Trans Tiber is in academic sources referred to as Transtiberim or Trans Tiberim. It is a small difference to be sure, but it could be an indication of a larger issue of not being correct in the details. And as the saying goes: the devil is in the details. If the details are found to be factually incorrect, would that not open up for the possibility of the larger picture also being faulty as a whole? A similar fact-based issue, but perhaps on a larger scale, is the timing of the setting. Olsson is very clear about exactly when certain events in the storyline take place. Sabina is very clearly stated to be born in October 249, the attack of the churchgoers happens exactly two weeks before Easter, and the decreed sacrifice happens in June. It is clear that Olsson is aware of the existence of the *libelli*, she makes direct reference to them when the Praetorian Guard comes to arrest all Christians. The reason they give for arresting Callistrate is specifically that

Monnica does not possess a certificate of sacrifice - one of the *libelli*. Given Olsson's awareness of their existence, should she not then also know that the actual decree of universal participation in sacrifice was made in late 249 or early 250, a full six months before it is said to have happened in the book? Granted that the reason for the delay between the decree and the production of the extant examples of *libelli* could be due to slow communications through the Empire, but it stands to reason that any delays should not impact Rome to the same extent as the far-reaching provinces, where the origins of many of the extant *libelli* are located. It seems much more likely that the inhabitants of Rome would be some of the first to hear of it, seeing as it was the official residence city of the emperor.

The purpose of this discussion is not to nit-pick factoids, even though some are worth mentioning in order to create a fuller picture, but rather to look at how the themes of the book correspond to the reality of those who were actually living them. In a way it is fortunate for Olsson that the subjects she covers in *Hedningarnas förgård* is of such a nature that the grey areas are large to operate one's artistic licence within. Regarding all major themes, women, slaves, non-elite living conditions, and experiences of early Christians, there is much that is unknowable with much certainty. For some of them this is especially true for this specific time period. Just a century or so later the availability of sources regarding Christians, for example, is much greater. Even conclusions of academic studies focusing on these topics are sometimes forced to take the form of so-called 'guesstimations'. Take the number of inhabitants of Rome as an example. It is impossible to know exactly how many people lived in the city, and when the closest approximation is 800000 to 1200000 people, where the difference between the values is fifty percent of the lower one. This makes it hard to call it anything more than an educated guess. The number of people living in the city would presumably change the experience of spending your life there.

In some instances, Olsson presents the half-truth of what there actually was. One example is the many occasions where the urban environment is described. There are descriptions of the layout of the urban fabric. Callistrate is said to live on the fourth floor in a six-floor building, and the description of the sensations of living there seems to be consistent with what academic sources can reveal, the building becoming ricketier the further up you get, the

constant noise, and the crowdedness for example. However, while ringing true in the larger sense of the feeling of living there, some aspects that could be highlighted to further the understanding of the historical period are either wrong or left out. In this example it would be the infrequency of buildings higher than two or three floors in the city of Rome.

To conclude the discussion on the first two questions, it could be stated that while much of the facts and descriptions that Olsson presents in *Hedningarnas förgård* seems to be more or less true, it is too unreliable to completely claim that it represents historic reality. While maybe correct on a thematic level, the devil is, as mentioned, in the details and the number of actual errors that is allowed in the book calls the validity of the rest of it into question as well. It also depicts aspects of historical reality that are unknowable. This is however a symptom of its genre. Much like in film and tv, it would not make for compelling storytelling if the creator did not fill in the blanks. Fiction is in and of its nature made with no demands to recount the sources on which it is basing its facts. In fact, there are no formal requirements for a fictional story to be based on research at all. Even fiction that appear to recount scenarios that could have taken place in history.

In the second chapter of this essay, it is stated that the “goal of this essay is not to “attract tomorrow’s students” but to form an idea of what tomorrow’s students already interested in the field know beforehand when entering a course or a programme on the subject of antiquity”. Herein lies the question of the perceived value of comparing historical reality to modern fiction. When studying history academically, the focus is on interpreting historical reality from the extant source material. These are skills developed over time, much like the skill of critical thinking. It would be unreasonable to expect that new students should enter their studies with the knowledge and skills they are there to learn. If that was the expectation, the whole point of the students being there is lost. Since the students cannot be expected to enter higher education already knowing what to be wary of in regard to fictional descriptions of antiquity, the point of this form of study is to investigate what students already know, or rather, think that they know. The value of this type of study is then to gain an understanding of how best to meet the students where they are at when starting their studies, in order to make it so that the student is able to gain as much as possible from their studies. Now, would

the benefits of conducting this type of study have been more actionable if the fictional work in focus had been more well known, more of a contemporary hit? Probably, and it could be an idea for future research. But the reason this work was chosen, as has been stated earlier, was because the better-known hits tend to be on areas of antiquity that has already been given much attention both academically and in popular culture. The fact that the most readily available work that the author of this thesis could find that did not deal mainly with men, military, or the search of power and was also not based on any ancient myths, historical persons, or events was forty years old could be seen as emblematic of how much more attention subject areas other than these should be getting, both scholarly but also, maybe mainly, in popular culture. Because *Hedningarnas förgård* nowadays might be described as somewhat out of date for tomorrow's students, studies with a slightly different angle could be valuable to conduct. In one of the footnotes in the introductory chapter of this thesis it is noted that retellings of classical myths, usually from a different perspective than the origin story or focusing on some specific part of it, has been popular in recent years. It is not uncommon for these books to address some of the same areas of interest as this thesis. Some of the most famous delving in to the experiences of certain women from the myths, for example. Two well known examples of this are Madeleine Miller's *Circe* (2018), which tells the story of Circe's life on Aiaia and how she is impacted by the arrival of Odysseus, and *Ariadne* (2021) by Jennifer Saint, which is a retelling of the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur from Ariadne's perspective. Seeing as this is the type of book popular now, if the goal was to gain an understanding of the ideas of tomorrow's students, they might be an appropriate topic to study next.

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