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Roman Latrines

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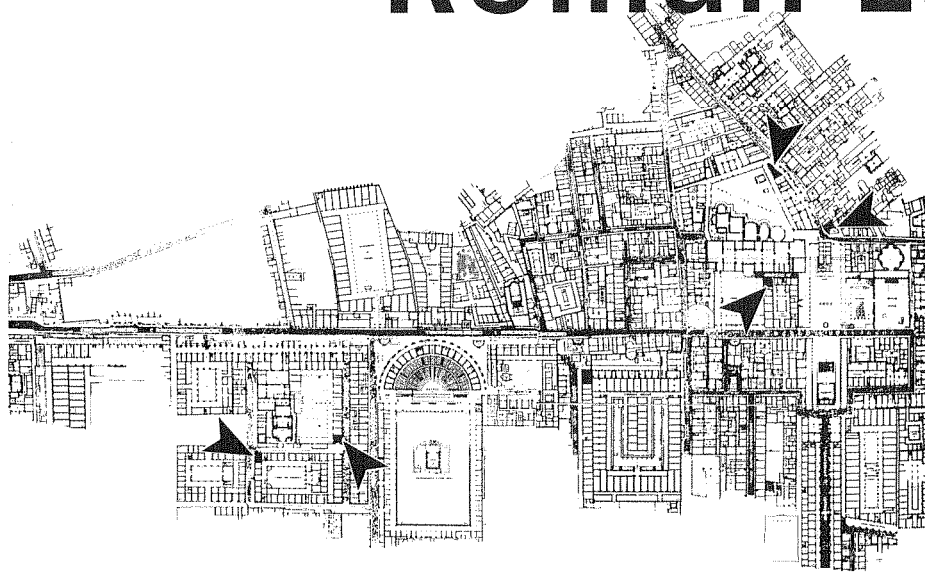
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# Roman Latrines



A brief epigram by Martial reveals a telling aspect of urban socialization in antiquity: “Vacerra dallies for hours, and sits a whole day in all the [public] latrines. Vacerra wishes to dine, not to empty his bowels” (11.77).

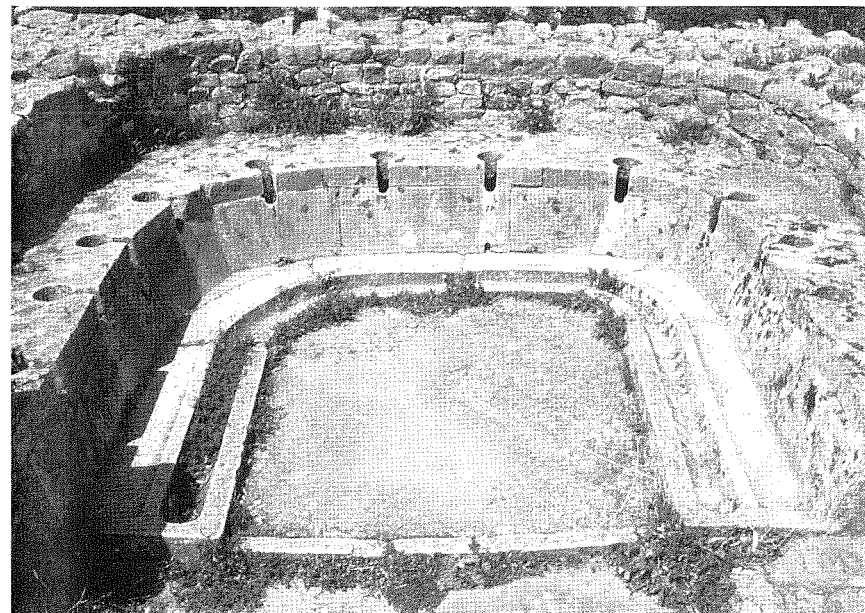
At first confusing, if not shocking, to modern readers, the meaning of this passage was clear to all Romans. Ancient urban residents openly acknowledged public privies as among the best appointed, best situated and most frequented places in the city for socializing. After all, everyone had to use such facilities during the course of daily activities.

The State and private owners alike vied to provide lavish appointments. Roman latrines boasted open, group seats that accommodated up to twenty-five people at a single sitting, sculpted marble arm rests, elaborate mosaics, wall paintings, extensive artworks, fountains and even shrines, most often to Fortuna, goddess of the good outcome. In such environments Vacerra could comfortably sit for hours in hopes of wrangling a dinner invitation from another privy user.

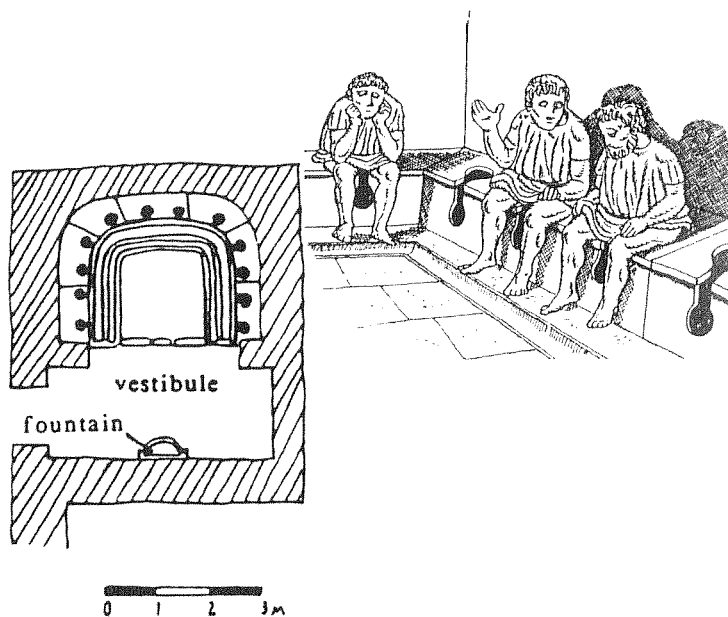
Today, discussion of bodily functions is considered impolite and a visit to a public bathroom something to be couched in euphemisms — and, preferably, avoided. In contrast, the Romans openly discussed such topics as a normal part of human existence, and found a visit to a privy as natural as a visit to a dining hall, and just as conducive to conversation.

In Roman cities public latrines were located at important gathering points, such as *fora*, theaters and baths, and could be used for a small fee. They were frequented generally by the middle and upper classes who found these well-appointed, semi-private spaces ideal for relaxing and networking. For example, game boards and phrases were often inscribed in the space between stone seats, including the famous quote, “Baths, wine and women corrupt our bodies, but these things make life itself,” a testament to both the atmosphere and the time spent in public latrines.

In Rome, Senators and businessmen frequently gathered in a heated latrine above the shops of Caesar’s Forum, where a semicircular



Plan of Ostia showing location of public latrines; excavated public latrine in Dougga (photograph by Fikret Yegul); plan of public latrine at Dougga; conversation in a public latrine (after Pascolini). Courtesy Diane Favro.



seating arrangement and hard, reflective surfaces encouraged conversations and flights of oratory, along with more mundane activities. Acknowledging the popularity of these spaces for public discourse, the unpopular emperor Tiberius sought to minimize himself as a subject by making it a capital crime to carry a ring or coin with his image into a privy.

In the modern world, public bathrooms are viewed as potential sites for vandalism, inappropriate behavior and outright danger. Yet when security allows, these become the locus for animated discourse, just as they did in antiquity, a fact affirmed by the public bathrooms in any high school or dance club where the genders separate to primp and gossip. Rather than treating public facilities in our modern cities as places for unspeakable activities or flash points for danger, perhaps we should follow the model of Roman cities and acknowledge and celebrate their potential for socialization.