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Almost every paragraph holds some small, fascinating fact. Most of the ancient world used butter only "for external application as an ointment...The 'butter-eating' Thracians were an object of amusement...to their Greek neighbors" (p 93).

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Toys were similar to what many have today, with dolls and go-carts, hobby horses and terra-cotta figurines of all sort. Nevertheless, the ancient family was much different than today. Women in Greece, with the exception of Sparta, were virtual prisoners in their homes.

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The author neatly captures the social life in the ancient world by a few well chosen revelations. A graffiti scratched at "Timgad in North Africa: 'hunting (watching beast fights), bathing, gaming, them is life'" (p 177) may have summed up the thrills of life for the lower classes. One interesting letter found in Egypt from a young boy to his father threatens, "'If you don't take me to Alexandria, I won't write to you, I won't speak to you...What a present to send to me, those beans!....So please send for me. If you don't I won't eat, I won't drink, so there!'" (p 179).

It's hard to overemphasize how wedded the ancients were to sound. Music, of course, and theater, were all wedded to sound, but so was epic poetry, which was chanted, and literature, which was intended to be read aloud. "Herodotus composed his 'History' not for book-readers, but for listeners at public recitals". Education meant acquiring the right accent, and even the right movements of the hand. Education was, to a great extent, rote memorization.

Writing was "done with a reed pen and carbon ink (vegetable gum mixed with soot and water) (p 168). Letters were originally written on wood, until they were overtaken by wax tablets, which were cheap and plentiful. The Acts Diurna in Rome, a kind of newspaper, kept Romans abreast of the current events there. But for those in outlying areas, letters were a lifeline to what was going on. "Important letters were sometimes multiplied and sent to various friends, thus taking the shape of political pamphlets" (p 173).

A good book for your library.

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