



Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity

Virginia Smith

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In this pioneering book, Virginia Smith combines archeology, psychology, biology, and sociology to reveal how and why standards of cleanliness have come to exist today. Using hundreds of first-hand accounts and sources, Smith bring us from the Neolithic age to the present, peppering her engaging prose with enlightening and often surprising details.

Subconscious cleanliness has been with us since the first cell ejected a foreign invader. Even at the earliest stages of human development, our bodies produced pleasure-giving chemical opiates when things smelled or felt clean, inducing us to do things like bathing and removing dirty clothes. The need to be clean led directly to socialization, as we turned to our fellows for help with those hard to reach spots. In Eurasia during the Bronze Age, an emerging hierarchy of wealthy elites turned their love of grooming into an explosion of the cosmetic and luxury goods industry, greatly effecting the culture and economy of a vast area and leading to advances in chemistry and medicine.

The history that follows, from Greece and Rome, where citizens focused much of their leisure time on perfecting, bathing, or just writing about the model athletic body, through Europe in the middle ages and the following centuries, is full of intriguing customs, convoluted treatises, and many reversals. Baths were good for you, baths were bad for you, baths were good again--but only if they were quite cold. Even the enlightened medical knowledge of modern times could not stop an onslaught of health remedies, treatments, spas, and New Age nature cures that were to follow. While today we are immeasurably closer--perhaps too close--to knowing just what "clean" means to our bodies, we are still just as far as we ever were on agreeing what it means to our souls.



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