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Book Author(s): ANN OLGA KOLOSKI-OSTROW

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PINPOINTING BEHAVIORS, ATTITUDES, AND IDEALS FOR ROMAN TOILETS

1. OBSERVATIONS FROM VISITING ROMAN TOILETS

The myth in the modern classical civilization or Latin class is that multiseat Roman toilets were everywhere, as ubiquitous as Roman baths, available for everyone in ancient Roman cities at frequent intervals. In the scholarship on Roman architecture, urban planning, and ancient technology, however, one would be hard-pressed to find toilets discussed until very recently.¹ While toilets in themselves get a lot of credit from modern scholars for eliminating filth and even for improving health in Roman cities, such assessments are generally based only on assumptions rather than scientific inquiry. In this section, we visit Roman toilets with our eyes open so that we can assess basic facts about their use and function in antiquity, relying strictly on archaeological observation and literary references.

Combining the archaeology of Roman toilets with literary references concerning matters of sanitation gives us enough information to make some surprisingly firm assumptions regarding how the Romans used their toilets and even what rituals of hygiene or cleanliness, if any, they followed when they were inside them. First of all, the design of toilets (fig. 94) tells us that Roman clients preferred to sit down, probably both for urination and defecation (fig. 95), and that toilets could be on different floors of the same building (figs. 96 and 97). Second, the Romans also sat quite close to each other when using public toilets, even as little as 30 cm apart. Such a distance between seats is consistent with spacing of theater and amphitheater seating as well, so it was not unusually close. Also we must remember that the folds of their clothing (togas in winter, lighter tunics in summer) would have afforded them some privacy for their business in public toilets, even though no barriers separated the toilet holes. When clothing is factored into the discussion, we see how careful we must be not to jump to the wrong conclusions about Roman attitudes toward

privacy, for example. Third, the keyhole arrangement at the front of a toilet bank and below Roman seat holes seems to have provided access for cleaning bottoms more than it would have for cleaning the toilets. One would have needed a very long sponge stick to clean the inside walls of a *forica*, and for the most part, excrement and urine fell straight down and did not even touch the inside walls. These keyholes under the seats come in a wide variety of sizes across the Roman Empire,² from extremely small (4 x 4 cm) to as wide as the seat hole above (ca. 30 cm). I think the toilet designer intended to afford access to the client's bottom by way of this variety of openings under the seats, not to the inside walls of the toilet. Fourth, clients sat with their feet resting on a slightly raised platform that contained a shallow trench. To me, these trenches strongly suggest that clients used a sponge-stick for cleaning themselves in the toilet (fig. 98), which is the fifth point to make about the use of a Roman toilet. The trenches are very shallow (2–3 cm deep) and usually just about wide enough for the width of a sea sponge (ca. 5–6 cm). Literary sources do not mention the trenches in latrines, but we do have references to sea sponges tied to sticks (see below, section 2, for more details). Because the contents of cesspit toilets and sewer drains under *foricae* have not been well excavated at most sites in Italy, if the fill in toilets once contained pieces of sea sponge that could have confirmed the popularity of sponge sticks as cleaning devices in Roman times, we no longer have this evidence in Roman Italy.³ The ever-present trenches at the feet of the public toilets were definitely designed to hold liquids, either spillage from washing arrangements, water deliberately directed into them for cleaning sponge sticks, or urine.

As a sixth point about visiting a Roman toilet, we can note that in many toilets (public and private) water basins were provided, either for rinsing sponge sticks, or hands, or both (fig. 99). Such basins have been found in one-seater, private house toilets, in toilets in clubhouses, and in large public *foricae*.⁴ A seventh point that becomes obvious from visiting a Roman toilet concerns water use within it. From the heavy construction of drains and channels widely found under the seats of *foricae* everywhere, we can deduce that the Romans thought it was crucial to use water, and large amounts of it, to flush away urine and feces as often as possible.⁵ In house toilets, the sloping tile floor for slop water is often still in place, as in the Casa dello Scheletro at Herculaneum (III.3; fig. 84). As our eighth and final observation, we can say that Roman toilet clients were afforded latrines that were reasonably ventilated, but poorly lighted. Public latrines regularly have windows (usually two) high up their walls, and often also wide doors, although we do not have literary references that discuss toilet stench.

In reality, both public and private Roman house toilets do not measure up at all to our modern standards of hygiene, but the Romans who financed and built them must have considered them a positive, perhaps even major, improvement on existing conditions both in their public areas and in their houses. Toilets generally were breeding grounds for disease⁶ and foul smells, but by the end of the first century B.C. every Roman expected to see them in their cities, just as they continued to be built in military forts.

Romans using such toilets were constantly exposing themselves to a high risk of contamination through direct or indirect contact with human fecal matter. A brand-new study of large amounts of backfill from the sewer systems of the Roman army camp settlement of Carnuntum (on the Danube between Vienna and Bratislava in Austria) has revealed vast quantities of the roundworm, *Ascaris lumbricoides*. New research on the transmission of animal parasites to humans by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that the eggs of roundworms, found in the feces of dogs and cats in open spaces, parks, or on streets, easily transmit to humans, especially children. Such transmission must have been a regular problem in ancient Rome as well. The discovery of the roundworms at Carnuntum virtually confirms that the majority of the population there must have suffered from abdominal pains, loss of appetite, reduction of energy, and perhaps death due to the massive presence of this parasite in their systems.⁷

2. THE SPONGE STICK — A ROMAN RITUAL FOR CLEANLINESS

A particular Roman ritual of cleanliness, use of the sponge stick, needs deeper analysis, since it addresses a favorite query: “What did the Romans use for toilet paper?” As recently as one hundred years ago, Mediterranean sea sponges were highly valued for their durability and softness in both private and industrial uses. The business of collecting sea sponges today has all but disappeared, but it is safe to assume that coastal cities in the ancient Mediterranean, such as Rome, Ostia, Pompeii, Puteoli, and Herculaneum, for example, would have had easy access to a plentiful supply.⁸ On the one hand, two impressive qualities of Mediterranean sea sponges, softness and durability, would have encouraged the practice of using sponge sticks in toilets—probably repeatedly using them by sharing them among many different people at all times of the day. On the other hand, since sponges were likely in plentiful supply (assuming they were not an overly expensive item; and unfortunately, we know nothing about their cost in antiquity), perhaps old sponge sticks were frequently switched out for new ones by the cleaners or operators who tended the public toilets.⁹

A powerful passage in Seneca gives us a Roman voice on the matter of sponge sticks: Seneca admires, with mixed emotions, a German arena performer (*bestiarius*) slated for execution, who, while making ready for this morning exhibition, asked to relieve himself in the nearby toilet. This activity, it seems, was the only one the German was allowed to perform in private before his fatal performance was to begin. Without the presence of a guard, he proceeded to kill himself with the only available weapon he could find, a sponge stick in the latrine. The passage is so evocative it is worth citing in full: “While so engaged, he [the German] seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked the breath from his body. That was truly to insult death! Yes, indeed; it was not a very elegant or becoming way to die; but what is more foolish than to be over-nice about dying?”¹⁰ While this passage does not prove a wide or exclusive use of sponge sticks in toilets for cleaning bottoms, the passage definitely puts the sponge stick in the Roman toilet. If the sponge stick were merely an apparatus for cleaning the toilet itself, the drama of the passage would be greatly diminished. The fact that this German performer used something designed for his anus for his mouth instead heightens the horror of the tale. One additional reference in Martial, while vague on the details of sponge-stick use, confirms that sponges tied to sticks were unquestionably personal cleaning devices known to the Romans.¹¹ We shall later discuss the paintings, with their dialogue of “toilet talk,” from a room in the Baths of the Seven Sages at Ostia, but it is worth mentioning here that one of the “*dipinti*” or “hand-painted writings” (these are not graffiti scribbled later by users of the room, but the equivalent of word bubbles painted as part of the decorative scheme over the characters on the wall as we might find in a comic strip) placed over the head of a man clearly using a toilet on the lower register of the room includes the word “*xylosphongium*,” the technical word for a sponge stick.

If my reading of sponge-stick use in toilets for cleaning bodies is accurate, it seems easy to understand why the *paterfamilias* of a fine house or villa might have insisted on his chamber pot,¹² despite the fact that a fairly sophisticated toilet may have been somewhere nearby within his own house. Of course, the *paterfamilias* may have had his own private sponge stick as well as his preferred chamber pot.

Knowledge of Roman bathroom habits is difficult to come by. Petronius’s novel, *Satyricon*, provides valuable insight into the personal habits of the wealthy. His character Trimalchio prefers his chamber pot (*lasanum*) above all types of privy. Trimalchio tells his guests that everything they might need

for rituals of bodily evacuation is just outside the dining room door, including *cetera minutalia* ("other little things"), which he never explains.¹³ Epictetus gives us a detailed argument about the pluses and minuses of holding a chamber pot for someone else.¹⁴ The Romans were also not shy about discussing various remedies for constipation, which seems to have been a more common problem for them than the reverse, given the quantity of advice about it.¹⁵ Cleaning a bottom with a sponge stick after a purge from a bout of constipation would leave a much cleaner sponge stick than cleaning a bottom after a bout of diarrhea.

Seneca's passage about the German *bestiarius* is interesting for another reason beyond the sponge-stick reference. It suggests that toilet activities were normally considered private matters, since the German was allowed to go off to the latrine for the one thing he might be allowed to do by himself. The archaeological remains also confirm that what Romans did in toilets was a private matter, since house toilets had doors and since clients at public toilets preferred not to be seen from outside the *forica* (hence the various door arrangements we have discussed to keep outsiders from looking in). Archaeology also tells us that clients wanted enough light to be able to see what they were doing, but not necessarily enough light to see what everyone else was doing or to identify the faces of others in the toilet. I would argue that Martial's comments about Vacerra's¹⁶ persistent loitering in toilets for possible dinner invitations is all the more funny given the actual unpleasant realities of these spaces. While people obviously congregated in public toilet facilities, I do not think that they were used as social gathering places, as their communal arrangements might suggest to us. The snugly spaced seats of public toilets may suggest a layout conducive to social intercourse, but we must not jump to false conclusions. If the dimly lit, dank chambers are fully reconstructed in one's mind, complete with their odious fumes and minimal supply of fresh air, it is hard to imagine long conversations taking place there. Martial therefore was deliberately using a toilet venue for the most humorous effect he could muster. Likewise, the effect of the exchanges ("dipinti" mentioned above) between people using a latrine that were written on the lower register of the walls of the Baths of the Seven Sages (see below, chapter 5, section 3) is all the more humorous since it would have been unpleasant to converse in a public latrine for very long.

Toilets were built by people at all levels of Roman society in all types of buildings, public and private. Public, multiseat latrines, very likely financed and built by city administrators or private benefactors, have no inscriptions commemorating their benefactions. In the real Roman world, no one seems to have wanted to be closely associated with a toilet.

Early Roman agriculturists were quite adept at using animal excrement as fertilizer. By the end of second century to sometime in the mid-first century B.C., when Varro (ca. 116–27 B.C.) was entertaining Roman men of his own social standing with his dialogue on all aspects of agriculture, he did not hesitate to point out the usefulness of excreta (both human and animal) for enriching the soil.¹⁷ He stated that the best manure is that which had been well rotted, as opposed to manure freshly produced. The sun should not dry the manure out. He recommended placing manure in pits where water could keep it moist. And finally, Varro noted that “some people place the privies of slaves on top of their animal manure pits” (*in eoque quidam sellas familiaricas ponunt*) so that human excrement could be added to the mix.

Columella (ca. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65), whose grandfather was a contemporary of Varro, extolled the benefits of manure-laden soils for orchards and gardens with no less enthusiasm.¹⁸ He too promoted the use of mixed animal and human excrement (*stercorata*) as he advised that manure from both barnyard and baths (*cohortis balneariorumque*) worked best. Bees, however, thrive when the apiary is surrounded with a wall and placed far from the dung heap of latrines and baths and its odor (*quae tetrus latrinae sterquiliniique et a balinei libera est odoribus*). While we would be reading too much into the texts of Varro and Columella to argue that Romans believed that nature admits no true waste and includes everything natural in a spiral of life and death, we can say that the Romans had come to a realization that recycling the bodily waste of humans and animals, an activity they probably learned through trial and error, was a good thing for soil productivity.

Cesspits retained their popularity into the second century A.D., well after public toilets, flushed by sewer drains, were firmly established in the urban fabric. The persistence of cesspits probably had as much to do with simple economics as with resistance to change. A city notice, painted in black, found at Herculaneum (*exemta ste(r)cora a(ssibus) XI*)¹⁹ indicates that eleven asses might have been paid for the removal of manure. *Stercorarii* (manure handlers) cleared it from the streets but also emptied cesspits and sold the contents to farmers on the outskirts of the city.²⁰ The eleven asses mentioned in the Herculaneum *dipinto* was not a very substantial sum, but when that sum was added to a farmer's payment for the manure, we can begin to see the modest economic value to be gained by impoverished urban denizens willing to take on this odious task.

The textual evidence verifies that the Romans could be inventive farmers,

but they did not understand that excrement transmits disease. Vegetables and fruits fertilized with human waste held considerable risks and could be contaminated with various viruses, bacteria, and worm eggs.²¹ Exposed sewage unquestionably posed a serious health threat.²² If disease carriers such as insects, rodents, and pets came into contact with excrement, especially human excrement, and then came near food or drinking water, the problem could become chronic. The Romans were apparently also exposed to diseases transmitted by the fish they ingested, which fed on sewage emptied into the polluted Tiber.²³

Even as fecal discharge and urine in manageable amounts continued to be valued in agriculture and industry throughout Roman history, large urban population centers such as Rome produced a massive accumulation of sewage on a daily basis that inhabitants simply could not recycle fast enough. This bulk of waste had to be removed from within the city's walls for several reasons: its smell; its power to attract insects and rodents; and its hindrance of traffic in the streets. If one inhabitant of ancient Rome could produce approximately fifty grams of solid body waste per day,²⁴ we can only guess the precise proportion of the total accumulation from the whole population of the city that might have entered the sewerage networks. In any event, such a staggering quantity of human waste (we saw the figures in chapter 3, section 2) would have required enormous physical resources and manpower both to regulate and eliminate.

The dangers of human waste are shockingly compounded if we add the animal waste deposited onto the streets of Rome, also on a daily basis, especially from dogs, mules, donkeys, and horses.²⁵ Because dogs were scavengers freely roaming the streets of Rome, they were particularly dangerous as carriers of diseases. According to Juvenal, they dragged about fragments of poorly buried corpses and dead children left exposed on dung heaps,²⁶ and according to Martial, they tore at starving beggars who were too weak to fend them off.²⁷ A canine waste deposit, therefore, was not only an additional annoyance fouling the streets, but a potentially hazardous nest for diseases. When we consider the story told by Suetonius²⁸ that as Vespasian lunched one day, a dog from the street (*canis extrarius*) brought a human hand into the dining room and deposited it under the table at the emperor's feet, the dimensions of the sanitary problem spring to life.²⁹

The ways that Romans disposed of the bodies of the poorest denizens of their cities³⁰ can also help us grapple with the horrors of Roman sanitation. When epigraphy and archaeology are brought to bear on analysis of Roman death rituals, potters' fields, shallow pits that were barely graves,³¹ and the morticians and executioners who regularly dealt with the dead at the lower end of

Roman society, a much more complex picture emerges about Roman attitudes toward death pollution and these darker realities of Roman daily life than we can find in our literary sources. The concept of death pollution, it turns out, was handled by the Romans both through religious rituals concerning burial and through much more practical solutions involving the removal of corpses from living areas. When plagues periodically overtook the city of Rome and managing disposal of the dead became impossible, corpses were shoved into the sewers or directly into the Tiber to alleviate the body count.³²

Juvenal³³ sneers at those who made profits by running public latrines, but we know that the Romans valued human urine itself as a coveted commodity, which they commercially exploited—perhaps more vigorously than their re-use of excrement as fertilizer—in agriculture, horticulture, for veterinary uses, and, to some extent, at least, in fulling.³⁴ Fullers apparently used some urine in their dyeing processes, although the matter is controversial.³⁵ We have some literary evidence for the placement of terracotta vessels in the streets for use as public urinals.³⁶ Vespasian's famous tax on urine³⁷ resulted in money for imperial coffers that indeed did not “smell bad,” despite the concerns raised by Titus. Vespasian, after all, had experienced intimate personal exposure to bodily excretions back in the days when he was aedile, responsible for keeping Rome's streets clean, under the emperor Caligula (Gaius). According to Suetonius,³⁸ Gaius had ordered some soldiers to smear Vespasian with muck (*lutum*), probably mud and excrement, and load the folds of his senatorial gown with it for failing to clean the streets up to standard. Apparently, by the time Vespasian was emperor himself he had learned his lessons so well that he saw no reason not to profit from filth of various kinds.

Actual collection of urine was far from hygienic. The terracotta jars, which were placed in the streets and alleyways, were unglazed and porous and sometimes must have cracked and burst. Martial complains about these putrid contents, which must have frequently spilled into the streets.³⁹ Perhaps easier to wash away than excrement, urine also attracted pests, was quite smelly, and was potentially disease-ridden. No one, of course, even at the highest levels of authority, had accurately assessed the dangers of the substance.

We conclude that the Romans were somewhat ambivalent about human and animal waste. They used excrement in farming, but apparently human waste was not a first choice, despite its copious availability in urban centers. Manure handlers were certainly at the bottom of society, as were the urine collectors working for fullers and the undertakers removing the dead.⁴⁰ If serious profit could be garnered from human waste of any kind, it seems that the emperor himself would not turn up his nose at the involvement. Finally, when deal-

ing with the dead bodies of the lowliest members of society, the Romans were quick to let pragmatism trump even religious customs in order to find workable solutions concerning body disposal.

4. ROMAN NOTIONS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Much life in a Roman town or city was lived in the public eye, that is, more communally than anything we can imagine in the modern Western world. All sorts of basic services that we take for granted in our cities and towns, like access to individual kitchens, baths, and toilets, were simply lacking to thousands of Romans in any ancient city.⁴¹ The plethora of *thermopolia* (hot food and drink shops), simple eateries, and bakeries in a Roman city must have served as places where people without kitchens of their own could come to cook their food, just as public fountains provided drinking water and places for quick washing and cleaning. Public baths also substituted for private washing arrangements for the poor; and multiseater public latrines had to be more attractive to use, especially when they were new, than cesspit toilets on the ground floors of crowded tenements. If cesspit toilets were installed at all in apartment buildings, they would have quickly filled to capacity. Furthermore, the chamber pots probably available in apartments on the uppermost floors could not have been very pleasant to use either, since they could not be easily emptied far enough away from already unpleasant and smelly living quarters. Under such circumstances, public toilets, especially when supplied with water for washing, would seem much more desirable.

Recent scholarship has shown that great ambiguity surrounds the very term “public,” which requires some clarification in terms of its relationship to the public toilets in this study. For many Roman buildings we must decide whether by “public” we mean publicly owned or publicly accessible. If we do not explore such labels further, the reader might well object to an indiscriminate application of contemporary categories like public and private onto ancient models.

It would be comforting to find much more firm ancient evidence for categories like public and private elsewhere in Roman culture—beyond literary passages referring to *cubicula*,⁴² for example—that could verify the distinctions we are always so eager to make in modern society. Whether we can justify such terminology for Roman latrines is not a question to which a simple yes or no answer is sufficient, as that would deny the subtleties of the Roman context.

First of all, in the English language we can find a richness of both euphemisms and dysphemisms for the toilet, that is, the room with appropriate hardware provided for the acts of urination and defecation; for the acts themselves;

and for the particular effluvia that result from a visit to a toilet.⁴³ Variant terms for toilet in English seem to be divided into four aspects of the room itself: 1) the place where the receptacle for the urine and excrement is located (head, latrine, john, bog, crapper)⁴⁴; 2) the place for easement (comfort station, rest-room); 3) the place where there is water (water closet, wc, lavatory, bathroom, washroom); and 4) the place where privacy can be found (privy, ladies and gentlemen, women's and men's rooms⁴⁵). This last category most clearly signifies a public toilet arrangement in modern usage, and interestingly, it is the category most concerned with the matter of privacy.

If we return for a moment to the Latin words for toilet facilities, we find that euphemistic and dysphemistic variants do not exist. Admittedly, there is a paucity of references to toilets altogether in Roman literature, but if the Romans did categorize the toilet as we do, we might expect that some hint of it would have survived. The word that best denotes a public toilet facility seems to be *forica*.⁴⁶ Judging from our available sources, we can conclude that a *forica* refers to a toilet that was accessible to the public, which almost always means a toilet with more than one seat.⁴⁷ While the *latrina*, usually a one-seater, served the same purpose as the *forica*, the most obvious distinction seems to be one of size.

The *latrina* was located in a private house or some other private space and not accessible to the public at large.⁴⁸ While the Romans used both of these words, *latrina* and *forica*, for their toilets, it does not seem that the words were easily confused. *Foricae*, multiseat facilities, open in plan, were public buildings or often attached to public buildings, though sometimes they were privately owned. They offered some privacy from the truly public areas of the city, such as the streets and open markets, for an activity that was abhorrent for the public at large to view.

The phenomenon of the Roman public latrine, as we encounter it from modern perspectives, continues to jolt our modern sensitivities, with its seats so close together, no construction of partitions, and dozens of toilet-seat holes in a row. Since we do not understand them, we tend to laugh at them. I suggest that we do not understand them precisely because the terms "public" and "private" that we use for our facilities did not have the same meanings for the Romans. In other words, the Romans did not make the same distinctions between public and private that we make.⁴⁹

If we return to the roots of both English words, "public" and "private," in the Latin words from which they derive, the considerable shift in meaning from the original Latin to an English translation becomes more apparent. The adjective *publicus*, from *populus*, "a people," "the people," can translate,

“of or belonging to the people, state, or community.”⁵⁰ In Latin, therefore, the word is significantly political. The adjective *privatus*, which in certain circumstances translates as “private,” also had a much more political punch to a Roman mind. In Latin, *privatus* can most essentially be translated “apart from the state,” “peculiar to one’s self,” “of or belonging to an individual,” hence the sometimes applicable English adjective, “private.”⁵¹ *Privatus* comes from the verb *privo*, “to deprive,” “rob,” “strip of.” A person or thing not connected to the community as a whole would have been labeled as *privatus*.⁵² To describe a person with the adjective *privatus* was to say that he was not connected to the community, and so presumably was not a magistrate or in any public office. Someone who was a nobody was a *privatus*, hence the description carries a decidedly negative connotation.

The Romans also drew lines between public as an outside space and private as an inside space in different ways from what we moderns are accustomed to. Vitruvius demonstrated this point clearly in his comments on the social rules that dictated who was allowed to make use of the various rooms of a Roman private house, and he is well worth citing in full, as what he had to say can help us understand the peculiar nature of public and private in relation to Roman toilets.⁵³ Again, Vitruvius is concerned here only with the spaces in a so-called private house, but their relevance to more public concerns is obvious:

Namque ex his quae propria sunt, in ea non est potestas omnibus introeundi nisi invitatis, quemadmodum sunt cubicula, triclinia, balneae ceteraque quae easdem habent usus rationes. Communia autem sunt, quibus etiam invocati suo iure de populo possunt venire, id est vestibula, cava aedium, peristylia, quaeque eundem habere possunt usum.

For among those rooms that are specific [to the family], none have the power to go into these except those who are invited, as *cubicula*, *triclinia*, baths. . . . There are, moreover, common areas, which even uninvited men among the people can enter of their own accord, that is, vestibules, courtyards, peristyles, and such areas as have the same use.⁵⁴

In contemporary terms, we consider what is defined as public as derivative, negative, secondary to, or less important than, what is private, as opposed to our private personal connections, primarily friends and family, our private bank accounts, private property, and private affairs. The Romans viewed things rather in reverse order from us. In other words, all individuals, whether categorized as *publicus* or *privatus*,⁵⁵ were subject to moral evaluation by the community, and that community had a kind of unspoken power over the individual.

The levels of public and private spaces in domestic dwellings in Roman society have been well studied.⁵⁶ The relative openness of the Roman elite house made it a stage for the theater of aristocratic public display within the house. In light of the public facade that an individual was forced to maintain, even at home, a person could not hide in his private world (his home or properties) to escape moral scrutiny by the community, as we can and often do today. In some sense, then, there was no generally accepted norm of privacy for the Romans, no legitimate moral claim to freedom from judgment in private matters.

What clearly did exist for the Romans was what one scholar has called a “norm of publicity.”⁵⁷ Certain public activity, in the sense of “belonging to the people, state, or community,” was to be carried out in public, in view of the people. If we can grasp this very Roman ideology, it can help us reevaluate what was private for the Romans as well.

For matters connected with personal hygiene, and most especially for the activities carried out in toilets, the Romans appear to have displayed a certain concern for privacy, at least upon first glance. When modern archaeologists record the physical details of latrine architecture, such as doors, high windows, and poor lighting, we tend to interpret them as evidence for desired privacy. If public and private are so reversed in the Roman context, however, it is worth asking if we can read anything else into such design features as those we find in the public *foricae*.

No Roman of Rome, Ostia, Pompeii, or any other city could have enjoyed the stench or the sight of human excrement, offal, animal dung, or various other forms of offensive garbage strewn about the streets. While the arrival of public latrines in Roman Italy probably improved the sanitary conditions of cities to some extent, we must not automatically assume that sanitary improvement was the only or even the main Roman motive behind them. Public latrines, like the Latin word *publicus* itself, may have had a political aspect. The Romans were masters of confining to restricted areas all behaviors that were unpleasant to the state or community. In this sense, we see that the privacy afforded by public latrines to the Romans who used them was not so much a right as a mandate set by higher authorities.

Romans in the power structure, the magistrates who paid for urban improvements over time, developed spaces such as public toilets where the offensive, but unstoppable, behaviors of defecation and urination could be carried out, but still kept out of view, in controlled secrecy. Authorities focused on the containment of these behaviors to the inside of latrines rather than focusing on tiresome prohibitions and constant policing of these behaviors to keep them away from public venues where they would not have been appropriate.

We can surmise that public latrines gave the Roman underclass a sense of privacy and at the same time removed the sense of transgression that would have been associated with tending to their bodily functions in the wrong places.⁵⁸

In modern society, public sexual acts (such as people exposing themselves or touching other people or being sexually aggressive), tend to conjure up images of physical harm, especially to women and children. They seem to hold much more moral gravity for us than public defecation or urination, however disgusting these latter acts may also be to us. With the Romans the situation is again reversed. The Romans, as we do during Gay Rights marches or Mardi Gras celebrations, tolerated public sexuality and even public obscenity at appropriate times,⁵⁹ but it seems that the privilege of acting freely in situations of secrecy (for example, secret sexual orgies or secret meetings with excessive drinking) was frowned upon much more vigorously. From these observations it seems safe to conclude that public latrines (and the term “public” here denotes a facility that was open to the public in some obvious way, whether it was publicly or privately owned) were constructed, in part at least, with such ideological demands behind them.

5. THE ROMAN ELITE AND THEIR MORAL SUPERIORITY

When Romans, such as Cicero, wrote about proper behaviors, ancient customs, or essential political and religious practices, the discourse was almost always directed to the elite, the social classes at the upper end of society, who represented people with political power and social standing, such as the *equites* (equestrians), for instance. Almost everyone else could easily be dismissed as boorish, pathetic, and not worthy of attention:

Neque enim de sicariis veneficis testamentariis furibus peculatoribus hoc loco disserendum est, qui non verbis sunt et disputatione philosophorum sed vinculis et carcere fatigandi, sed haec consideremus quae faciunt ii qui habentur boni.

For here there is no need to talk about killers, poisoners, forgers, thieves, and embezzlers, who should be held in check not by words and the disputes of philosophers, but by chains and prison; we are considering those things which those who are held among the “good” do.⁶⁰

The Romans frequently assigned different activities to different venues. They required that certain activities must (or must not) be carried out in public spaces in full view of an audience. An unwritten code for behaviors, particu-

larly those for Roman aristocrats, was thereby readily understood by almost everyone within society.⁶¹ The general character of the magistrates who performed public rituals was thereby always on the line. Spectators at these public events were consciously or unconsciously comparing the performer of the ritual to the performance and to what they understood these rituals entailed from their knowledge of that unwritten code. Thanks to some recent scholarship, we also know something of the expectations and experiences of life for the lower orders of Roman society.⁶²

The Romans believed in the moral superiority of the elite, and this belief provided much ideological justification for the domination of the elite in the public arena. It also provided justification for implementing as much control over society at large as was possible, veering even into areas we would consider absolutely private, such as the activities performed in the toilet. Since the elite considered the nonelite members of Roman society undeniably inferior, although they were clearly curious about them and their depraved activities,⁶³ they did their best to control these inferior denizens in as many spheres of activity as they could. Such control could not reach every area or location of non-elite society, however, such as activities that occurred at meetings of *collegia* or in taverns, brothels, cheap inns, the dingier urban baths, and dirty alleyways, which were everywhere.

The very nature of Roman social order itself goes a long way toward explaining why latrines were increasingly apparent in the urban infrastructure during the late republic, the time of Augustus, and most especially into the second century A.D. Almost everything a Roman did in the public sphere needed to produce the consent of those who maintained the status quo. Deviant behavior in any society is to be expected in secret places. If surveillance is increased, secrecy is reduced, and undesirable activity is more likely to be discouraged. The Romans saw, however, that this policy would eventually reach the point of diminishing returns.⁶⁴ As a result, they adopted a different strategy to quell a variety of undesirable actions of the masses.⁶⁵

When the ruling classes wished to eliminate certain unseemly behaviors from the public sphere, such as using obscenities, unbearable noisemaking, frenzied dancing, indulging in sloppy drunkenness, and the resultant vomiting, urinating, and so forth, the reveling was likely to be assigned to a restricted place at a specific time and occasion.⁶⁶ The undesirable behaviors of revelers, of course, could never be completely contained or controlled by such domination, but the elite's desire to confine it represents their attempt to legislate behavior. Likewise, public latrines provided a place where the nasty bodily functions of the dispossessed *privati* could be hidden away from sight. Furthermore, the

latrine gave to those same impoverished urban poor the illusion of privacy, that sought-after intangible of the wealthy that they so envied. The elite could escape to the peace and calm of their villas and private gardens for whatever needs they had. Those who had nothing had no such escape, but inside dark, urban latrines they could do what they wished and what they needed to do in less humiliating circumstances than in the streets or byways.

6. ROMAN IDEALS FOR MEDICINE AND HEALTH DERIVED FROM MEDICAL OR PHILOSOPHICAL LITERATURE

The writings of Galen⁶⁷ showcased a health regime whereby a paunchy Roman aristocratic male could become the epitome of physical perfection. Galen proposed that through the strict supervision of bathing and bodily evacuations one could achieve an ideal body, similar in its detail to the recommendations of the Polycleitan canon. The philosopher Epictetus⁶⁸ presented a similar physical regime with the goal of creating a bodily reserve among the Roman nobility (a certain way of holding the head and shoulders, a certain type of confident stride, and an expressionless face, for example) that would allow an easy integration into social rank. From birth the Roman male was to be subjected to sensual deprivation, on the one hand, and strong bodily manipulation on the other. Not only were the nose and the back of the head of male Roman babies manually shaped on a daily basis by nurses or mothers, but their penises as well were regularly manipulated to stretch the foreskin.⁶⁹

The new public baths of the second century A.D., vast pleasure palaces already from the time of Trajan, afforded the perfect place for the future paterfamilias to display his completely controlled nudity in all its preregulated elegance. Elite Romans were probably never keen on public nudity,⁷⁰ which they apparently associated with dishonor, but it was a long-established and customary expectation to bathe in the nude already by the time of Cicero. Nudity in the baths would continue as a common practice to the end of the empire.⁷¹ Roman attitudes toward the body and its basic sexual and excretory urges are perhaps best understood by way of their negative attitudes toward nudity,⁷² but Roman authors do not remark upon the exposure of sexual organs in latrines, probably because the occurrence was quite rare, given Roman clothing design.

Tying medical and philosophical ideas about health and sanitation in Galen and Epictetus to the presence of luxury latrines in Roman urban settings seems to me a very uncertain business. Unquestionably, these authors had much to say about conditioning the body, quite literally, from top to bottom. The physical care of the body, including evacuation of bodily fluids in sufficient amounts

and at proper times, was a process taught to Roman males from a very early age, perhaps to prepare them for their stations in life. It is therefore tempting to suggest that the Roman social hierarchy was largely the result of such physical conditioning, but the connection is thin. Since these medical ideas developed in the second century A.D. and coincided with the architectural advent of the luxury latrine, it has been tempting to assume that Roman urban planners began to appreciate the political potential that was inherent in the construction of public toilets for the regulation of private behavior.⁷³ I am not so sure, and I must challenge the hypothesis.

According to this scenario, Galen and Epictetus (both writing in Greek) prescribed regulations for the care of the body that actually inspired the construction of luxury latrines in the second century A.D. In the fundamental work proposing this hypothesis, the author chose luxury latrines in six cities—Rome, Ostia, Timgad, Cuicul (Djémila, in Algeria), Corinth, and Ephesus—for the quality of their remains.⁷⁴ Toilets with a variety of shapes and sizes and displaying various touches of elegance, including marble walls, sculptural displays, mosaic floors, and fine frescoes, were cited to promote the theory,⁷⁵ but I think it is not solidly defensible.

To test the theory that there is a link between concepts of health and latrine design more rigorously, I tried to find a connection between hygienic concepts expressed in earlier medical writings (namely, those of A. Cornelius Celsus) and the construction of earlier, more simply decorated latrines in Italy. Celsus, who likely lived under the emperor Tiberius in the early first century A.D., was a prolific medical writer and by some accounts a practicing physician. He gives us an important contemporary Roman view on matters of defecation, urination, and health in his treatise, *De medicina*. Celsus's constant emphasis on the bowel movement, so prevalent in later medical writings as well, suggests that the topic was open for discussion with unembarrassed openness in connection with good health. Celsus was particularly interested in the topics of solid and loose bowel movements, how to induce vomiting, causes of flatulence, and an array of urine colorations in the healthy and the sick. The following sampling of references should suffice to show that Celsus considered these subjects important for everyone's health.⁷⁶

In his prooemium, Celsus establishes that among the natural actions or evident causes of diseases, digestion is the most important.⁷⁷ *De medicina* book 1 explains how those in good health should act. Advice is generous about how to effect healthy bowel movements and clear flatulence,⁷⁸ what white and red urine signifies about digestion,⁷⁹ how much and what type of food and drink lead to good digestion,⁸⁰ how to deal with loose bowels,⁸¹ recommendations for

vomiting,⁸² suggestions for relieving confined bowels,⁸³ and what drinks are best for not disturbing them.⁸⁴ The discussion of bodily evacuation is varied, colorful, and graphic. We would expect in such an account (if Celsus were hoping to influence the urban architecture of sanitation in any way) at least one mention, even as an aside, of a place, house toilet, public latrine, or even a chamber pot where such evacuations could be accomplished, especially since he does make five specific references to baths and to the value of visiting baths for good health in book 1.⁸⁵ He remains resoundingly silent on the topic of toilet facilities and has no recommendations about them. The fact that Celsus has nothing to recommend regarding the relationship between public toilets and personal health is consistent with the similarly weak connection between early latrines and the question of whether there was any broader ideology of urban sanitation and health that we found in our investigation of second-century medical and philosophical writings.

A chronology of toilet habits, beginning in pre-Roman antiquity with Herodotus's observations on Egyptian women who urinated by standing up⁸⁶ and proceeding all the way to Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, helps us establish an elevated cultural consciousness about toilet practices, but does not really explain anything about the Romans or why luxury toilets appeared when they did. Freud formulated three needs—beauty, order, and cleanliness—on which we moderns establish our cultural consciousness for toilet practices,⁸⁷ but the evidence shows that the Romans did not utilize this (to us) familiar Freudian triad in their culture.

In modern Western societies, certainly by the twentieth century, we can identify three forces that have combined to clean up cities: 1) the physical removal of dirt and muck; 2) compulsion about cleanliness on the part of civic administrations; and 3) the imposition of some regime on the public by administrations in order to promote urban order. We have asked if these or similar forces also lay behind Roman latrine culture. What does the Roman medical literature (both of the first and second century A.D.) concerned with the regulation of the body and its behaviors have to tell us? We can deduce from this literature that some wealthy Romans were fascinated with medical cures⁸⁸ and diet, that digestion had become a hot topic of discussion among the aristocracy, and that healthy bodies were idolized. The evidence does not seem to indicate that elite Romans translated their concerns for bodily health into concern for the urban architecture of latrines. We must look elsewhere to find an explanation for the development of Roman latrine architecture.

To conclude, I would say that the impetus for the fancier latrine architecture of the second century A.D. did not come from the social forces outlined

in medical and philosophical writings that favor regimentation to promote order. Rather, the later, more complex latrine architecture was a natural development from much older Roman cultural notions, such as concepts of appropriate public and private activities and the spaces in which to effect them, combined with the ever more effective usage of water to remove dirt.

Consideration of toilet traditions in Roman culture has taken our exploration into many intriguing directions: we have examined Latin etymologies relating to toilets; early literary references to latrines; the development of urban sewers; Roman class distinctions and toilet habits; penalties for soiling public areas, especially temple sanctuaries; the societal attitudes toward excrement; the aggressive functions of sexual and excretory exhibitionism within Roman society; Roman attitudes toward nudity; and intimate practices employed in the care of Roman male babies effected to encourage their ultimate control over their own bodies. The theory that toilets were embellished with decorations and increased in numbers in the second century because they served as a symbol of Roman social hierarchy, however, ignores the fact that there was a long, earlier tradition of toilet use in the cities of Roman Italy.