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SOMNUS IN URBE: THE PROBLEM OF SLEEP IN ANCIENT ROME

Summary. *The purpose of the study is to investigate the phenomenon of sleep in urban Rome, with particular attention to its disruptions, cultural perception, and implications for Roman urbanism and social stratification. The research methodology is based on the general scholarly methods, including analysis, synthesis, and content analysis of literary and legal sources, and is guided by the principles of scientific rigor. Scientific novelty lies in its focus on the underexplored aspects of sleep in the context of Roman daily life and urban space. Conclusions.* In ancient Rome, sleep was not merely a biological necessity but a marker of social status, shaped by the city's physical infrastructure, daily rhythms, and stark socioeconomic divides. While the affluent could retreat to private domus in quieter, elevated districts or rural villas, the urban poor – crammed into “insulae” in noisy, congested quarters – faced constant auditory disturbances that undermined rest. Nighttime cart traffic, daytime commerce, and the demands of early-morning obligations such as the salutatio all contributed to a restless urban existence. Literary sources underscore these challenges, often contrasting the privileged silence enjoyed by the wealthy with the unrelenting clamor endured by the lower classes. Sleep, then, emerged not only as a physiological need but also as a luxury – accessible in its fullest form primarily to those who possessed magnae opes. In this context, the ability to sleep soundly functioned as a subtle but powerful index of inequality in the Roman metropolis.

Key words: ancient Rome, sleep, urban noise, insulae, domus, social inequality.

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SOMNUS IN URBE: ПРОБЛЕМА СНУ В СТАРОДАВНЬОМУ РИМІ

Анотація. *Метою дослідження є вивчення феномену сну в міському середовищі Стародавнього Риму з особливою увагою до чинників, що його порушували, культурного сприйняття сну та його значення для римської урбаністики й соціальної стратифікації. Методологія дослідження ґрунтується на загальнонаукових підходах, зокрема аналізі, синтезі та контент-аналізі літературних і правових джерел, із дотриманням принципів наукової об'єктивності. Наукова новизна полягає в зосередженні на недостатньо вивчених аспектах сну в контексті повсякденного життя та міського простору Риму. Висновки.* У Стародавньому Римі сон був не лише фізіологічною потребою, а й маркером соціального статусу, зумовленим міською інфраструктурою, добовими ритмами та глибокою економічною нерівністю. Заможні римляни мали змогу відпочивати в приватних domus у тихіших і вищих частинах міста або в замських віллах, тоді як міська біднота, скупчена в перенаселених і шумних кварталах з багатоповверховими insulae, постійно зазнавала звукового дискомфорту, що порушував сон. Нічний рух возів, денна торгівля та обов'язкова ранкова salutatio сприяли формуванню неспокійного ритму

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життя. Літературні джерела підкреслюють ці труднощі, протиставляючи тишу, якою користувалися багатії, безперервному галасу, з яким стикалися незаможні мешканці. Отже, у римській метрополії сон поставав не лише як природна потреба, а і як розкіш, у повному обсязі доступна лише тим, хто володів *tagnae opes*. У цьому контексті здатність спокійно спати перетворювалася на прихований, але показовий індикатор соціальної нерівності.

Ключові слова: Стародавній Рим, сон, міський шум, *insulae*, *domus*, соціальна нерівність.

Problem statement. Sleep (*somnus*) is as essential to human life as food, water, or air. In “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet 11 depicts the inescapable human necessity of sleep. Gilgamesh attempts to stay awake for six days and seven nights but fails this challenge, immediately falling asleep, thereby highlighting the human inability to conquer the natural limitations of mortality. Quintilian emphasizes the need for adequate sleep, since fatigue prevents success, and there should be enough daylight for work (Quint. Inst. 10 3.26–27). Cornelius Celsus, a prominent Roman medical writer, emphasized the importance of sleep for human health (Celsus, Med. 3.18.15). According to Plutarch, Perseus of Macedon died while in Roman captivity because his guards would not let him sleep (Plut. Aem. 37.2). *Somnus* must not be confused with *somnium* (dream) – a distinction that Plutarch appears to conflate in his “Life of Cato” (Von Staden, 1996, p. 382). Sleep was a fundamental physiological necessity and a profoundly culturally inflected experience in the ancient world. But, one should agree that “Sleeping is not and has never been only a physiological phenomenon” (Nissin, 2015, p.126). For the inhabitants of the densely populated city of Rome, a crucial question arises: could they truly achieve peace and rest at night? An examination of Roman domestic arrangements reveals that sleeping conditions were, by contemporary metrics, considerably austere. Roman residential architecture typically incorporated compact bedrooms, often providing only minimal natural light, even for the elite (Wright, 1960, pp. 11–12). Such environmental factors arguably precluded the quality of restorative sleep often prioritized in modern societies. Nonetheless, in the context of a bustling metropolis like Rome, an additional, significant impediment to repose presented itself: the pervasive problem of urban noise. This factor’s impact was considerable. Indeed, the severe traffic and noise problem was a direct consequence of the *Lex Julia Municipalis*, a law prepared by Julius Caesar shortly before his assassination, which notably aimed to restrict the movement of heavy wagons during daylight hours (For dating of this law see: Mueller, 1965, p. 256–258). Ancient texts frequently portray urban sleep as disturbed, interrupted by incessant noise. A comprehensive exploration of how sleep was experienced, disrupted, and conceptualized by urban dwellers in Imperial Rome is therefore essential. This inquiry suggests that the Roman experience of sleep was not merely a biological imperative but was deeply shaped by prevailing urban conditions, moral discourses, and social structures.

Although Roman society has been extensively studied through the lenses of politics, religion, and daily life, the phenomenon of sleep remains significantly understudied. Modern scholarship has only marginally addressed how urban living shaped sleep patterns and perceptions. Yet given sleep’s vital role in human well-being – and the recurring literary evidence of sleep disturbances among city dwellers – this lacuna raises important questions about the nocturnal dimensions of Roman life. The central challenge under consideration is the tension between the physiological need for rest and the environmental and cultural forces that complicated or defined the experience of sleep in the ancient city.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Modern historiography explores various aspects of sleep in ancient Rome. Laura Nissinen (Nissin), for instance, observes that “the degree of privacy varies both in antiquity and in the modern day” (Nissinen, 2012, p. 29). She emphasizes that although modern societies conceptualize privacy as a fundamental human right, ancient cultures – while lacking such a formalized notion – still show evidence of individuals seeking private spaces and moments, including for sleep. She also notes that “the segmented nightly sleeping pattern was not an established Roman sleeping practice,” and argues instead that Roman sleep culture was biphasic, consisting of two principal periods: a midday siesta and a single block of

nighttime sleep (Nissin, 2016, p. 50). Suzanne Paszkowski examines the semantic field of *somnus* in the context of the House of Sleep, a notable episode in Book 11 of Ovid's "Metamorphoses". She contends that in the Sleep episode at the end of "Aeneid" 5, Vergil deliberately distinguishes between *somnus* (the god Sleep), *somnium* (sleep), and *insomnium* (dreams) – a distinction clarified by Servius. This differentiation underscores that Sleep induces literal sleep in Palinurus, not dreams. Servius' commentary highlights Vergil's precise use of related terms, and Paszkowski notes that Ovid later expands on this idea by portraying Sleep as distinct from the dreams inhabiting his domain (Paszkowski, 2015, pp. 43–45).

This review does not claim to be an exhaustive survey of all scientific literature on sleep in ancient Rome. It is important to note, however, that this topic remains largely unexplored in Ukrainian historiography.

In light of the aforementioned, **this study aims to** analyze the nature of sleep within the urban Roman context. Specifically, it seeks to identify common sleep disturbances, examine its cultural conceptualization, and ultimately explore the implications of these insights for understanding Roman urbanism and social hierarchy. This research will primarily focus on the period of the Principate, as this era saw Ancient Rome, as a state, attain the zenith of its power, with the city of Rome, its capital, embodying this imperial might.

Presentation of the main material. In Ancient Rome, the population was stratified by legal and social status, exhibiting varying levels of property qualification. Affluent residents of the metropolis typically owned their residences, whereas less prosperous inhabitants occupied rented dwellings, which ranged from comfortable to notably modest. Despite the absence of definitive demographic records for the city of Rome, it is widely accepted that its population reached approximately one million during the Augustan era (Noy, 2000, p. 15–16). Comprising the smallest segment of Rome's inhabitants were the senators and equestrians, who largely owned private residences (Latin: *domus*). The majority of the Roman population, however, consisted of the plebs, the most numerous of whom were the proletarians, constituting approximately two-thirds of the city's populace (Łoposzko, 1989, s. 62). These individuals typically rented accommodation in multi-story apartment buildings (Latin: *insulae*). Records from the 4th century AD provide the most detailed extant data regarding the number of residential structures in Rome. Specifically, regional registers from the mid-4th century document 1,790 *domus* and 46,602 *insulae* (Kolb, 2007, s. 99). While direct data for earlier periods are scarce, it is generally posited that a similar proportion of *domus* to *insulae* likely characterized the urban landscape in the 1st century.

Regardless of social status or individual living conditions, every inhabitant of Rome was compelled to meet basic daily needs, chief among them the need for food. Satisfying this demand entailed considerable logistical coordination and relied heavily on mule- and donkey-drawn transport within the city. Substantial quantities of food were distributed to the kitchens of private *domus* as well as to *tabernae*, where residents of *insulae* could purchase ready-made meals. In one of his epigrams (Mart. 7.61), the poet Martial commends Emperor Domitian for his urban planning initiatives, particularly the widening of Rome's narrow and congested streets. His vivid depiction of the pre-reform capital as a "*magna taberna*" – a "vast shop" or "expansive stall" – captures the commercial saturation and chaotic traffic that characterized the late first-century city prior to these infrastructural improvements.

Despite coexisting within the same city, *domus* owners and apartment tenants occupied geographically distinct areas of it. This residential segregation is exemplified by the observation that "The Palatine, especially the northeast and northwest sides, which overlook the Forum and the Velabrum, was the chief residential quarter of the wealthy Romans" (Witherstine, 1926, p. 567). Income disparities in ancient Rome were extreme and intensified over time. According to some estimates: "In Cicero's time a moderately wealthy man had an income 714 times that of one who was poor, while the extraordinarily rich were 10,476 times better off than the poor. For early Imperial times the gulf between free labourers and the reasonably wealthy remained precisely the same, but now the super-rich were 17,142 times wealthier than the poor" (Bastomsky, 1990, p. 40). Ray Laurence

(Laurence, 2017, p. 21) observes that “sources present night-time in the houses of the wealthy as a period of silence that might be disturbed by the sound of doors or windows being opened, or a person at the door”. Juvenal claims that only the wealthy can afford to sleep peacefully in the city: “*magnis opibus dormitur in urbe*” (Juv. 1.3.235), implying that the poor are constantly disturbed by the noise and chaos.

Not all wealthy Romans lived exclusively in desirable areas. A notable example is Gaius Julius Caesar, who, prior to his political success, lived in a small house in the Suburra (Suet. Iul. 46). This neighborhood, situated between the Celian and Esquiline hills, was infamously “the noisiest and the most disreputable street in the city” (Witherstone, 1926, p. 573). Martial calls this street noisy – *clamosa Subura* (Mart. 12.18.2). So, to a large extent, both the poor and the rich inhabitants of Ancient Rome could have had the same problems, one of which was the problem of noise that interfered with sleep. Although the very wealthy, whose homes were located in privileged parts of Rome, could count on more favorable sleeping conditions. Juvenal, in particular, states that the noise and chaos of Rome make sleep impossible for the poor who live in cheap apartments, known as *meritoria*. In contrast, the wealthy, who could afford quiet, luxurious homes, were able to rest. This is captured in his famous lines: *nam quae meritoria somnum admittunt? magnis opibus dormitur in urbe* (Juv. 3.234–235).

It is commonly accepted that Romans typically rose at dawn (Wright, 1960, p. 12). Latin texts suggest that waking the household was among the duties of servants, who were themselves awakened by the crowing of cockerels (Nissin, 2016, p. 47). The inhabitants of Rome were typically obliged to rise early for the *salutatio matutina*: some hastened to greet their patrons, while others received them. Martial, when describing the daily routine, sets aside the first two hours after sunrise specifically for the *salutatio* (Mart. 4.8.1). Martial recounts the story of a certain Caelius, who pretended to be ill with gout and thus justified his failure to fulfill this duty (Mart. 7.39.1–4). Occasionally, patrons found early visits displeasing, and their *ianitor*, or doorman, might even refuse clients access, as can be inferred from Cicero’s testimony (Cic. Planc. 27.66).

Therefore, not everyone was always ready to withstand Rome’s intense rhythm. Martial, for example, laments the lack of rest in the noisy city, indicating a personal preference for longer sleep. In “*Epigrammata*” 12.57, he addresses his acquaintance Sparsus – possibly to be identified with Pliny’s friend of the same name (Harrer, 1931, p. 830) – and explains his frequent retreats to a modest villa in the quiet countryside of *Nomentum*. In Rome, he complains, the urban poor are denied silence, whether to think or sleep: schoolmasters shout their lessons from dawn, and bakers work through the night. Only beyond the city walls can he find true rest (Mart. 12.57.3–5, 27–28). Other authors echo this experience. Juvenal notes, for example, that even “deep slumbers are broken by barking” (Juv. 2.6.415–416), underscoring the auditory chaos of urban life.

The *Lex Julia Municipalis* restricted cart traffic on Roman streets after sunrise, allowing daytime access only for specific purposes such as transporting materials for temples or other state-sponsored buildings (Johnson, Coleman-Norton, Bourne, 1961, pp. 94–95). As a result, heavy cart movement was concentrated at night, significantly contributing to urban noise. Naturally, the intensity of nocturnal activity varied by street. One may therefore infer that the rental cost of an apartment was influenced not only by factors such as size, floor level, or proximity to a water source, but also by the level of nighttime noise in the surrounding area.

Even for those with the time and desire to sleep during the day, doing so could be difficult. In certain districts, the daytime cacophony compounded the disturbances of the night, making rest elusive. Seneca, in one of his letters, vividly complains about the constant daytime noise, lamenting that he lives directly above a bathhouse: “*Supra ipsum balneum habito*” (Sen. Ep. 56.1). When readers encounter Pliny’s reference to his midday nap – *meridianus somnus* (Plin. Ep. 7.4; 9.36; 9.40), they may interpret it as a response to nocturnal disturbances and a way of compensating for insufficient sleep. However, such rest was more commonly a privilege of Romans not severely affected by sleep deprivation. In another letter, Pliny the Younger describes a visit to Vestricius Spurinna, marked by tranquil daytime activities and an evening meal that did not end

with the onset of night (Plin. Ep. 3.1). It is possible that Aponius Saturninus's habitual napping contributed to his financial misfortune: having fallen asleep during an auction, he inadvertently "purchased" thirteen gladiators for nine million sesterces, after Gaius instructed the auctioneer to treat his nods as bids (Suet. Calig. 38.4).

Remaining awake at night in ancient Rome could result from either leisure or necessity. Laura Nissinen highlights *lucubratio* – the elite practice of postponing sleep for nighttime reading or writing by lamplight – as a culturally valued form of temporal privacy, often taking place in the *cubiculum*. Considered virtuous for both men and women, *lucubratio* also carried negative connotations when associated with the evening pastimes of older women. Though irregular sleep was sometimes deemed harmful, medical texts offered advice on how to conduct proper *lucubratio*. Among the lower classes, sleepless nights were often spent working (e.g., farming, baking) or engaging in disreputable activities such as carousing or illicit gatherings. While some regulations addressed nocturnal assemblies, there is no clear evidence of formal curfews (Nissin, 2015, p. 121; Nissin, 2016, p. 51).

Conclusions. In ancient Rome, sleep was not merely a biological necessity but a marker of social status, shaped by the city's physical infrastructure, daily rhythms, and stark socioeconomic divides. While the affluent could retreat to private *domus* in quieter, elevated districts or rural villas, the urban poor – crammed into "*insulae*" in noisy, congested quarters – faced constant auditory disturbances that undermined rest. Nighttime cart traffic, daytime commerce, and the demands of early-morning obligations such as the *salutatio* all contributed to a restless urban existence. Literary sources underscore these challenges, often contrasting the privileged silence enjoyed by the wealthy with the unrelenting clamor endured by the lower classes. Sleep, then, emerged not only as a physiological need but also as a luxury – accessible in its fullest form primarily to those who possessed *magnae opes*. In this context, the ability to sleep soundly functioned as a subtle but powerful index of inequality in the Roman metropolis.

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