CHAPTER SEVEN

# THE PLEASURES OF THE BODY: FOOD, WINE, SEX AND BATHS

## *Dormice for starters?*

A curious pottery object, unearthed in the mid-1950s in a small house not far from the Amphitheatre in Pompeii, was almost instantly identified as a 'dormouse-jar' (Ill. 75). The idea is that the dormice lived inside, running up and down the spiralling tracks moulded into the sides of the jar (the Roman equivalent of a hamster's wheel). A couple of feeding trays could be filled up from the outside, and a series of small holes let in air and a little light. For a lid was fitted on the top, to keep the creatures inside and, perhaps, to confuse their body-clocks with the constant gloom, so that they did not hibernate – although you might equally well predict that the dark would have sent them to sleep.

Unlikely as this reconstruction may seem, the strange pot does in fact match up almost exactly with a description offered by one first-century BCE writer on agriculture: 'Dormice are fattened up in jars,' he writes, 'which a lot of people keep even inside their houses. The potters make them in a special shape. They make runs in their sides, and a basin for holding food. Into these jars, you put acorns or walnuts or chestnuts. When the lid is fitted, the animals grow fat in the dark.' Several others have been found in Pompeii or round about. This leaves no doubt that a nice plump dormouse could be a delicacy of Roman cuisine. The one surviving Roman cookery book – a compilation of the fourth or fifth century CE, attributed to a well-known gourmet called Apicius, who lived centuries earlier and almost certainly had nothing whatsoever to do with the book – includes a recipe for stuffed dormice ('Stuff dormice with pork stuffing and with the meat

75. A Pompeian dormouse holder. Occasionally the Romans really did eat dormice, just as they do in the movies. They would have been placed in this small pottery jar (some 20 centimetres tall), with a lid – to be kept and fattened before consumption. The ridges in the side of the jar acted as exercise runs for the doomed creatures.

of whole dormice crushed with pepper, nuts, *silphium* [perhaps a kind of fennel] and fish sauce'). And at Trimalchio's extravagant banquet that is the centrepiece of Petronius' novel, the *Satyrica*, the starters included 'dormice dipped in honey and sprinkled with poppy seeds'.

But these poor little creatures played a smaller role in Roman cookery than they do in modern fantasies about the luxury and excess of Roman eating habits, which are one of the most celebrated and mythologised of all aspects of Roman life. The lavish banquet at which men and women recline together in various states of undress, being fed grapes by battalions of slaves or tucking into silver platefuls of stuffed dormouse in *garum*, is a familiar image from sword-and-sandals movies and even TV documentaries. And the weirder aspects of Roman cuisine are regularly imitated at student toga parties and the occasional brave, if short-lived, modern restaurant (some concoction of anchovy usually standing in as a pale imitation of proper Roman fish sauce, and sugar mice doing duty for the real thing).

This chapter will explore a series of Pompeian pleasures, from eating and drinking to sex and bathing. We shall find (as the dormouse-holder has already shown) that the modern popular image of the Romans at play is not entirely wrong. But in each case the picture turns out to be more complicated and interesting than the hedonistic, excessive and raunchy stereotype implies.

## *You are what you eat*

The Romans themselves had a hand in mythologising their eating and dining. The biographers of emperors made much of the ruler's habits at table. Banquets were imagined as an occasion to enjoy his hospitality, but also to see the

hierarchies of Roman culture sharply reinforced. True or not (and probably not), it was said of Elagabalus, a particularly strange third-century CE emperor, that he hosted colour-coded dinner parties (on one day all the food being green, on another blue) and that to make sure that the inferior guests knew their place he served them food of wood or wax, while he himself consumed the edible version. Other Roman writers discussed in minute detail the rules and conventions of elite dining. Should women recline with the men, or should they sit upright? Which position on the shared couch was most honorific? At what time was it polite to arrive at a dinner party? (Answer: neither first nor last, so it might be necessary to hang around outside to make a well-timed entrance.) In what order should the different dishes be eaten?

Meanwhile fantastic culinary creations caught the Roman imagination as much as they do the modern. At Trimalchio's fictional banquet, a running joke is that none of the food is quite as it appears (rather like Trimalchio himself – an ex-slave pretending to be an aristocrat). One of the courses consisted of a boar, surrounded by piglets who turned out to be made of cake. When the boar was carved, a flock of thrushes flew out of its innards. A rather more mundane artifice, but with similar 'deception' in view, is recommended in Apicius' cookery book. One memorable recipe is for 'Casserole of anchovy without anchovy'. A mixture of any kind of fish, 'sea nettles' and eggs, it promises to pull the wool over the eyes of every diner: 'at table no one will recognise what he's eating.'

At Pompeii itself we find wall paintings depicting extravagant parties that fit nicely with our own modern stereotype of Roman dining. One scene (Plate 10) in the dining room in the Chaste Lovers bakery shows two couples reclining on couches covered with rugs and cushions. Though hardly a picture of sexual debauchery, other types of excess are on display. The drink is set out on a pair of tables nearby. A considerable quantity has already been consumed, for a third man has passed out on one of the couches, while a woman in the background has to be supported by her partner or slave. Another painting from the same room shows a similar scene, but this time in the open air, with the couches covered by awnings, and a slave mixing up the wine in a large bowl (wine was usually mixed with water in the ancient world).

In the House of the Triclinium, named for the paintings in its dining room, we find other variations on this theme. In one scene, a man who must just have arrived at the party is sitting on a couch, as a slave removes his shoes, while one of the other guests is already vomiting (Ill. 76). In another scene, in which entertainers perform for the guests on their couches, we glimpse a striking piece of

76. A nineteenth-century copy of a painting of a Roman party, from the House of the Triclinium. Notice how the servers, whether slaves or free, are shown as smaller than the guests. But they are very useful adjuncts to the occasion: one (on the left) removes a guest's shoes; another (on the right), takes care of someone who is already being sick.

furniture. What looks at first sight like a living waiter, is in fact a bronze statue of a young man, holding a tray for food and drink.

So do the dining rooms and dining customs of Pompeii match up to these images on its walls? In part, yes. We saw in Chapter 3 that, even for the city's elite, formal dining of this type was probably restricted to special occasions, most food being taken on the run, sitting at tables, or perched in the peristyle. That said, some *triclinia* have been excavated which show an exquisite attention to detail and to luxury – as, for example, the dining installation overlooking the garden in the House of the Golden Bracelet, with its shining marble and babbling water (Ill. 35). The silver tableware and other elegant pieces of dining equipment occasionally discovered in and around Pompeii also conjure up an image of rich Roman dining, with all its stereotypes, jokes and cultural clichés.

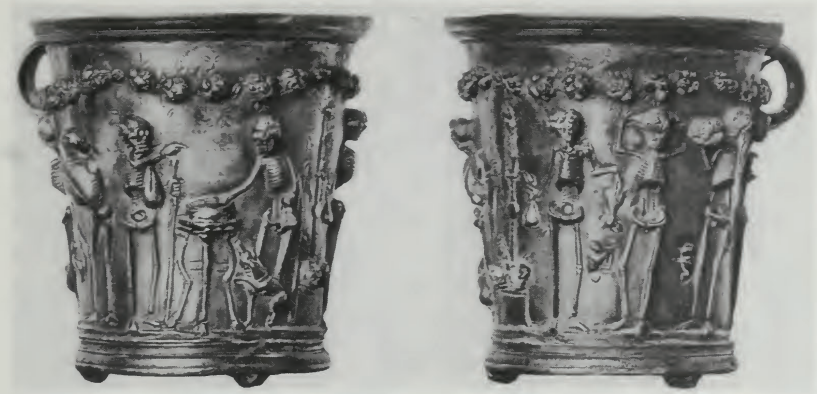
In the House of the Menander, 118 pieces of silver plate, most of it dining ware, were found, carefully wrapped in cloth, stashed away in a wooden box in a cellar under the house's private bath suite. Whether put here as the occupants fled, or more likely – as there was no sign of hurried packing – in storage during renovations to the house, this collection includes matching sets of drinking cups, plates, bowls and spoons (knives would have been made from tougher metal). There are even a pair of silver pepper or spice pots, in 'Trimalchian' disguise, one in the shape of a tiny *amphora*, the other in the shape of a perfume bottle.

A few miles outside the city, in a country house at Boscoreale, over a hundred silver pieces were unearthed at the end of the nineteenth century. These had almost certainly been hidden away for safe-keeping as the volcano erupted, in a deep wine vat where the body of a man – owner or maybe would-be robber – was also found. Among the precious service were a pair of cups which again strike a chord with Trimalchio's banquet. In the middle of his feast a silver skeleton was brought onto the table, prompting Trimalchio to sing a dreadful ditty on the theme of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die' (a favourite topic of Roman popular moralising). Two of the silver drinking cups from Boscoreale are decorated with a jolly party – of skeletons (Ill. 77). Several are given the names of learned Greek philosophers, and are accompanied by suitable philosophical slogans: 'Pleasure is the goal of life' etc.

In some cases, we can point to an almost exact match between objects depicted in the paintings of drinking and dining on Pompeian walls and those found in the excavations of the city. The collection of silver plate shown on the walls of one rich tomb could almost be part of the dinner service from the House of the Menander. Even more striking is the free-standing bronze statue discovered in a large room in the House of Polybius (once a dining room, it was being used for storage or safe-keeping at the moment of the eruption). Imitating the distinctive 'archaic' style of Greek sculpture in the sixth century BCE, this figure holds its arms out, presumably to carry a tray. Though it is often assumed that this tray would have held lamps, making the statue an elaborate and expensive lamp-stand, it could equally well have been a 'dumb-waiter', holding food just as in the painting from the House of the Triclinium. That idea is certainly seen on a smaller scale in a group of table settings from another house in the city: four elderly men, naked, with long dangling penises, each supporting a small tray, for holding appetisers, titbits or any dainty food (Plate 12). Part of this design has had a surprising afterlife: overlooking the dangling penises, a well-known Italian kitchenware company is now marketing an expensive mock-up of this very tray.







77. A clever message for a rich dinner party. This silver cup from Boscoreale features some jolly skeletons, with moral slogans inscribed next to them.

But there are reasons for thinking that even on the grandest occasions, the reality of Pompeian dining would have been rather different from the images that surrounded it, and a good deal less sumptuous or elegant. The paintings on the walls, in other words, might have reflected an ideal of dining (vomiting and all) rather than the reality. Of course, the hard stone of the fixed couches would have been made much more comfortable and attractive by the addition of rugs and cushions. And no doubt, with practice, the idea of eating with your right hand, while leaning – semi-recumbent – on your left elbow would have come to seem entirely natural. All the same, many of the Pompeian dining rooms, where the couches still survive, seem with a practical eye to be awkward and cramped for the diners. Even in the top-of-the-range installation in the House of the Golden Bracelet, simply mounting the couches looks as if it could have been a difficult operation, at least for the less nimble. Some wooden steps, or their human equivalent in the shape of slaves, would have helped, but not entirely solved the problem. Besides, three people on these couches would feel to us rather crowded. Maybe in fact it did to the Pompeians too. The fact that the different utensils in the silver dinner services are arranged in pairs rather than threes may hint that the canonical 'three on a couch' was not always the practice in real life.

The details of the serving arrangements are also puzzling. Movable couches in a large display room would allow for flexibility and plenty of space. Not so the 'built-in' *triclinia*. Where there are fixed couches, there is also often a fixed table in the centre, on which the food and drink must have been placed. But it was not

78. Pompeian cooking equipment, fit for a banquet. On the lower level, large buckets and vessels. Above, more sophisticated utensils – ladles, pans, moulds and what look like egg poachers.

large and there would have been little room to spare after nine (or even six) plates and drinking cups were put there. That suggests that portable tables and slaves would have had an important role, but there is little room for these either – particularly since servers could not move *behind* the diners to replenish food and drink as in a modern restaurant. And what of those cases where, as in the House of the Golden Bracelet, the central table is a pool of water. Here the younger Pliny, who kept well clear of the eruption of Vesuvius when his uncle went to investigate, and lived to tell the tale, can perhaps point us in the right direction. In one of his letters, he describes a villa he owned in Tuscany. This included an elaborate garden, with a dining area at one end with a pool of water in front of it, filled by water spouts that gushed from the couches themselves. He explains that larger dishes were placed for the diners on the edge of the pool, but that smaller dishes and garnishes were set floating on the water. That may well have been the principle in the House of the Golden Bracelet. If so, it's hard not to suspect that, however elegant the arrangement was in theory, some of the food, not to mention the guests, became rather damp.

This raises questions about the kind of food that would have been served in these fitted dining rooms. Influenced by Petronius, we tend to think of large elaborate dishes: whole boars with a stuffing of live birds being only one of many extravagant options. And it is true that some of the cooking equipment found at





Pompeii suggests that some complicated confections were possible, even if not quite so showy as those offered by Trimalchio. Discoveries include plenty of large saucepans, frying pans, colanders, strainers and elaborate moulds for mousses (strikingly reminiscent of the shapes still used for modern jelly moulds: long-eared rabbits and fat pigs) (Ill. 78). Probably all that was feasible in a large room with movable couches. Not so in the smaller versions, however elegant. There the practicalities of space, and of eating with just one hand, prompts the suspicion that what was served was often simple and small, or at least already cut up into bite-size chunks. Against the lavish image of movie-style Roman banquets, we have to set an often more cramped and uncomfortable reality, with anything more substantial than the equivalent of a modern finger buffet making for awkward, messy eating.

Not that these considerations would have worried the poor, for whom stuffed boar and honeyed dormice were probably not even a part of their wildest fantasies. *Triclinium* dining was for the wealthy, or for those in the ranks below who might occasionally take a special meal in a place such as the dining room in the Chaste Lovers bakery, where you could pay to eat in that style (even if it was located unglamorously between the pack animals and the flour mills). Everyday food for most Pompeians was far from showy. In fact it must have been a repetitive, if healthy, diet of bread, olives, wine, cheese (more like ricotta than cheddar), fruit, pulses and a few cottage garden vegetables. Fish would have been available too (caught in the Bay nearby, less polluted then than now), and more rarely meat. By far the commonest form of meat was pork, and that probably more often in the form of sausage or black pudding than a large roast joint. Chicken and eggs, as well as sheep or goat's meat, provided some variety.

That is the picture of meat distribution discovered in the excavation of even the larger houses. In just one year's explorations of the House of the Vestals, for example, some 250 identifiable animal bones were found (more than 1500 could not be identified). Almost a third of them were from pigs, just over 10 per cent from sheep or goats, a mere 2 per cent from cows. This is a rough-and-ready figure, probably under-representing some classes of evidence (a total of twelve identifiable chicken bones seems implausibly small); and the large number of 'unidentifieds' necessarily puts a question mark over any firm conclusions. Nonetheless, it fits nicely with the pattern of evidence we have from throughout the Roman world that pork was the standard meat; the pig discovered at the Villa Regina (p. 158) would have been destined for the dinner table.

The basic diet of ordinary Pompeians is vividly illustrated by a neatly written

list, scratched into the atrium wall of a house, with connecting bar, in the centre of the city. As usual with such graffiti there is no explanation of its purpose, but it appears to be a list, with prices, of food (and a few other essentials) bought on a series of eight days in an unknown month of an unknown year, which can hardly be very long before the eruption. Presumably it represents an attempt by someone – whether resident in the house or a visitor – to keep track of his, or conceivably her, recent expenditure. We cannot now decode all the Latin terms for the purchases: the *sittule* which cost '8 *asses*' (there were 4 *asses* to one *sesterce*) may have been a bucket; the *inltynium* at the cost of 1 *as* may possibly have been a lamp; the *hxeres* at 1 *denarius* (or 16 *asses*) may have been dried fruit or nuts – and, if so, rather expensive.

If it is a full record of a week's shopping (and that is a big if), it suggests a dreary diet, unless whoever it was had other foodstuffs in store, or was growing his own. Everyday he bought bread, one or more of three different types: 'bread', 'coarse bread' and 'bread for the slave'. On the first day of the list, 8 *asses* were spent on 'bread'; on the second day, 8 on 'bread' and 2 on 'bread for the slave'; on the final day, 2 *asses* went on both 'bread' and 'coarse bread'. The 'bread for the slave' may have been either an accounting category, or it may refer to a particular kind of loaf; but it was not the same as 'coarse bread', since on one of the days in question both were purchased. Either way, the list not only gives us a glimpse into the range of different products made by a Pompeian bakery, but also underlines the importance of bread as a staple of the average Pompeian diet. At 54 *asses* (or 13½ *sesterces*) in total, it was the biggest item in the week's expenditure.

After that came oil, bought on three days, at a total of 40 *asses*, and wine, also bought on three days, for 23 *asses* in all. The more occasional, or less expensive, purchases ranged from 'sausage' (for 1 *as*) and cheese (bought on four days, in two varieties, but for just 13 *asses* in all) to onions (5 *asses*), leeks (1 *as*), whitebait (2 *asses*) and possibly – or so the word hints – something bovine (*bubella*, for 1 *as*). It is basically a diet of bread, oil, wine and cheese, with a few extras thrown in, but hardly any meat. A couple of other, shorter, lists which also appear to record food purchases confirm that general picture. Both list bread. One includes wine (1 *as*), cheese (1 *as*), oil (1 *as*), lard (3 *asses*) and pork (4 *asses*). The other, which may reflect a recent trip to the vegetable market, has cabbage, beetroot, mustard, mint and salt (all at 1 *as*, except the pricey cabbage at 2).

It is easy to feel romantic about the simple and healthy diet that these lists seem to represent. Indeed Roman poets, a comfortably off crowd whatever their





protestations of poverty, often waxed lyrical about the wholesome fare of the peasant. Cheap local plonk, they crowed, and some simple bread and cheese, was better than a banquet if the company was right. So indeed it might have been. But the eating habits of the ordinary Pompeian were a very far cry from the image of Roman dining in modern movies, or even from the image of dining displayed on the walls of Pompeii itself. I suspect that, if we are honest, most of us, given the choice, would prefer to dine with Trimalchio.

## *Café society*

The best way to escape a diet of bread, cheese and fruit, eaten in small lodgings over a shop or workshop, where there were limited or no facilities for cooking anything more interesting, was to eat out. Pompeii has long been thought of as a cheap café culture, with bars, taverns and *thermopolia* (as they are often called in modern guidebooks, though this was certainly not the standard ancient term) lining the streets, catching the passing trade – from visitors with time on their hands to local residents with nowhere nice of their own to be. In fact the masonry counters facing the pavements, with large jars (*dolia*) set into them and display stands behind, are one of the most familiar elements in the Pompeian street scene (Plate 4).

Often brightly decorated, these counters run the gamut of Pompeian decorative taste: sometimes faced with a nice patchwork of coloured marble, sometimes elegantly painted in flower patterns, sometimes featuring lusty phallic images. The façades of the buildings might carry signs or enticing advertisements for what lay inside. One bar near the Amphitheatre, with a small vineyard attached, sported a wonderful phoenix on its exterior wall, next to the slogan: 'The phoenix is happy and so can you be'. This is the bar owned by Euxinus, 'Mr Hospitality' (p. 20). It is nice to think of him advertising the warm welcome at his bar with a painting of the mythical bird that rose from the ashes. What better way to parade the kind of 'pick me up' you would find inside at Bar Phoenix.

There are over 150 such establishments so far discovered in the excavations at Pompeii (with estimates for the whole city rising well above 200). It is easy to get the impression of a town crammed full of fast-food joints serving, from the *dolia* set in the counters, wine and filling stews to a hungry populace – albeit in an atmosphere less 'family-friendly' than the modern McDonald's. For Roman writers certainly tend to portray such bars and taverns as shady premises, associated with a range of vices that went beyond drunkenness and the over-

consumption of cheap food. They were said to be places of sex, prostitution, gambling and crime, run by unscrupulous landlords, who were crooks and cheats.

The poet Horace, for example, writes of the bailiff of his country estate longing for the disreputable pleasures of the town: 'the brothel and the greasy tavern', a no doubt significant pairing and a hint at the type of fare on offer. Juvenal, in what is admittedly an extravagant satire, conjures up the image of a bar at the Roman port of Ostia filled with all kinds of unsavoury types, from thieves, murderers and hangmen to coffin makers and the eunuch priests of the goddess Cybele taking time off to get drunk. Emperors too seem to have thought that bars were in need of legislative control. Nero is said to have forbidden the sale of anything cooked apart from vegetables and beans; Vespasian limited it to just beans. Though how effective these bans were – and how exactly they were supposed to improve the moral climate – is unclear.

Sex, prostitution, gambling and crime: all these were certainly present in Pompeii, whether in bars or elsewhere. But the reality of much tavern life was less lurid and more varied than those upper-class Roman authors and lawmakers – always ready to brand places of harmless popular pleasures as morally disreputable – would suggest. What has been uncovered in Pompeii presents a rather more complicated and diverse picture of these establishments than is often allowed.

For a start, were there really 200 bars in the town? Reckoning the population of the city at around 12,000, that would mean one for every 60 inhabitants, whether men, women, slaves or babies. Of course, the resident population may not be a particularly meaningful figure here. For food and drink outlets would cater for many visitors: for sailors from the port, for those who had come in from the countryside for a day, or for those stopping off on some longer journey by road. A town is always likely to have facilities for more than those who live there permanently. All the same, 200 seems a considerable over-provision (and hardly a money-spinner for the landlords), especially when you take into account all those people who were unlikely to have made heavy use of the bars – many of the slaves, for example, or the upper-class ladies.

The fact is that a good number of what we now label as 'bars' (or whatever sub-category of 'tavern' or 'inn' we prefer to call them) can have been nothing of the sort. Their counters, inset *dolia* and display racks would certainly have been for selling something, but it could have been a whole variety of products, not necessarily food and drink for instant, on-the-spot consumption. The chances





are, in other words, that some of these bars were really grocery shops or the like, selling nuts, lentils and beans from their counters.

Indeed, even when the establishment is certainly a bar, the conventional picture of mine host ladling wine and stew out of the large jars set in the counter cannot be correct. These jars were made of porous pottery. There is no sign that they were sealed with pitch. And it would have been extremely difficult to clean them or even to get the last scraps of any liquid content out of them. In nearby Herculaneum, where traces of their contents more often survive, it seems they were filled with dry goods – dried fruit, beans or chick-peas – some of which at least might have been sold as snacks. The wine was stored in jars on the floor or in racks on the wall, as the occasional remains of fixings and supports suggest, and presumably decanted directly into jugs for serving. Hot food would have been cooked up on a separate stove and served from the pan.

Quite how disreputable these places were is a moot point. The attempts to detect some rudimentary zoning in the urban layout of the city, and to link the bars and the brothels to areas of 'deviant behaviour' away from the formal, public and ceremonial areas of the city, are only partly convincing. It is true, as we saw in Chapter 2, that there are fewer in the immediate vicinity of the Forum than in other busy areas of the town (canny landlords would obviously try to choose a location with maximum access to potential trade). But not only is their relative absence partly illusory (three, as we noted, once stood where the modern restaurant is), but all kinds of factors, such as property prices or rent, may be at work here too. That said, there is no doubt – as we shall see by taking a look at one or two – that bars were associated with the combined pleasures of food, alcohol and sex.

The women whose names appeared (and were in some cases erased) in the election slogans on the wall of the bar on the Via dell'Abbondanza (p. 191) probably worked as barmaids or waitresses inside: Asellina, Zmyrina, Aegle and Maria. This was only partly excavated in the early twentieth century, and we do know how far its facilities extended beyond the single room we now see – if there were four barmaids, presumably it extended some way. But nonetheless the surviving decoration and the collection of objects so far unearthed on its premises give us a good impression of the ambience and equipment of a Pompeian bar.

Outside the lower part of the walls were painted red, with the electoral slogans above that. There is no obvious shop sign or advertisement on the façade, but on the street corner, a couple of doors away, a painting of some smart bronze drinking vessels must have been meant to alert potential customers to a bar in sight. The bar has a wide opening onto the street, though it is partly blocked by the

79. With bells on ...? This extraordinary phallic lamp hung over the entrance to a bar. It provided some light at night, and must have jangled, like wind-chimes, in the breezes. The little statue in the centre is just over 15 centimetres tall.

L-shaped counter: a solid masonry structure, painted red on its sides and covered on top with a patchwork of marble fragments. Four *dolia* are set into it, and at the end is a small oven, with a bronze container built in, presumably for heating water – the ancient equivalent of having a kettle on the boil. The wine jars were stacked against the wall behind the counter, where (to judge from the find-spots of the various objects) there was a wooden shelf carrying more of the bar equipment. At the back of the room, stairs led to an upper level.

Customers were greeted by a bronze lamp that hung over the counter on the street side (Ill. 79). This ingenious creation was so shocking to the original excavators that they chose not to illustrate it when they first published the finds. For the lamp itself is attached to a small bronze figure of a pygmy, largely naked, with an enormous phallus almost as big as himself. Although his right arm is damaged, he would probably have been holding a knife, as if making to cut off his vast penis, which is itself already growing another mini-member from its tip. To cap it all, six bells dangle from different parts of the whole ensemble. One of several such objects found in Pompeii or nearby (which is how we can be fairly certain about the knife), hanging over the counter it acted as a combination of lamp, wind-chimes and service bell. Welcome to the world of the bar?

This was a night-time, as well as a day-time world, to judge from the seven





other pottery lamps found in the single room (one an elegant specimen in the shape of a foot). The rest of the objects discovered were a mixture of the practical and homely, with some little touches of luxury and whimsy. There was a good collection of bronze jars, for water or wine, as well as a bronze funnel which must have been an essential piece of equipment for decanting the wine from the storage vessels to the servers. So characteristic an accessory of the bar was it that a funnel had its place among the other drinking paraphernalia in the painted advertisement on the corner. Glass seems to have been the material of choice for drinking vessels – in general a much more common presence on Pompeian tables than we tend to imagine, misled by its relatively low rate of survival. Not only did it often smash in the eruption itself, but it has had bad luck in modern times too. Several of the glass vessels from this bar, in fact, were destroyed in the Second World War, but the finds originally included a nice set of delicate glass bowls and beakers (as well as a mysterious mini-*amphora* in glass, with a hole in the bottom, perhaps for dropping tiny quantities of special flavouring into water or wine). The utensils were completed with some cheaper pottery cups and plates and an engaging pair of jugs (one in the shape of a cockerel, the other of a fox) and a knife or two.

For the rest, there are enough surviving traces to show that the whole place was originally less bare than it appears now. Bone fittings and hinges hint at the presence of some wooden furniture, cupboards perhaps, or storage boxes. The recent takings were also discovered: 67 coins in all, a few (totalling just over 30 *sesterces*) in higher denominations, the rest in *asses*, two-*as* pieces or tiny quarter-*asses*. From their exact find-spots, it seems that the counter service was mostly dealing in *asses*; a couple were even found in the *dolia* – which might hint at another use for these jars in the counter. Most of the higher denominations had been put away on the shelf behind. This amount of cash fits well with other evidence we have for the prices at a Pompeian bar. A graffito at another establishment suggests that you could get plonk (a glass? a pitcher?) for 1 *as*, something better for 2 *asses* and top-notch Falernian wine for 4 *asses*, or 1 *sesterce* (though, if Pliny is to be trusted when he says that you could set Falernian alight with a flame, then it must have been more like brandy than wine, until it was mixed with water). Apart from the welcoming pygmy, the nearest we get to any signs of depravity are the fragments of a couple of mirrors.

But it is the behaviour of the staff and customers that counts; and you cannot necessarily reconstruct the conduct within from the physical surroundings. We get a precious glimpse of the atmosphere of a bar, people and all, from two series

of paintings in two other drinking establishments in the town – where the images on the walls were obviously meant to entertain the customers with scenes of the 'bar life' they were enjoying. Humorous, parodic, idealising, though these may be, they are our best guide to Pompeian café culture.

The first series is from the so-called Inn (or Bar) of Salvius ('Mr Safe Haven'), a small establishment on a desirable corner site in the city centre: four images, originally running along one wall of the main front room, opposite the counter, now in the safety of the Naples Museum (Plate 13). On the left, a man and a woman – both brightly clad, she in a yellow cloak, he in a red tunic – enjoy a rather awkwardly posed kiss. Above the figures is the caption 'I don't want to ... [the key word is sadly lost] with Myrtalis'. Whatever the man did not want to do with Myrtalis, or who she was, we shall never know. Perhaps this is a vignette of the fickleness of passion, much the same then as now: 'I don't want to hang around with Myrtalis any more, I'm getting off with this girl.' Or perhaps, given the stiffness of the pose, this girl *is* Myrtalis and the point is that the man is none too keen on the encounter.

In the next scene, a couple of drinkers are getting served by a waitress, but there's competition for the wine. One of them is saying, 'Here', the other, 'No it's mine.' The serving woman isn't going to get involved: 'Whoever wants it, take,' she says to them. Then, as if to taunt them by offering it to another customer, says, 'Oceanus, come and have a drink.' This is not deferential service; and the waitress is more than ready to answer back. Drinking is followed by a game of dice in the next scene, and another argument is brewing. A couple of men are sitting at a table. One shouts, 'I've won', while the other objects, 'It's not a three, it's a two.' By the final scene in the series, they have come to blows and abuse: 'You scum, I had the three, I won', 'No, come on, cocksucker, I did.' It is too much for the landlord, who throws them out. 'If you want to fight, go outside,' he says in the usual landlord's way. The customers, as they looked at the paintings, were presumably supposed to get the message.

The paintings suggest a familiar and slightly edgy mixture of sex, drink and play, but no terrible moral turpitude: some kissing, plenty of tipsy banter (but hardly the vomiting we saw in the dining-room images), a row over a game getting a bit out of hand, and a landlord who doesn't want his bar trashed. We find much the same kind of pictures in the other decorated bar a few blocks away, also on a good corner site and usually now called after its location, the Bar on the Via di Mercurio. This had a back room with a direct entrance onto the street, and presumably waitress service from the counter next door to four or five tables,

80. Life in the bar. This nineteenth-century drawing shows four men around a table, enjoying a drink, served by a diminutive waiter. Above them hang some of the bar's food supplies.

maximum. It was on the walls of this room that the paintings were set, at just the right height to be enjoyed by someone sitting at a table. There are captions to some of them, not here painted as part of the original design, but graffiti scratched on by the customers.

Once again we find men (this does seem to be a world of *male* drinking) having their glasses replenished by willing, or not so willing, servers. In one painting a waiter (or waitress, it's hard to tell) is topping up a glass that a customer holds out. Someone has scratched above his head 'Give me a little cold water' – to mix, that is, with the wine in the glass. In another similar scene, the scrawled caption reads: 'Another cup of Setian', referring to the wine that had been the favourite of the emperor Augustus, and was reputed to be especially nice when chilled with snow. There are scenes of gambling here too (Plate 6), and one particularly evocative view of the inside of a bar (Ill. 80). A group of what seem to be travellers (a couple are wearing distinctive hooded cloaks) are sitting round a table having a meal. Above them is one solution to the storage problem in these small places: a selection of food, including sausages and herbs, hangs from nails attached to a shelf, or even to some kind of framework suspended from the ceiling.

But there is a strikingly different theme in a painting that once decorated the end wall of this room, long since lost or destroyed (all except a couple of remaining human feet and shins), and known only from nineteenth-century engravings (Plate 11). It apparently shows an extraordinary balancing act. A man and an almost naked woman perch on a pair of tightropes, each holding or drinking from a large glass of wine. And as if that wasn't difficult enough, the man simultaneously inserts his large penis into the woman from behind. In fact, it is something

of a relief to discover that the original picture was not quite as weird as this engraving makes it seem. For more than likely the whole tightrope element was introduced by the modern artist, who mistook the faint traces of the painter's guidelines, or possibly painted shadows, for this ingenious contraption. But even minus that particular bit of the balancing act, it is a provocative contrast to the decorous kiss from the other bar. What does it represent? Some archaeologists have thought it a scene drawn from a raunchy act in the local theatre (and so the large penis might be a pantomime-style appendage). Others, bearing in mind that the companion pictures are all of tavern life, conclude that this must be one of the activities you would find in the bar itself – whether it's a do-it-yourself cabaret, or something the drinkers might end up doing (or hope to end up doing) with the barmaids by the end of the evening.

Does this painting suggest that we should take the accusations of Roman writers more seriously? Certainly, in addition to the eating and drinking, gaming and flirtatious banter, there are many hints that the sexual encounters in at least some of these bars went beyond kissing. On the outside wall of one bar, for example, a small graffito (written entirely within a large letter O of an electoral slogan) reads: 'I fucked the landlady'. In others, we find women's names written on the wall in a clearly erotic context and sometimes with a price: 'Felicla the slave 2 *asses*', 'Successa the slave girl's a good lay', and even what has been taken to be a price list, 'Acria 4 *asses*, Epafra 10 *asses*, Firma 3 *asses*'.

We have to be careful in interpreting this kind of material. If today we were to see 'Tracy is a whore' or 'Donna sucks you off for a fiver' daubed up at a bar or bus shelter, we would not automatically assume that either of them was actually a prostitute. Nor would we assume that 'a fiver' was an accurate reflection of the prices charged for these sexual services in the area. They are just as likely to be insults as facts. So too in Pompeii – despite the attempts by some over-optimistic modern scholars to use evidence like this to construct lists of Pompeian prostitutes or even to work out an average price for the job. In fact that 'price list' may be nothing of the sort. The inclusion of *asses* is a modern addition; the original has simply three names with a number.

Yet the clustering of explicitly erotic scribble around some bars cannot be explained away, especially when it is combined with matching decorations. It has led to the conclusion that, while some drinking establishments in the town were just that, with a bit of sex on the side, some were not so much bars as fully fledged brothels. Both the bar on the Via dell'Abbondanza that we looked at and the Bar on the Via di Mercurio have often been identified as such: the first largely on the

Plate 13. Almost a 'comic strip' series of paintings on the wall of the Inn of Salvius (p. 230). The couple in the first scene used to be taken for two men until cleaning revealed that the left hand figure was female. Although the final scene is damaged, it is clear enough that that landlord is laying down the law: 'If you want to fight, go outside.'

Plate 14. Among the gathering of humans and gods that makes up the Villa of the Mysteries frieze (p. 132), a boy reads out from a scroll, watched over by a woman, perhaps his mother. Part of the visual 'joke' lies in that fact that we the viewers can neither see nor hear what he is reading out.

Plate 15. The face of the defeated king Darius from the 'Alexander Mosaic' in the House of the Faun (p. 28).

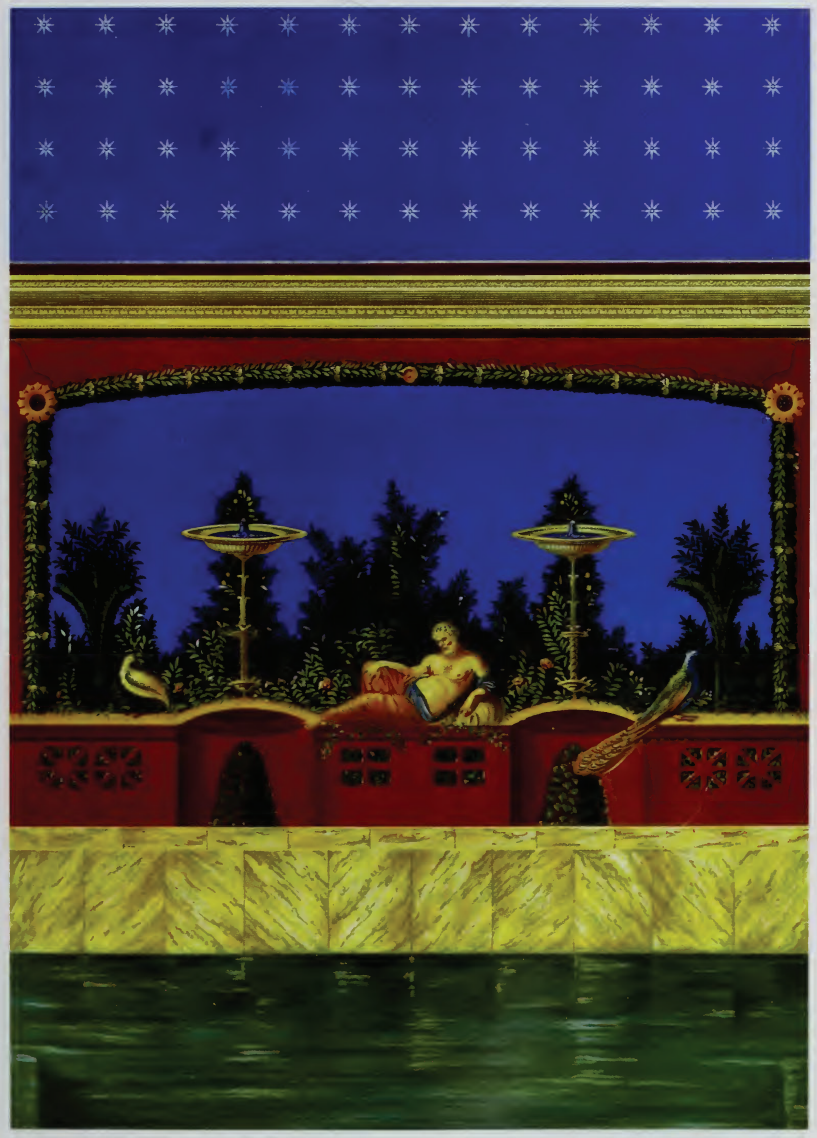


Plate 16. The baths offered a glimpse of luxury to the ordinary Pompeian bather. This nineteenth-century painting recreates the ambience of the Stabian Baths (p. 246).

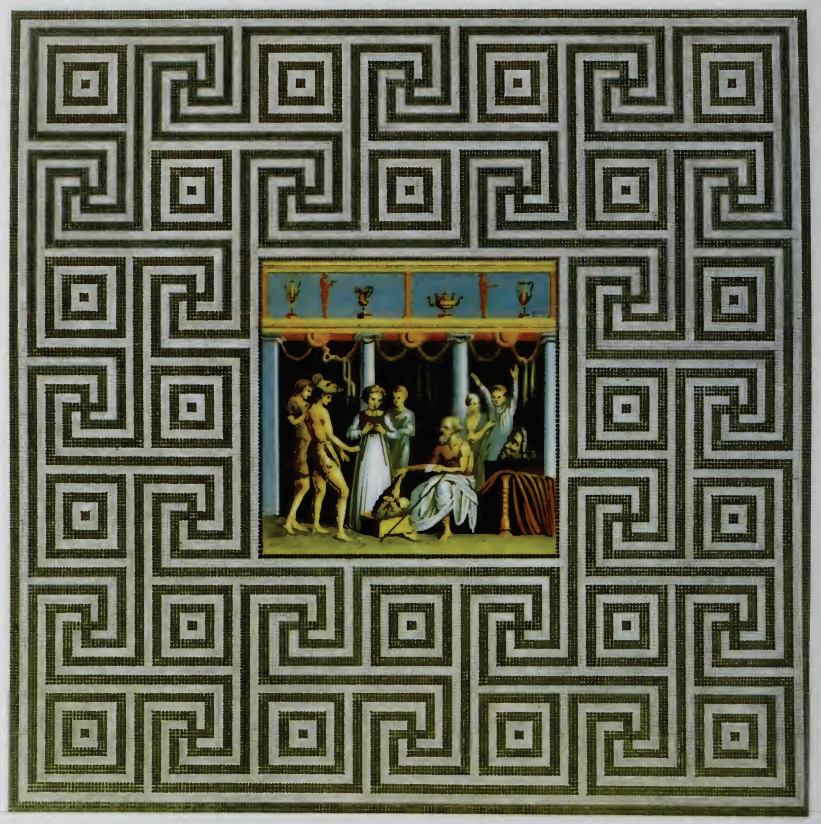


Plate 17. In the centre (*tablinum*) of the House of the Tragic Poet (Fig 6), this mosaic depicted a group of actors preparing to go on stage. The performance is to be a satyr play, hence the thespians are squeezing into goat costumes (pp. 254–5).

Plate 18. A painting from the sacred precinct of Isis in a nineteenth-century copy. The Greek priestess Io, one of Zeus' lovers, is received in Egypt by the goddess Isis. According to the myth, Io had been hounded by the jealous Hera, Zeus' wife – who at one stage had turned her into a heifer, hence the horns. She is supported by a river god (p. 306).

Plate 19. The garden wall of the House of the Ancient Hunt, named after this painting.

Plate 20. A nineteenth-century version of a miniature frieze in the House of the Vettii, showing cupids as metal workers.

Plate 21. Here, in the original paintwork from the House of the Vettii, the cupids have a chariot crash. (p. 126).

Plate 22. A vista onto a foreign world. In this painting, pygmies get into all kinds of adventures. One is riding a crocodile, another is apparently being eaten by a hippo, though help is at hand.

Plate 23. A composite image of the walls of the House of the Tragic Poet. On the lower left Helen departs on her journey to Troy. On the right, in another moment from the Trojan War, the prisoner Briseis is taken from Achilles to be given to Agamemnon (pp. 147–8).



basis of the pygmy lamp, the second on the basis of the tightrope walkers (and perhaps another painting of which only a head survives, but which might originally have shown a couple making love). On some recent calculations, these are just two of a grand total of thirty-five brothels in the town. Pompeii, in other words, was a town in which there was roughly one brothel for every seventy-five free adult males. Even adding in the visitors, the country dwellers and the slaves who might have chosen to spend their pocket money in that way, it seems at first sight an over-generous ratio – or a level of sexual supply that would justify the worst fears of Christian moralists about pagan excess.

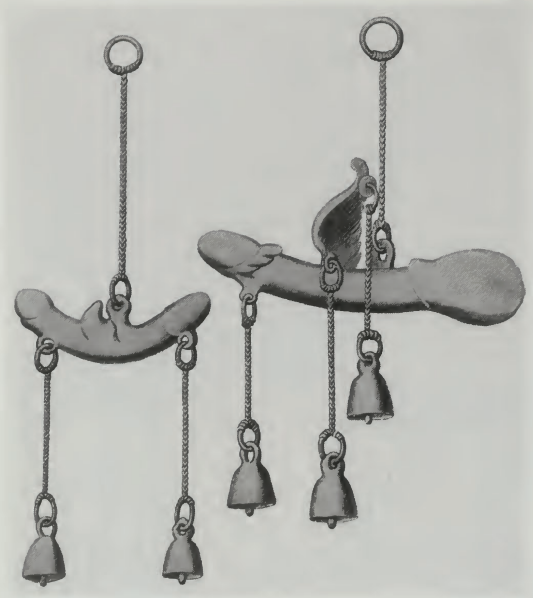
That, in a nutshell, is the 'Pompeian Brothel Problem'. Can we really believe that there were as many as thirty-five brothels in this small town? Or was there, as the most sober estimates have it, just one? How do we recognise a brothel when we find one? How do you tell the difference between a brothel and a bar?

### *Visiting the brothel*

Roman sexual culture was different from our own. Women, as we have seen at Pompeii, were much more visible in the Roman world than in many other parts of the ancient Mediterranean. They shopped, they could dine with the men, they disposed of wealth and made lavish benefactions. Yet it was still a man's world in sex as it was in politics. Power, status and good fortune were expressed in terms of the phallus. Hence the presence of phallic imagery in almost unimaginable varieties all round the town.

This is one of the most puzzling, if not disconcerting, aspects of Pompeii for modern visitors. In earlier generations scholars reacted by removing many of these objects from public view, putting them in the 'Secret Cabinet' of the museum at Naples or otherwise under wraps. (When I first visited the site in the 1970s, the phallic figure at the entrance to the House of the Vettii was covered up, only to be revealed on request.) More recently the fashion has been to deflect attention from their sexuality by referring to them as 'magical', 'apotropaic' or 'averters of the evil eye'. But sexual they cannot avoid being. There are phalluses greeting you in doorways, phalluses above bread ovens, phalluses carved into the surface of the street and plenty more phalluses with bells on – and wings (Ill. 81). One of the most imaginative creations, which once jingled in the Pompeian breeze, is the lusty phallus-bird, a combination (I guess) of a joke and an unashamed celebration of the essential ingredient of manhood.

In this world, the main functions of respectable, well-off married women



81. The 'phallus bird' was one of the Roman world's most extraordinary mythical creatures. Impressive, powerful – or just silly?

– that is, the occupants of the larger houses at Pompeii – were twofold: first the dangerous job of bearing children (childbirth was a big killer in ancient Rome, as it was in every period up to the modern era); and second the management of house and household. One tombstone from Rome famously hits the nail on the head. It is a epitaph put up by a husband to his wife Claudia. It praises her beauty, her conversation, her elegance; but the bottom line is that 'She bore two sons ... she kept the house, she made wool.' The lives of poorer women might in practice have been more varied – whether as shopkeeper, landlady or moneylender – but I doubt that the underlying assumptions about their role were very much different. This was not a society where women were in control of their lives, their destinies or their sexualities. The stories told by Roman poets and historians of racy, licentious and apparently 'liberated' women of the capital are part fantasy, part applicable only to such truly exceptional characters as those in the imperial house itself. The empress Livia was not a typical Roman woman.

For elite men, the basic message was that sexual penetration correlated with pleasure and power. Sexual partners might be of either sex. There was plenty of male-with-male sexual activity in the Roman world, but only the very faintest hints that 'homosexuality' was seen as an exclusive sexual preference, let alone





lifestyle choice. Unless they died too young, all Roman men married. Sexual fidelity to a wife was not prized or even particularly admired. In the search for pleasure, the wives, daughters and sons of other elite men were off-limits (and crossing that boundary might be heavily punished by law). The bodies of slaves and, up to a point, of social inferiors, both men and women, were there for the taking. It was not simply that no one minded if a man slept with his slave. That was, in part at least, what slaves were *for*. Poorer citizens, with a less-ready supply of servile sexual labour, would no doubt use prostitutes instead. As with dining, the rich provided for themselves 'in-house', while the poor looked outside.

Not that this made for a carefree sexual paradise, even for the men. As in most aggressively phallic cultures, the power of the phallus goes hand in hand with anxieties – whether about the sexual fidelity of one's wife (and so the paternity of one's children) or about one's own capacity to live up to the masculine ideal. In Rome itself, insinuations that a man had played the part of a woman, that he had been penetrated by another man, could be enough to blight a political career. In fact, many of the insults that scholars have sometimes taken as signs of Roman disapproval of homosexuality as such are directed only at those whose played the passive part. And, to return to Pompeii, whatever other associations that tiny bronze pygmy might have had, caught for ever in the act of attacking his own giant penis, it surely exposes some kind of sexual unease. Funny, fantastic, carnivalesque, it may have been. But it is hard to escape a more uncomfortable message too.

Nor is it the case that individual relations between Roman men and women were as unnuanced and mechanical as my stark summary might suggest. All kinds of relationships of care and tenderness flourished, whether between husband and wife, master and slave, lover and beloved. A expensive gold bracelet, for example, found on the body of a woman at a settlement just outside Pompeii is inscribed with the words 'From the master to his slave girl'. It reminds us that affection can exist even within these structures of exploitation (though how far that affection was reciprocated by the 'slave girl' concerned, we of course do not know). And the walls of Pompeii, both inside and out, carry plenty of vivid testimony to passion, jealousy and heartbreak with which it is hard for us not to identify, even if anachronistically: 'Marcellus loves Praestina and she doesn't give a damn', 'Restitutus has cheated on lots of girls'. All the same, the basic structure of Roman sexual relations was a fairly brutal one, and not one that was female-friendly.

Within this context prostitution had a place both on the streets (or in the

brothel) and in the Roman imagination. For the Roman government, prostitution could be a source of revenue. The emperor Caligula, for example, is said to have imposed a tax on prostitutes – though how exactly it was levied, where it was applied and how long it remained in force is anyone's guess. Revenue apart, the main concern of the authorities was not to police the day-to-day activities of prostitutes but to draw a firm line between them and 'respectable' citizens, especially the wives of the Roman elite. Prostitution belonged to a motley group of occupations (including gladiators and actors) that were officially judged *infamis* or 'disgraceful', a stigma which carried with it certain legal disadvantages. Some prostitutes would anyway be slaves, but even those who were free citizens did not, for example, enjoy the protection against corporal punishment that usually went with Roman citizenship. Pimps and male prostitutes (who were, by the logic of Roman sexuality, effectively female) could not stand for public office. Tradition even had it that women prostitutes were not allowed to wear standard women's clothes, but dressed in a man's toga. This was a crossing of gender boundaries that firmly distinguished them from their respectable counterparts.

Prostitutes loomed perhaps even larger in the Roman imagination than in reality, from images of 'happy hookers' to the tragic victims of abduction sold off for sexual labour or the objects of public abomination or derision. In Roman stage comedies of the third and second centuries BCE, prostitution is a major theme. One of the characteristic romantic plots of these plays concerns the young man of good family who has fallen in love with a slave prostitute, controlled by a malevolent pimp. Despite their love, marriage is impossible, even if the young man could raise the money to buy her, because his father would not countenance such a wife for his son. But there is a happy ending. For it turns out that the object of his desire was actually a respectable girl all along: she had been the victim of a kidnapping and sold to the pimp; so she was not a 'real' prostitute after all. In comedy, at least, we are allowed to glimpse the awkward truth that the boundary between respectability and prostitution might not be quite so clear as we thought.

It is against this background that archaeologists have tried to pinpoint the prostitutes of Pompeii, and to identify the physical remains of the brothels. The total number they come up with depends entirely on the criteria they choose to adopt. For some the presence of erotic paintings can be enough to indicate a place for commercial sex. So, on this interpretation, a small room near the kitchen of the House of the Vettii, decorated with three paintings of a couple, man and woman, making love on a bed, is a dedicated place of prostitution – a money-





spinning sideline for the owners (or for their cook). It can be linked for good measure to a tiny scratched graffito in the front porch of the house which may offer the services of 'Eutychis' for 2 *asses*. Alternatively, of course, the room has just been decorated in this way to please a favourite cook (whose lodgings, next to the kitchen, it may well have been), and the scrawled information (or insult) about Eutychis is nothing to do with it at all.

Others place the qualifying standard for a brothel rather higher. One scholar lists three conditions that more reliably indicate that we are dealing with a place primarily used for sex for profit: a masonry bed in a small room easily accessible to the public; paintings with explicitly sexual scenes; and a cluster of graffiti of the 'I fucked here' type. Needless to say, if you require all of these conditions to be met, the number of brothels in the town goes down – to one. On this argument, the upstairs or backrooms of bars might well have provided a place where some people sometimes paid for sex, but that is different from a brothel, in the strict sense of the word.

There are all kinds of traps for the archaeologist here. We have already noted the difficulties in interpreting the erotic graffiti and in deciding if the plain single rooms with masonry beds and doors directly from the streets were places of prostitution or just very small lodgings for the poor (why, after all, must we imagine that stone beds were particularly suited to prostitution?). But the key question concerns the difference between the dedicated brothel and any of the many other places in the town where sex and money were not kept entirely separate.

We have probably been rather too easily taken in by the Romans' own attempts to insist that prostitutes were a clearly separate class of women (or men) and by the institutional image of the brothel and pimp given by Roman comedy. Most of the 'prostitutes' in Pompeii were probably the barmaids or the landladies (or the flower-sellers, or the pig-keepers, or the weavers for that matter) who sometimes slept with customers after closing-time, sometimes for money, sometimes on the premises, sometimes not. I very much doubt that many of them really wore togas (a classic piece of Roman elite male myth-making), thought of themselves as prostitutes or defined their place of work as a brothel – any more than the modern massage parlour is a brothel, or a hotel where, if you ask, you can rent a room by the hour. The search for the Pompeian brothel is, in other words, a category mistake. Sex for money was almost as diffused through the town as eating, drinking or sleeping.

Except in one case: a building five minutes' walk east of the Forum, just behind

82. This image of love-making from the brothel is set in more luxurious surroundings than the brothel itself seems to have offered. The bed is comfortably appointed, with a thick pillow. Next to it, on the left, stands a lamp, a hint that we are to imagine that the scene is set at night time.

the Stabian Baths, which meets all of the toughest criteria there have been for such an identification. It has five small cells, each with its own built-in bed and a series of explicitly erotic paintings, showing couples making love in a variety of different positions (Ill. 82). It still contains almost 150 graffiti, including a good number of the 'I fucked here' type (though not all are of that kind: one person at least was moved to scratch a quotation from Virgil). It is a rather dark and dingy place. Set on a corner, it has a door onto both streets (Fig. 17). What is now the main entrance in the one-way system used to cope with the crowds of tourists was probably the main entrance in antiquity too. If you enter this way you find yourself in a wide corridor, with three cubicles on the right and two on the left. At the end of the corridor, a masonry screen blocks the view of what lies beyond. That turns out to be the latrine – so clearly some care had been taken to ensure privacy for toilet-users, or alternatively to ensure that incoming clients were not greeted by the sight of another customer on the toilet.

The walls are mostly painted white, in what had been a relatively recent redecoration before the eruption (the imprint of a coin of 72 CE has been found in the plaster). High up above the level of the entrance to the cubicles are the erotic paintings, which show men making love to women from behind, underneath, on





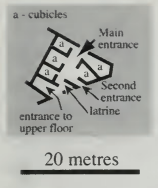



Figure 17. The brothel. Nothing fancy here. The brothel was small and cramped. Apart from the lavatory, there was nothing but five tiny cubicles off a hallway. Where the money changed hands is far from clear – as is the use of the upper floor. Was it a separately rented apartment, or did it house the pimp and the girls?

top, and so on. There are just two significant variants. One painting shows a single male figure with not just one, but two large erect phalluses (on the 'two is better than one' principle, presumably); another shows a man on a bed and a woman standing by his side, not engaging in lovemaking, but looking at some kind of tablet – perhaps meant to be, in a nice self-referential joke, an erotic painting.

The cubicles themselves are small, with short masonry beds, which would (one hopes) have been covered with cushions and covers, or at least something a bit softer than the hard stone. There is now no sign of any way of screening off the cubicles; but that may well be a consequence of the rough techniques of the 1860s excavators. If the view to the latrine was blocked by a substantial barrier, it is hard not to imagine at least a curtain which could be pulled across these doorways. Most, though not all, of the graffiti comes from inside the cubicles, and it is from these scraps of writing that we get some hints of who used the brothel and how.

The men who came here were not afraid to leave their names on the wall. So far as we can tell, these names include none of the well-known figures of the Pompeian elite. Prostitutes, as we already noted, were probably for those without ready access to the sexual services of their own slaves. The one man who clearly notes his job was an 'ointment seller'. In fact, this collection of graffiti is one of the best indications we have that some command of reading and writing was found widely among the relatively humble people at Pompeii. Most of them sign up as individuals: 'Florus', 'Felix went with Fortunata', 'Posphorus fucked here'. But occasionally, it seems, the customers came on a joint outing: 'Hermeros with Phileteros and Caphisus fucked here'. This was possibly group sex, but more likely a boys' night out.

The prostitutes themselves are harder to place. The names on the walls include a number of Greek or eastern women's names (including, interestingly, a 'Myrtale' (p. 230), which can often indicate slave status. But these may be 'professional' names, assumed for the job, and so tell us nothing about the

real background of the girls concerned. There is no clear evidence of any male prostitutes, though there are some references in the graffiti to sexual practices (such as buggery: in Latin *pedicare*, usually referring to men) which would not absolutely exclude the possibility that men as well as women worked here. Where there is a sign of prices, they are rather above the '2 *asses*' we often find on the walls of bars. One man, for example, claims that he 'had a good fuck for a *denarius* [that is 16 *asses*]'. This may mean that sex on the side with a serving girl came cheaper than in the brothel itself. It could be a further hint that the '2 *asses*' line was more of a conventional insult than a real price.

The layout of the graffiti within the building may tell us even more. One recent study has pointed out that the first two cubicles nearest the main entrance contain between them almost three quarters of the graffiti. Why? Possibly because they were used not just for sex itself, but as waiting rooms, so men had time here to scratch their thoughts and their boasts into the plaster. More likely, and more simply, these were the cubicles next to the street which were used more. You came in and took the first available 'slot'.

How the brothel was organised, we can only guess. Were the girls who worked here slaves with a pimp owner who ran an organised business? Or was it all rather more casual? More freelance? One relevant factor is an upper floor, accessed by a separate entrance on the side street. This had five rooms, one considerably larger than the others, linked by a balcony serving as a corridor between them. There are no fixed beds here, nor erotic paintings nor surviving graffiti of any sort (though there is much less surviving decoration at all). There is nothing to prove what happened on this level. It could have been more prostitution. Or it could have been where the girls lived (and on this model the pimp perhaps occupied the larger room). Alternatively it was not directly linked to the brothel at all, but was a separate rented apartment (address: 'above the brothel'). In which case, the working girls might simply have worked, lived and slept in those small cubicles.

It is, frankly, a rather grim place. And it is hardly improved by the stream of visitors who – since its restoration a few years ago – now make a bee-line for it. It usually proves to offer the tourist only a brief pleasure. It has been calculated that the average visit lasts roughly three minutes. The local guides meanwhile do their best to make it appealing, with not entirely accurate stories about the peculiar encounters that once took place in it. As some have been heard to explain: 'The paintings have a practical purpose. The prostitutes couldn't speak Latin, you see. So the clients had to point to a picture before they went in to let the girls know what they wanted.'





### *A good bath*

A tombstone from Rome, put up some time in the first century CE to an ex-slave, Tiberius Claudius Secundus, by his partner Merope, includes the following piquant observation: 'wine, sex and baths ruin our bodies, but they are the stuff of life — wine, sex and baths'. Tiberius Claudius Secundus had not, in fact, done too badly, for he had lived to be fifty-two years old. But the wry sentiment blazoned here was almost certainly a popular Roman maxim. A version of it turns up, for example, as far away as Turkey: 'Baths, wine and sex make fate come faster'.

So far in this chapter we have looked at the wine and the sex of ancient Pompeii. What about the baths: those three large sets of public bathing complexes in the town (now called, from their locations, the Stabian, Forum and Central Baths) and a number of smaller privately owned commercial establishments, catering to a public or semi-public trade?

Roman bathing was synonymous with Roman culture: wherever the Romans went, so too did Roman baths. Bathing in this sense was not simply a method of washing the body, though cleanliness was one part of its purpose. It was a mixture of a whole range of (for us) different activities: sweating, exercising, steaming, swimming, ball-gaming, sunbathing, being 'scraped' and rubbed down. It was Turkish bathing plus, with all kinds of further optional extras that might be added on, from barber's services to – in the very grandest metropolitan versions – libraries. The bathing complexes that were designed to house all these activities were some of the largest and most elaborate and sophisticated pieces of architecture in the Roman world. In Pompeii, the three main public baths together occupy a space larger than the Forum itself, even though they are tiny by comparison with the vast schemes of the capital. The whole of the Forum Baths at Pompeii would fit easily into the swimming pool of the third-century CE Baths of Caracalla at Rome.

The baths were both a social leveller and one of those places where the inequalities of Roman society were most glaringly on display. Everybody except the very poorest went to the baths, including some slaves – even if they were only acting as retinue for their master. The very richest did have their own private baths at their home, as in the grand House of the Menander at Pompeii. But, as a general rule, the well-off would have shared their bathing with those less fortunate than themselves. In other words, unlike for dining, they went *out* to bathe.

On the one hand, the conventions of bathing brought everyone down to size. Bathing naked, or nearly naked (there is evidence for both practices), the poor

were in principle no different from the wealthy – possibly healthier and of finer physique. This was Roman society on display to itself, without all those usual markers of social, political or economic rank: striped togas, special 'senatorial' sandals or whatever. It was, as one modern historian has put it, 'a hole in the ozone layer of the social hierarchy'.

On the other hand, the stories which Roman writers tell about baths and bathers return time and again to competition, jealousy, anxiety, social differentials and ostentation. This was partly a question of the body beautiful, for both men and women. According to one ancient biographer, the emperor Augustus' mother could not bear to go to the baths ever again, after an unsightly mark appeared on her body when she was pregnant (it was in fact a sign of the divine descent of her son). And the poet Martial wrote a pointed epigram about a man who laughed at those with hernias, presumably in the baths, until he was bathing one day and noticed he had one himself.

But it was also a question again of displaying (and pulling) rank. A notorious incident in the second century BCE involved a consul's wife, who was travelling in Italy and decided that she wanted to use the men's baths in a town not far from Pompeii (the men's suite must have been better appointed than the women's). So not only did she have the men thrown out, but her husband had the local elected *quaestor* flogged for not clearing them out quickly enough, and not keeping the baths themselves clean.

One nice variant on this theme, with a happier ending, concerns the emperor Hadrian. The story is told that when he was visiting the baths one day (for even emperors might bathe in public – or make a point of so doing once in a while) he noticed a retired soldier rubbing his back against the wall. When questioned, the man explained that he could not afford a slave to rub him down. So Hadrian gave him some slaves and the cost of their maintenance. Returning on a later occasion, he found a whole group of men rubbing their backs on the wall. The cue for another act of imperial generosity? No. He suggested that they should rub each other.

There was also some edgy ambivalence about the moral character of the baths. True, many Romans assumed that bathing was good for you, and indeed it might be recommended by doctors. But there was at the same time a strong suspicion that it was a morally corrupting habit. Nakedness, luxury and the pleasures of hot, steamy recreation were in the eyes of many a dangerous combination. It was not only the noise that worried the philosopher Seneca, when he complained about living above a set of baths (p. 108).

Archaeologists have tended to stereotype and normalise Roman baths much





as they have Roman houses. An array of Latin names are applied to the various parts of the cycle of cold and hot rooms: *frigidarium* (cold room), *tepidarium* (warm room), *caldarium* (hot room), *laconicum* (hot sweat room), *apodyterium* (changing room) and so on. These terms were sometimes used by Romans themselves. In fact, an inscription in the Stabian Baths at Pompeii records the installation of a *laconicum* and a *destrictorium* (a scraping room). But they were not the standard everyday words that modern plans and guidebooks suggest. I very much doubt that many Romans would, in practice, have said, 'Meet you in the *tepidarium*.'

Nor was there the kind of fixed procedure in the baths that these impressive Latin terms encourage us to think. Archaeologists are almost always too keen to systematise Roman customs. Although we are often told by experts on the baths that the principle of Roman bathing was to move through progressively hotter rooms, before going back to the beginning and finishing with a cold plunge, there is no firm evidence for that. All kinds of different pathways would have been possible (and, in fact, some experts hold the opposite view that they worked through from hot to cold). Nor is there any reason to suppose that a visit would always have required a couple of hours, minimum, or that visits for men were always in the afternoon. Practice was almost certainly much more varied, procedures much more 'pick and mix', than the modern desire to impose rules and norms would have us believe.

The variety of opportunities and entertainments offered by a relatively large bath complex will become clearer if we take a look at the Stabian Baths at Pompeii (Fig. 18). One of the three main sets of public baths in the centre of the town, these were – like so much else – under repair at the time of the eruption, with only the women's area in full working order. In fact there must have been a certain pressure on bathing space in Pompeii in 79. Of the public baths, only the Forum Baths were operating to capacity. A brand-new set (the Central Baths) were being built to the most up-to-the-minute designs but had not yet been completed. Even the private commercial establishments, which tended to be smaller than those operated by the city, and which might have been more picky about their clientele, were not all up and running. One, for example, had been in ruins for many years (perhaps a commercial failure), and the so-called Sarno Baths on the lower floors of an apartment block (pp. 107–8) were being restored. Those on the Estate of Julia Felix, 'an elegant bath suite for prestige clients' as the rental notice puts it (p. 110), were one of the few in operation – and were presumably, given the likely demand, a nice money spinner.

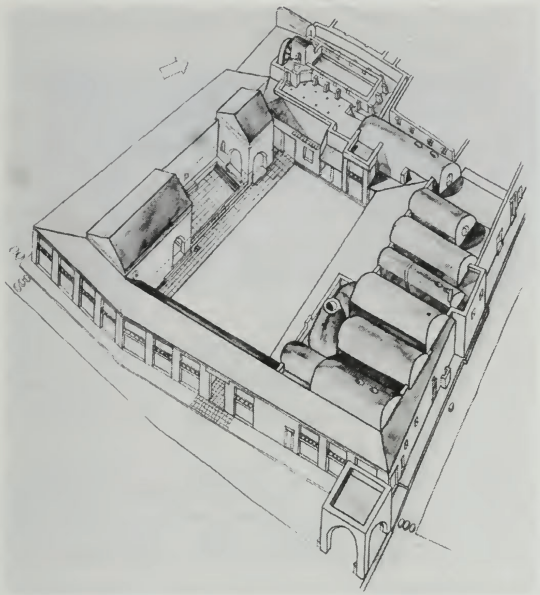
Key
a entrance to men's bathing suite
b men's changing room
c warm room
d hot room
e furnace
f hot room
g warm room
h women's changing room
i plunge pool
j swimming pool
k shops

Figure 18. The Stabian Baths

The Stabian Baths were the oldest in the city, going back long before the Roman colony. The different phases of their construction are very complicated to disentangle (and not helped by the fact that the notes of one major study of the fabric were destroyed in the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War). The very first building on the site, which some archaeologists have dated as early as the fifth century BCE, took the form of an exercise court (*palaestra*) and a row of 'hip baths' in the Greek style. But the baths as we see them now were the result of a major redevelopment in the middle of the second century, with a series of improvements and refurbishments going on right up to the end of the city's life, including the provision of water direct from the aqueduct, rather than from the earlier well (Ill. 83). We assume that they were publicly owned and administered, not only because of their size (it is hard to imagine a complex this large being private enterprise), but also thanks to inscriptions which record the investment of public money: the sundial, with its Oscan text noting that it was set up with the proceeds of the fines; and building of the *laconicum* and *destrictarium* by *duoviri* in the first century BCE, 'out of the money', as the inscription states, 'which they were legally obliged to spend either on games or on a monument'.







83. The Stabian Baths. In the centre of this reconstruction drawing is the open exercise area. On the right are the vaulted rooms which form the men's and women's bathing suites. The Via dell' Abbondanza runs along the front face of the complex (bottom left) – with the large arch, associated with the family of Marcus Holconius Rufus.

The main entrance was from the Via dell'Abbondanza, just near the statue of Marcus Holconius Rufus, where the street widens to form a little piazza. A row of shops fronted the street itself, but going through the vestibule you came into a colonnaded courtyard, which was the exercise (and sitting) area. At some point money may have changed hands. For while some public baths made no charge, others levied a small fee. We do not know which was the case here, but the easiest place to have taken any cash would have been at the entrance to the main bath suite at (*a*).

The layout of the bathing rooms themselves is extremely practical. In the Stabian Baths the heating is provided by a single wood-burning furnace, which was connected to the underfloor heating system or 'hypocaust'. The earliest example of this system to survive in the Roman world (it was probably invented in Campania), this provided a much more powerful way of heating the rooms than the earlier system of braziers, which was still in use at the Forum Baths (Ill. 84). The basic principle was that the floors of the rooms to be heated were raised on small pillars of tile, so providing an air space underneath. This was warmed by the heat of the fire – the nearer to the furnace each room was, the hotter it would become. The arrangement in the Stabian Baths allows two sets of room to

be heated on either side of the fire: two very hot rooms, (*d*) and the smaller (*f*), and two warm rooms, (*c*) and the smaller (*g*).

Why two sets? The smaller set was for women, whose bathing was here segregated from the men's. They did not use the impressive main entrance to the baths on the Via dell'Abbondanza, but entered up a side street through a door, which is said to have carried the painted sign 'Women' (visible soon after the original excavations, it is now completely illegible). Instead of emerging into an airy courtyard, they had to make their way down a long, poky corridor before they reached a place they could perhaps pay to leave their clothes (*h*) and enter their own smaller suite of rooms. This was the arrangement at the Forum Baths too, where there was a second less elaborate series of female bathing rooms. In the Central Baths, no such separate provision was planned: either women would have been excluded, or they would have bathed at separate times, or it would have been that red rag to ancient moralists – mixed bathing.

For the men visiting the Stabian Baths, the choices would have been many. They left their clothes in the changing room, (*b*), a beautifully stuccoed room, where the individual niches for the bathers' belongings still survive (Ill. 85). We may guess that the establishment's staff included a guard for this facility, but Roman writers tell many tales of petty thieving at the baths. Maybe it was better to leave your valuables at home. They could then move outside for all kinds of games and exercise. There was a swimming pool, (*j*), and, if the discovery of a couple of stone balls is significant, perhaps a place where you could play some form of bowls. The oiling and scraping that traditionally went with Roman exercise may have been provided by the visitor's own slaves (brought with him for the purpose), or on a Hadrianic self-help basis. But there may have been staff at the baths for this too – though where the 'scraping down room' built by the *duoviri* was, we do not know. Inside the bath-suite itself, there was the possibility to sweat in the heat, to sit around in the small pools (rather like a modern hot tub), or to plunge into the cold bath, (*i*) – which is reckoned to be a later conversion of the earlier *laconicum*.

For those who lived in small dingy houses, or perched over their workshop, these baths must have been a real People's Palace (Plate 16). Not only were they marvellously spacious, with all the pleasures of swimming and splashing and whatever kind of exercising took your fancy, but they were decorated in lavish style. The barrel vaults of the bathing suite were painted in rich colours, while the sun streamed in dramatically through roundels in the ceilings. Where the sun did not stream, the rooms were kept brightly twinkling with a battery of lamps. In one corridor of the Forum Baths a store of 500 lamps was discovered.