

The Emergence of Shopping Streets in Early Imperial Rome

According to the dominant view in marketing history, shopping streets – streets characterized by a high frequency of shops and the presence of architectural installations, such as porticoes, arcades, and sidewalks – were a modern innovation tied to the ‘retailing revolution’ of the 19th c. Within the last five years marketing and urban historians have begun to challenge this assumption by investigating the development of shopping streets in various European countries through the Medieval and early Modern periods (Furnée and Lesger 2014). Their work demonstrates that the streetscapes of many pre-industrial towns improved dramatically between the 16th and 18th c, which in turn promoted the growth of shop economies. Building on this recent trend in scholarship, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the evidence to explore how the emergence of the shopping street in the city of Rome during the early Imperial period impacted consumer behavior and urban culture.

The urban renaissance initiated by Augustus in the city of Rome and the civic improvement projects undertaken by him and his successors produced more uniform streetscapes, which placed visual emphasis above all else on the shopfront (e.g. Favro 1996, Barrato 2003, and Ellis 2011). While the state invested in enhancing the quality of streets from above, shopkeepers, acting as urban placemakers, took an active role in managing their street environments from below, maintaining the paving, sidewalks, shrines, and fountains, as well as aesthetically embellishing the street with fashionable shopfronts. While the emergence of shopping streets benefitted shopkeepers commercially by facilitating pedestrian traffic along shop fronts, this urban development also affected consumer behavior, as buying goods from fixed shops transformed from a purely functional act into a cultural activity undertaken for pleasure and enjoyment (Stobart 2014). In addition to challenging traditional views of marketing

history, this paper emphasizes the active role shops and shopkeepers had in the formation of urban culture at Rome. Shopping streets would have varied considerably in quality based on their geographic location and the local socio-economic status of its neighborhood, indicating that shop architecture, as a reflection of local identities and collective memory, has excellent potential to provide a nuanced understanding of Roman urban culture.

Bibliography

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