

# **HOMOEROTICISM AND PERFORMANCES: REPRESENTATIONS OF BODIES AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN ANCIENT ROME IN PAINTINGS OF POMPEII**

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## **Abstract**

Among the academic subjects, Ancient Studies are those considered the most conservative. However, through interdisciplinarity (particularly through the dialogue with Archaeology), this field of study has managed to reach more critical perspectives, mainly in researches on love and sexuality. This work keeps a dialogue with the research carried out by the classicist Pedro Paulo Funari, who, in turn, has inspired many Brazilian researchers to break up the normative models, questioning old concepts and patriarchal values to give rise to a more libertarian classical antiquity. After presenting a discussion on gender and sexuality in Ancient Rome, a theoretical debate is proposed. Later on, some paintings of erotic relationships, showing diversified practices (particularly emphasizing homoerotic relationships), found in a suburban bath in the Archaeological Site of Pompeii, are presented to evince how differently individuals interpellated norms, to question the definition of pornography and to deal with the relationships between the images and their contexts.

## **Keywords**

Classical Antiquity; sexuality, Roman Paintings, Roman Baths and Pompeii.

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## **Resumo**

Os estudos da antiguidade, dentre as disciplinas acadêmicas, são aqueles considerados como o mais conservador, no entanto, por meio da interdisciplinaridade, sobretudo a partir do diálogo com a Arqueologia, esta área de conhecimento tem conseguido alcançar perspectivas mais críticas, sobretudo, em pesquisas sobre o amor e a sexualidade. Nesse trabalho, dialogo, em grande parte, com as pesquisas produzidas pelo classicista Pedro Paulo Funari, que, por sua vez, inspirou diversos pesquisadores brasileiros a romper com os modelos normativos, questionando antigos conceitos e valores patriarcais a fim de trazer à tona uma antiguidade clássica mais libertária. Deste modo, apresento algumas discussões a respeito da sexualidade e do gênero na Antiguidade romana, inicialmente, um debate de natureza teórica, e, num segundo momento trago algumas pinturas de relações eróticas com práticas diversificadas, com ênfase particular às relações homoeróticas, encontradas em uma terma suburbana do sítio arqueológico de Pompeia, a fim de evidenciar as diferentes maneiras que os indivíduos interpelavam as normas, bem como questionar as noções de pornográfico e trabalhar as relações das imagens com os seus contextos.

## **Palavras-chave**

Antiguidade Clássica; sexualidade; homoerotismo; pinturas romanas; termas romanas; Pompeia.

## Introduction

*Et quae tanta fuit Romam tibi causa uidendi?  
Libertas, quae, sera, tamen respexit inertem.*

*And what so potent cause took you to Rome? Freedom, which, though belated, cast at length Her eyes upon the sluggard* (Bucolic I, vv. 27-28) – these famous words of Virgil's first Bucolic which inspired the conspirators of the Brazilian State of Minas Gerais comprise the quotation selected by Pedro Paulo Funari to think about the potential of Ancient History to engender critical thinking in the present. However, according to Funari, that past not only inspired the fight for equality and freedom, but also (and more commonly) served to justify the patriarchal and oppressive *status quo* (2014: 17). About the latter, the Brazilian historian Glaydson José da Silva (2007) presents an interesting discussion on how the memory of the Ancient World was deeply linked to questions of national identities. He calls attention to the fact that, during the period comprehended by Modernity, much had been recovered of the Classical Past to justify a supposed cultural heritage attributed to the West. If, on the one hand, Ancient Greece served as a model of civilization and democracy, on the other, regarding the Roman past, its imperialism, military power, literature, buildings and art were highlighted. That is, the use of an oppressive Classical Antiquity is, therefore, much older but much more persistent than the more known and criticized fascist appropriations of the mid-20th century<sup>2</sup>.

Among the so many “uses of the past”, there is a very particular aspect that should be underlined – when turning to Antiquity to search for glorious identities, a series of interpretations and themes of study have been excluded, such as sexuality. Thus, the theme of sexuality, in addition to being a social taboo, has been controlled by different political forms and, consequently, has been seen as something secondary in the Human Sciences field. Only in the last two decades Western societies have started a systematic contestation of normative and homogeneous values dictated by science as a result of philosophical discussions in the mid-1960s, which prompted the revision of concepts and traditional values, such as the regimes of truth instituted on gender relations (Feitosa & Rago, 2008). From that perspective, feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. (Silva, Garraffoni, Funari, Gralha, & Rufino, 2017), in this book, many Brazilian researchers rethink the concepts and interpretive models of the Ancient World, coined in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, reflecting on the role of the past in strategy games and identity affirmations at present. There is a chapter in which the researcher Renata Senna Garraffoni and I write about the construction of the fascist doctrine on the basis of the cult of romanity, in which classical Roman History mashes up with the National Italian History from the excavations of the Archaeological Site of Pompeii, cf. (Garraffoni & Sanfelice, 2017).

theories viewed sexuality as a product of different technologies and institutionalized practices. Both sexuality and gender could not be properties of the bodies, neither would they be innate to human beings, but instead a set of effects produced on those bodies, behaviours and social relations, through a complex political and cultural technology (Lauretis, 1994). Gender began to be seen as a primarily political relation that occurs in a discursive and historical field of power relations (Scott, 1995).

In this sense, Judith Butler's propositions (2010) are worth mentioning since they can provide us with instruments to interpret the sex-gender systems in the Ancient World. Butler conceptualizes sex/gender as a "performative act", as an effect produced or generated, rescuing the notion of process and the singular construction of each subject inside a field of possibilities which is reaffirmed or renegotiated through successive "performances", i.e., acts, concrete practices (and not naturalized essences) by which the subjects are constituted. Gender concepts like these explain why the constructionist theories of the subject have been abandoned, thus, a natural sex or a single form of being a woman or a man would no longer exist. Sexuality was surrounded by rituals, languages, fantasies, representations, symbols, conventions, deeply cultural and plural processes. Through culture, we define what is, or what is not, natural. We produce and transform nature and biology and, consequently, we make them historical. This way, bodies gain meaning socially – hence, sex is not simply what someone has or a static description of what someone is: it is "one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. (Butler, 2000: 2).

Thus, thinking about ancient sexual practices, love and Roman Eros without necessarily attaching them to the modern concepts of pornography, obscenity, homosexuality and heterosexuality is at the same time an exercise and a challenge in order to explore new perceptions of bodies and human relationships. Therefore, a theoretical debate is initially presented in this paper to identify the tensions existing between the discursive clash on gender and sexuality in the Ancient World; later on, some paintings found in a suburban bath in Pompeii are brought to discussion to show erotic relationships<sup>3</sup>, evincing how differently individuals interpellated norms. In

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<sup>3</sup> The thoughts revealed here represent somehow the follow-up of a research started together with Renata Senna Garraffoni, in which we described some graffiti and paintings (discussed again now) to think about the homoerotic relationships in Antiquity, whose results were published in the collection of texts on Homoeroticism in Classical Antiquity (Garraffoni & Sanfelice, 2014). However, in this paper the focus is on the paintings only, and some readings of the images and their relationship to the site - which had not been addressed previously in the aforementioned research - are developed.

this sense, to review the erotic-sexual documentation of Pompeii means to take it out of isolation and neglect, becoming a way to visualize contradictory and complex issues on the sex-gender system.

### **Debates on gender and sexuality in the Ancient World**

Discussions on the sex-gender system and reflections on the behaviour or the representations of sexuality were also on the spotlight in the Ancient World, for both historians and archaeologists. Inspired by the new post-structuralist theories and mainly by the appearance of *The Use of Pleasure*, the second volume of the audacious *History of Sexuality*, published by Michel Foucault in Paris in the year of his death, in 1984 – together with the volume *The Care of the Self* –, represented a new starting point to explore “sexuality” in Antiquity. In these two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, when referring to Antiquity, Foucault marked the difference in relation to Modernity in the forms of the constitution of the “subject”. According to the author, in Greco-Roman cultures, the space of the constitution of the subject was a sphere of ethical concerns that emphasized freedom and self-production. In the Athenian culture of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the French philosopher localized a chronological moment in which the sexual subjectivity had undoubtedly taken very different forms than those considered “natural” in contemporary modern Western societies.

Using the genealogical method, the French philosopher intended to trace the later development of the desiring subject, using the alterity of the past to defy the contemporary belief in the existence of universal norms of sexual conduct grounded in human nature. His project was to map out in Western History the hermeneutics of the “self”, of the subjectivity. In this sense, in the second volume, the author centered on the Greek philosophy and medical writings (first from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC in Athens) and in the third volume on Greco-Roman writings of the first two centuries of our era (Foucault, 2009; 2007). In *The Care of the Self* (vol.3), Foucault (2007) centralizes his study on the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, perceiving a change in the modes of subjectification. The philosopher argues that free, aristocratic Roman citizens were responsible for the command and organization of society, and would have developed to themselves a practice of temperance and sexual austerity that would mark their power relation over themselves and over the others. Hence, practices of care emerged in this period, in which people would develop on themselves foci of attention, resulting in what he termed as the aesthetics of the culture of the self. Foucault highlights that in that context it is

not an interdiction which is in vogue in sexual morals, but the art of existence which gravitates around the issue of the self, of his/her own dependency and independency, the way by which full autonomy can be established. And this art of the existence accentuates the importance of developing all practices and all exercises through which one could keep control over oneself and reach enjoyment. To Foucault (2007), Greco-Roman societies would share an ideal – in which the relation of man to sexuality would be intimately connected to social relations: the identity of a free man or citizen would be grounded in the defence of masculinity and virility (2007).

As these discussions evolved, the 1990s were marked by an increased interest in sexual behaviour in the Greco-Roman world: investigations showed that the concepts of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” were inappropriate categories to understand Ancient World experiences. In that universe, the issue of masculinity was constantly discussed, being a consensus that the fact of a man having sexual intercourse with another man or woman was not enough to identify his sexual category, as it is still supposed by common sense nowadays. The relationship between two men was compatible to marriage, and, although the sexual ethics were stringent, complex and multiple, there was not a single code governing sexual behaviour. The position of the subject as active or passive is defended by part of the historiography as the main moral boundary delimiting individuals, and not the hetero or homosexual preference (Holmes, 2012; Walters, 1997; Halperin, 1990; Winkler, 1990; Feitosa L. C., 2014; Flores, 2017). Especially in the Roman universe, the most frequent representation is that in which the aristocratic man and citizen exerts an active function, in both sexual and social fields.

To better understand this situation, the interpretations offered by Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner (1997) are underscored here, providing a focussed reading on the sexual-social practices. The authors highlight the changes occurred between the years 70 BC and 200 AD, a period of transition from Republic to Roman Principate, in which Rome was transformed after long decades of civil war, a Republic governed by a senatorial oligarchy and a quasi-hereditary principate, which comprise fundamental elements to define the social organization of this period. Although the ancient behaviours, *mos maiorum*, were increasingly distant from the daily life of the Romans, they continued to serve as a reference for the conduct expected by the subjects comprising the elite of Rome, thus being present in lettered culture. The authors also say that the sexual codes were affected by clientela relationships, permeating all spheres of life and all levels of society, mediating hierarchy through *amicitia*, an institution premised upon a voluntary exchange of favours between the *patronus* and his *cliens*, also guided by patriarchal power. Roman society was totally patriarchal, being *pater* not only the individual who had

children, but the one who had all the power in the core of the family, who had the right over the life of his children, wife and slaves. In this sense, these historical and social contingencies would be projected in the relation domain-submission of Roman sexuality, creating documents in which sexual narratives, mainly the literary ones, would serve as an ordering of the semantic system to shape social elites.

Jonathan Walters (1997) explores the idea of the impenetrability of bodies, and says that if we took most Roman textual sources from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD as vehicles of male sexual ideology of that time, they would indicate that from a Roman man (the *uir*) a dominant role in the sexual act should be expected. On the other hand, the submission status was attributed to his object of seduction and desire. Therefore, the Roman social-sexual protocol defined the Roman man (*vir*) as an impenetrable penetrator. Indeed, such conceptual standard characterized those of high social status, as the individual who is able to defend the limits of his body from assaults and invaders of all kinds. Thus, the body of the man who was a citizen (*vir*) was seen as inviolable, legally protected against sexual penetration, aggressions and tortures – he had bodily immunity. The *vir* would bring with himself an identification of physical integrity under two aspects: the social aspect, because bodily chastisement would not be appropriate to this elite (when one of its members infringed some norm, he would be punished with fines or exile, and not with physical chastisement, considered an insult to his *dignitas*); and the sexual aspect, with his licit activity being that in which he could penetrate.

Walters also stressed that the term (*vir*) is restricted to male adults: men who had not reached adulthood were not called *vir* but described as *pueri*, *adulescentes* or other terms that defined them as people who had not grown up yet. Male slaves and former slaves, even adults, were not normally called *vir*: the preferred designation was *homines* (which was also used in the elite literature to refer to popular layers and men of bad reputation) or *pueri*. *Vir*, therefore, was not limited to indicate a male adult, and it referred specifically to adult men who were free-born Roman citizens at the top of Rome social hierarchy.

More recently, the Brazilian classical scholar Guilherme Gontijo Flores (2017) has offered an interesting panorama of how the Romans faced some aspects of homoeroticism, related mainly to a more poetic concept of life. Flores at first presents the Greek experience of pederasty as a social institution (the living together of an older man, *erastés*, with a young apprentice, *erômenos*, which included a sexual life until the young boy matured). In Rome pederasty, instead of a social institution, was a kind of inspiration in the Greek aesthetics

which, in turn, was present in many Roman poems. To the author, that explains why the literary documents have this so limited boundary between the one who was active and the one who was passive in the sexual act. Not that there was not a sexual affectivity between Romans, but the written documents generally point values present in the social discourses, which, in turn, have a strong Greek inspiration. The scholar also claims that through vestiges of the past “we can minimally understand what is spoken in the public space, but this does not represent all society, since inevitably what is considered immoral and obscene remains to a large extent out of the discourse which was conserved” (2017: 15).

Although summarizedly, these reflections presented here help understand the debates around genre identity in Rome, which end up basically in a kind of binary distinction between free men, who could sexually penetrate any other person, of any gender and inferior status, i.e., the penetrated. Yet, in addition to discussing the issue of virility, many studies have sought to understand the meanings of the remaining accounts, emphasizing subjectivity and desire<sup>4</sup>.

Lourdes Conde Feitosa (2005) claims that other sources, besides the aristocratic literature (generally juridical or philosophical, of historical and rhetorical narratives) can help in the composition of varied discourses. For instance, through unofficial texts, such as Ovid’s and Petronius’, it is possible to question the ideal of submission and fidelity attributed to women and the ideal of austerity and command related to men when analyzed in the realm of affectivity, since they evince, even to the elites, fields of diversified, and even contradictory, feminine and masculine action. Against this perspective, Guilherme Gontijo Flores argues that through literature one might find vestiges of private life and erotic relations, “even though under layers and more layers of poetic games, repetitions and common places” (2017: 21), as is the case with some genres and subgenres of ancient poetry, which can bring descriptions and experiences of homoerotic affection.

Therefore, the questioning of rigid and generalizing theoretical models regarding masculine and feminine identity in Roman society has prompted scholars to think about the variety of meanings that sexual gender behaviours could take in such a heterogeneous population. As already pointed out, many representations of that eroticism were out of the scene, and it is precisely

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<sup>4</sup> Renato Pinto even considers that the term ‘passive’ is problematic, since it can give the idea that the sexual partners being penetrated were denied sexual pleasure in Ancient Rome (Pinto, 2011: 113). However, for methodological purposes, the terms “active” and “passive” are going to be used, but bearing in mind that they need to be interpreted carefully, following Feitosa’s alert that there is always the risk of taking the role of “penetrated” as essentially submissive and always a victim of his/her condition of passive, inoperative in the sexual relation (Feitosa, 2005: 15).



because of that that the erotic material culture of Pompeii becomes a great resource to explore new approaches and subjects of the Ancient Rome. Indeed, the analyses of documents other than the traditional literary ones reassess the kinds of relationships established between people and the sexual and social roles assumed in the Roman social organization, following the works by Antonio Varone (2002), which recover the love inscriptions on the walls of Pompeii. By bringing graffiti alluding to gods, relationships with prostitutes and love declarations, Varone evinces a society that did not know either the feeling of guilt or the puritanism or the hypocrisy of Modern Literature: a society in which there was not obscenity, and in which even expressions that our sense of morality would deem indecent could manifest love instead.

Lourdes Feitosa (2005), using the same resources, discussed the different aspects concerning Roman sexual practices analysing graffiti. One of her most relevant findings was the indication of how that written documentation, describing the life experience of popular layers, contradicts the models defined by modern historiography of what it meant “to be a Roman” during the Empire. Feitosa’s proposal contradicts traditional historiography, to which a masculinity based on political virtue and emotional self-control were the building blocks of the notion of “Roman man”. All these facts sound conflicting after analyzing the graffiti<sup>5</sup>, which display men begging for the love of women and sharing with them their everyday joys and sorrows, thus expliciting postures quite different from those assumed by the virile soldier and still widely spread in the modern imaginary.

Eventually, another great counterpoint to analyze Roman society is the visual-artistic culture, since pictorial language broadens the references about sexual practices in the Roman world, going beyond the ideals proposed by literary documents. In the next item the relationship between sexuality and Roman everyday life, as seen more precisely from a bath in Pompeii, is problematized, proposing that sex and sexual practices were a natural component of life.

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<sup>5</sup> Out of curiosity, have a look at the following example: *Amethusthus nec sine sua Valentina* (CIL, IV, 4858), [Amethusthus cannot live without his Valentina]. Graffiti found on the wall between the doors number 12 2 13 of Region VII, 15 (Feitosa, 2005: 116).

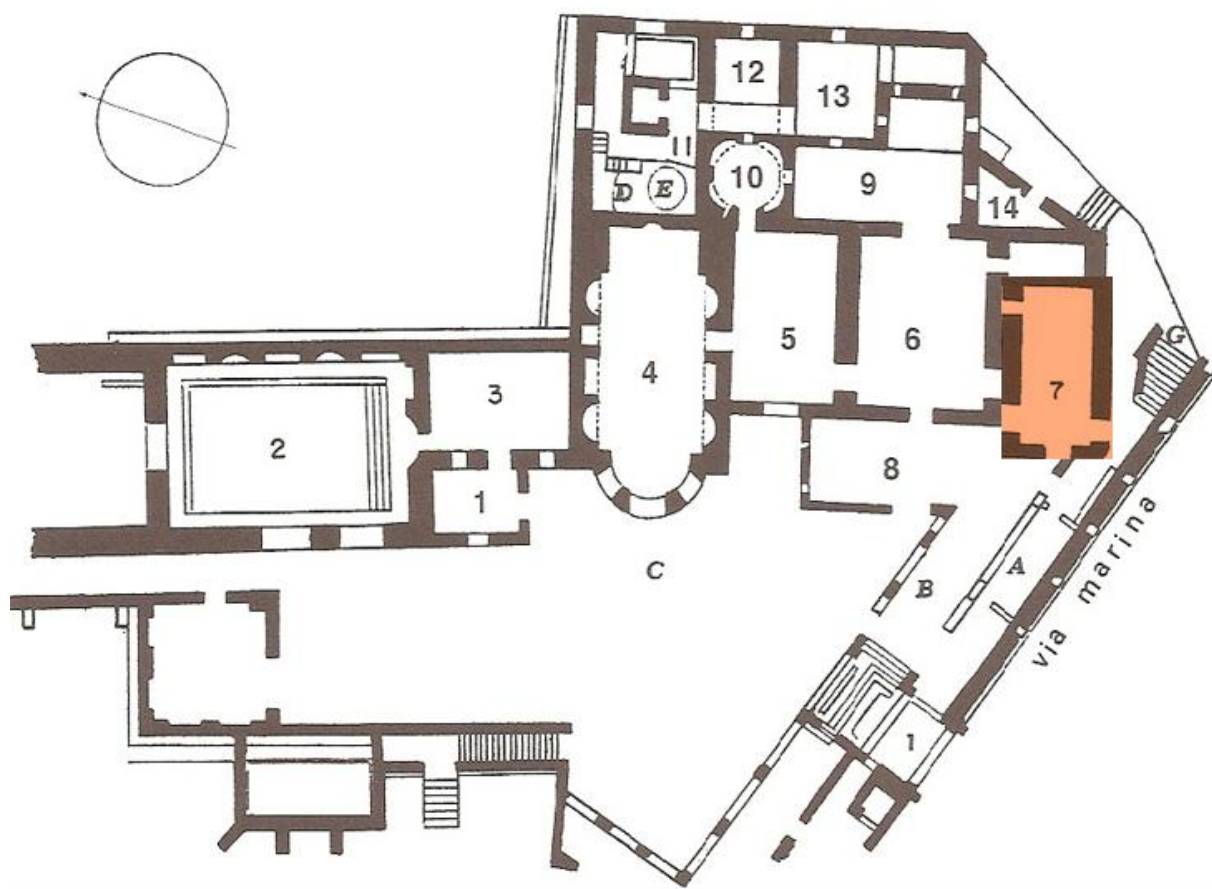
## Multiple bodies: performative acts in homoerotic representations in the Suburban Bath of Pompeii

Pompeii was a Roman colony in the South of the Italian Peninsula that was buried by the volcano Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, being rediscovered by archaeological excavations in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. At first the discovery of the city allowed to find almost intact vestiges of the Roman world, amphitheaters, theaters, circuses, temples, and so on. Actually, these were the findings of the first archaeological enterprises. However, Pompeii brought other possibilities to understand the Ancient World – artefacts of everyday life. Many houses were taken from the ashes of the volcano, with their household objects, the register of their feelings and beliefs (in graffiti on the walls as well as on wall paintings). However, during the excavations, many erotic-sexual objects were found, and since they were deemed pornographic or inappropriate according to Christian morality, for decades this type of documents remained locked up in museum rooms, or was simply destroyed, leaving many vestiges of Antiquity nonvisualized.

This piece of information needs to be mentioned because it is closely related to modern discourses about sexuality, since it was the finding of some objects in the city of Pompeii that gave rise to the term “pornography”. The German archaeologist C. O. Müller became one of the precursors of the use of the expression in 1850, when he ran across many “obscene” objects in his excavations. He looked up the word *pornographein* (*writer about prostitutes*) in a Greek dictionary, and considered it adequate to refer to the objects found in the site (Clarke, 2003; Voss, 2012; Sanfelice, 2013). During almost two centuries, paintings and other objects have been catalogued as pornographic and obscene, and the ones that were not destroyed when found, were locked up in highly-surveilled rooms, where the public could not access, in the *Museo Nazionale di Napoli*. Such postures ended up restricting the possibilities of studying that documentation as well as silencing the different ways of representing sexual practices. In this sense, questioning the notions of pornographic and their relation to the materiality means to get them out of isolation, which explains why an approach to paintings displaying homoerotic relationships found in a suburban bath in Pompeii was selected to this debate.

The Suburban Bath of Pompeii was excavated in 1987, under the supervision of Luciana Jacobelli, who published a monograph about that site in 1995. Due to theoretical and methodological advances, the practice of leaving paintings onsite has been adopted since the mid-1930s, therefore, the paintings of this bath are still *in loco*. About the public baths, according to Paul Veyne (2009), there was an old proverb among Romans saying the following: “Baths, wine and Venus bring decay to our bodies; but baths, wine and Venus make up life”, highlighting how this experience was important to the Roman routine.

In the daily routine of the Romans there were only three places in which subjects would take off their clothes: *cubicula* (bedrooms), *termas* and *lupanaria* (brothels), but it was in the baths that people exposed their bodies more to the eyes of the people. Therefore, nakedness defined the experience of the public bath as something unique in Roman society (Laurence, 2010). Since the Hellenistic period, the function of the bath was not only to allow for the hygiene, but also to promote a desirable way of life among everyone. The baths were decorated with mosaics, sculptures, paintings and sumptuous architecture which would provide the bathers with well-being (some of them often went there only to get warm).

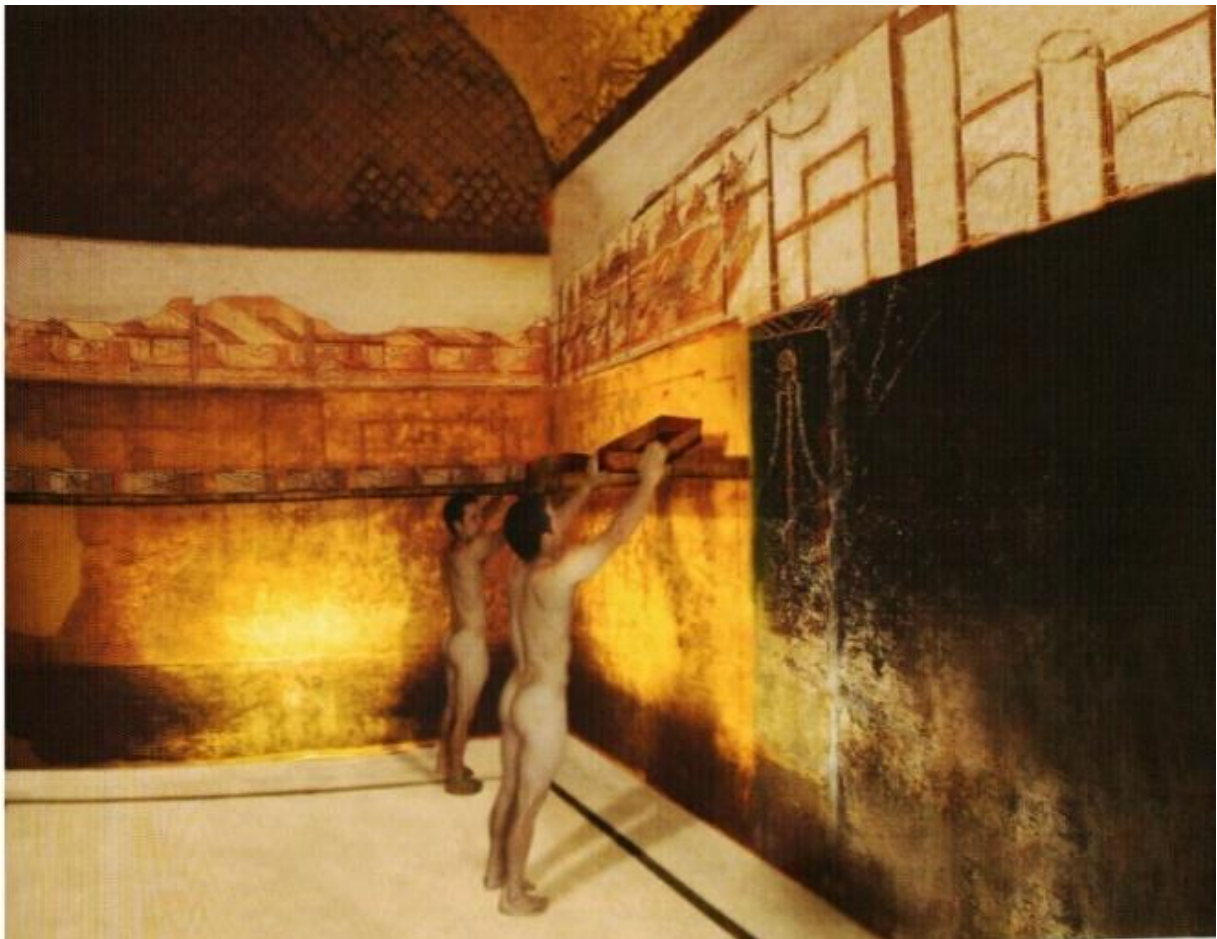


**Map 1** – Pompeii, Suburban Baths, plan. Source: (Clarke, 2001, p. 213)

The baths could be split between male and female or shared between both sexes at alternating times. The ritual linked to the baths consisted of arriving at the *apodyterium* (a changing room), going to an exercise room and then passing through other rooms that got increasingly hotter until the bather reached a cold pool. The baths involved an individual bodily experience, with impressions of heat, cold and nakedness, resulting in a myriad of sensations. Additionally, bathing was a social pleasure experienced collectively: there

was a pleasure in being among the crowd, yelling, meeting people, eavesdropping chats, hearing curious cases, playing and showing off. The citizens spent many hours in the baths, because that space represented a moment to feel pleasure, to make exercise, and, above all, to take care of the appearance (Clarke, 2007). In the specific case of this bath in Pompeii, Clarke (2001) and Jacobelli (1995) both believe that it was shared by men and women. This fact is proved by the architecture of the place, since lighter baths, built of window glass, were usually destined to segregated baths, whereas darker baths were characteristically shared, as described here (Laurence, 2010). At the *apodyterium* (the coloured room in the planimetry below) there are paintings

with scenes of explicit sex, being the only images of Pompeii with homoerotic reproductions. Inside this room, there would supposedly be a shelf to store clothes and, above it, the paintings (numbers I to VIII) are located (map 1).



**Figure 1.** A digital reconstruction showing how the painted representations of box (Suburban Bath)

The first scene of the sequence shows a half-naked man lying down leaning on his elbows and penetrating a woman. The woman has short dark-brown



hair, is completely naked and wears a jewel on her left ankle, and on her side there is a fish. She apparently faces the observer, while sitting on her lover's penis (fig. 2).

What calls our attention in this scene is the perspective used by the painter, who neatly diminished the male body, perhaps drawing on that resource to emphasize the female figure. The sexual position represented is very common in Roman culture. Apuleius (Apul., *Metam.*, II,4) defined this posture as *Venus pendula* "*mobilem spina quatiens pendulae Veneris fructu me satiavit*"<sup>6</sup>. Ovid (Ovid, *Ars.Am.*, III, 777) refers to it as "*parua uehatur equo*"<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, women were the ones who rode<sup>8</sup>, and this idea is present in the graffiti of Pompeii as well:

Mea vita, meae deliciae, ludamus parumper:  
hunc lectum campum, me tibi equom esse putamus (CIL, IV, 1781)

[My life, my delight, let us play this game for a while: this bed be a field and I your steed...] <sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding, there is a historiographic branch that interprets this woman's sexual posture as passive and submissive: "*è al servizio del piacere del suo signore e si spinge fino a far lei tutto il lavoro; se 'cavalca' l'amante che se ne sta fermo è per servilo*" (Veyne, 1978: 53-54 *apud* Jacobelli, 1995: 38)<sup>10</sup>. According to Catherine Johns (1990), that position is the search for the woman's own pleasure and it even helps the female partner look at the sexual act better, i.e., such attitude could be interpreted as the emancipation of the Roman woman. Although, normatively, under the Roman sexual codes, that relation might be seen as active man/passive woman, the image allows us to observe the partners from another perspective, in which both can feel pleasure and not necessarily submit themselves to the pleasure of the other. After all, as Ovid

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<sup>6</sup> "So saying, she climbed onto the bed, tentatively settled on top of me, then plunged up and down repeatedly, **with sinuous movements of her supple hips as she satiated me with the fruits of over-arching pleasure**, until our energy flagged, our limbs grew slack, and we collapsed together exhausted, caressing each other and panting for dear life". Translated by A. S. Kline (2003). Available at: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/TheGoldenAssII.htm> Accessed on: 7 Nov. 2017.

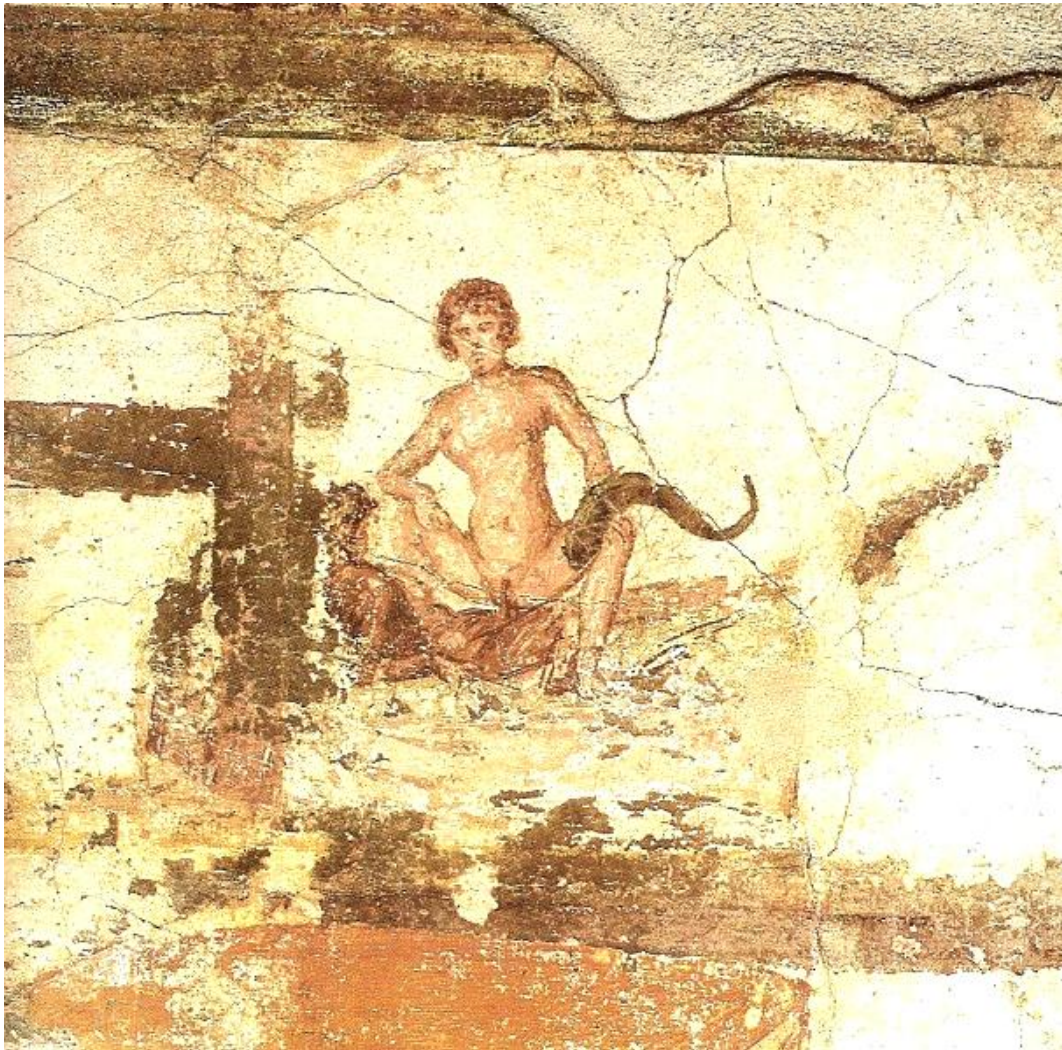
<sup>7</sup> "**Let the small be carried by a horse:** Andromache, his Theban bride, was too tall to straddle Hector's horse.  
Translated by A. S. Kline (2001).

<sup>8</sup> *Mulier equittans*, Cf. Jacobelli, 1995: 36; Cavicchioli, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Graffiti found at the entry of a Basilica, translations taken from the book *Rediscovering Pompeii* (catalogue of IBM Exhibition Organisation) (4. Ed.), eds. Luisa Franchi dell'Orto, Antonio Varone. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1990, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> "The female partner is at the service of her lord's pleasure and is on the point of doing the whole job, riding the immobile lover to serve him" [my translation].

already proclaimed: "Hasten to the goal together: that's the fullness of pleasure, when man and woman lie there equally spent" (Ovid., *Ars.Am.*, II)<sup>11</sup>.

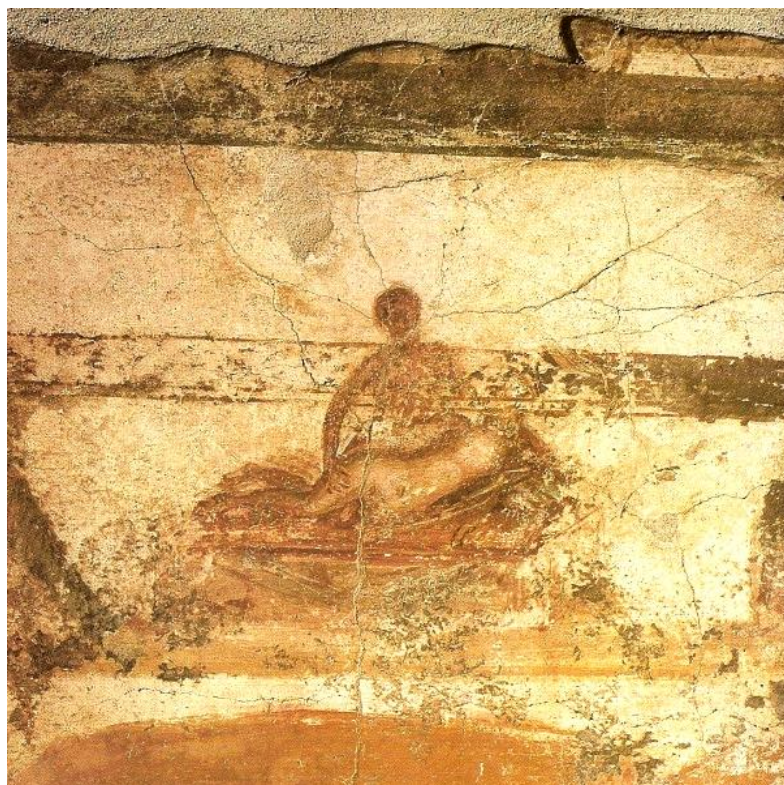


**Figure 2** – Scene I- Man with a woman in bed. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 9)

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<sup>11</sup> Translated by A. S. Kline (2001), available at: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/ArtofLoveBkII.htm> Accessed on: 7 Nov. 2017.



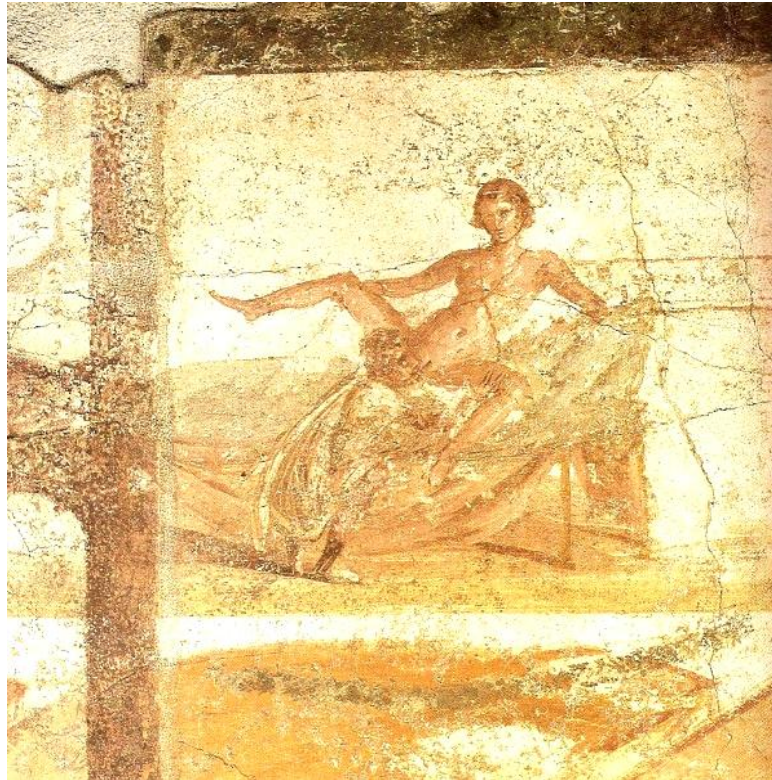


**Figure 3** - Scene II- Man with a woman with rear entry sex. Fonte: (Clarke, 2001: plate 10)



**Figure 4.** Scene III- A woman wearing only a breastband fellates a clothed man. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 11)





**Figure 5.** Scene IV- Man performing *cunnilingus*. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 12)

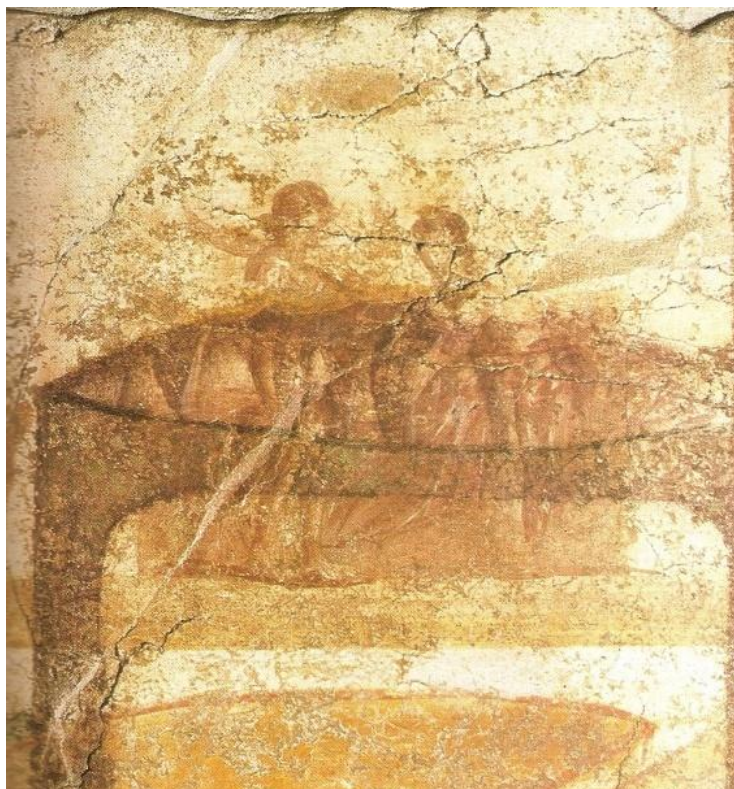
The next scene also deals with a sexual representation between a man and a woman, however, it is a little atypical in its erotic iconography. The man is down on his knees under the bed whereas the woman is lying with her back to him. This is a representative pattern in the artefacts spread throughout the Empire. However, it is a typical position in which the man penetrates another man, but it is uncommon between two opposite sexes, since the position suggests anal penetration. In this scene, like the previous one, the female body is privileged, possibly highlighting a pleasure which is not consonant to the norms, considering that women were not allowed to enter this kind of relationship, as it was not meant for procreation.

The third scene, albeit common in Greek erotic representations, is quite rare in Roman visual registers: a woman performing fellatio on a man. The man depicted is sitting on a bed and one of his hands holds a parchment, whereas the woman is down on her knees on the floor performing oral sex on her partner. In this image we also find an atypical relationship, because there is evidence, in both ancient literature and graffiti<sup>12</sup> that fellatio is a socially condemned practice, usually related to prostitutes, because Romans were convinced about the holy function of the mouth, an organ destined to speech delivery and public oratory – and, curiously, the man has in his hands a parchment, alluding to the practice of oratory.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. (Feitosa, 2005; Varone, 2000).

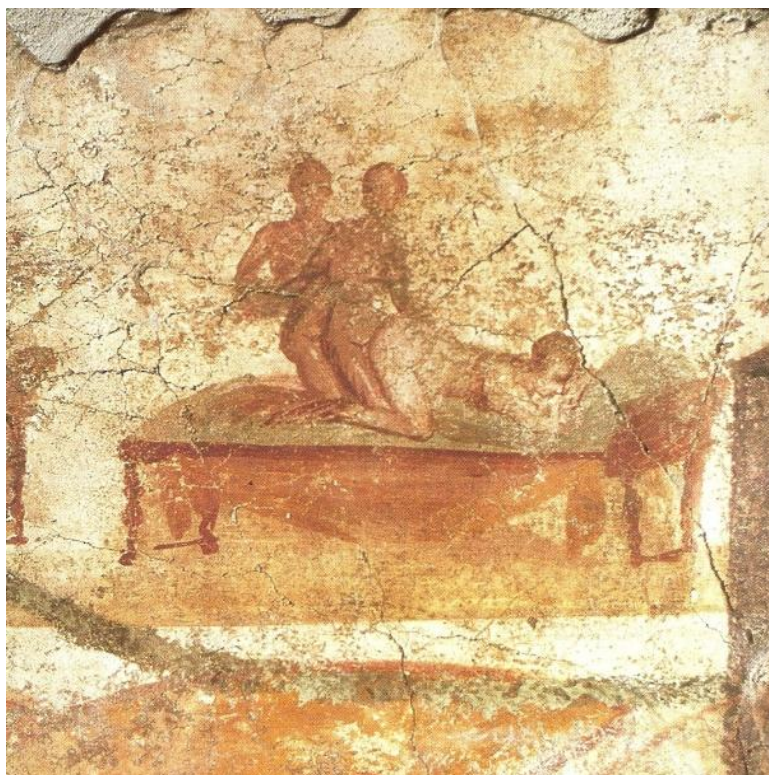




**Figure 6.** - Scene V- Two women making love. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 13)



**Figure 7.** Scene V reconstituted by Jacobelli. Source: (Jacobelli, 1995: 48)



**Figure 8** - Scene VI- Two men and a woman making love. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 14)



**Figure 9.** Scene VII- Two men and two women making love.



Scene number IV is quite more audacious: we have an inversion of the previous act, as the man is performing oral sex (*cunnilingus*) to the woman. She is adorned with jewels, seems to wear the belt of Venus (the necklace around her neck), which is very common in the representations of that goddess, who had as a property to inspire love (Sanfelice P. P., 2012), as we can see in figure 5. That adornment becomes meaningful because it can be interpreted as a way to inspire the lover to give female pleasure, while marking an elevated social status of this woman. This scene is quite relevant to our discussion, in that it points to the extreme dislocation of traditional genders. Woman, always labelled as passive, becomes active in this moment, with the contrary happening to the man, being used “vaginally” by a woman (Parker, 1992). Thus, what calls our attention is the power exerted by this woman: while she is delighting in pleasure, the man is disgracing his life, since he is contaminating his mouth, which would be the apex of masculine corruption.

Scene V changes a little in content, since there is a person standing up and another one lying down. Although the sharpness of the image is a little compromised, the reconstitution proposed by Jacobelli makes it clearer to the observer what was going on in the sexual intercourse represented.

According to Jacobelli (1995), this is a common scene when a man penetrates a woman. However, we should doubt that proposition because if the scenes increase their degree of contravention to the norms, this image would be quite

dislocated in this sequence. Therefore, it is possible to consider that there are two women imitating a position that would be more common to the representational pattern of a man relating to a woman. Beyond that, in all these images men are represented with a slightly darker skin tone. In this image, although the figuration of the subjects is not clear, we cannot differentiate skin tonality. In this scene, showing a homoerotic relationship between two women, there seems to be a fake sexual intercourse, in which a woman would be using a dildo, in a masculinized practice known as *tribades*. Many would believe that that happened because the woman had a huge clitoris, making her an active partner, taking the role of a man, thus crossing the borders of gender and at the same time violating norms of social conduct (Parker, 1997), in a role usually attributed to prostitutes. However, to suppose that those women were prostitutes would be nonsensical if we compared to the previous scene (number IV), in which the active woman apparently is a member of the aristocracy, due to her adornments, her clear skin, etc. Thus, what would make this scene irreverent is the fact that two women are giving pleasure to each other, disorganizing norms and dispensing with the services of a man.

In scene number VI a trio is represented in bed in full sexual activity. There is a woman down on her knees, being penetrated by a man, who would supposedly be the active one in the act (*vir*). However, he is also penetrated by another man, thus, taking the passive role (*pathicus*). Regarding the woman, it is not clear whether she is performing anal or vaginal sex, but all the evidence suggests that it is a penetration when she is also breaking the law: she becomes a *puer* instead of a *femina*. This image is instigating, since representations of erotic trios are quite rare not only in iconography but also in written culture. However, there is the clear ambiguity of social status in the figure in the middle, who takes up the active/passive role, thus opposing the sexual models that presume that there is always an active and a passive partner in the sexual act (fig. 8).

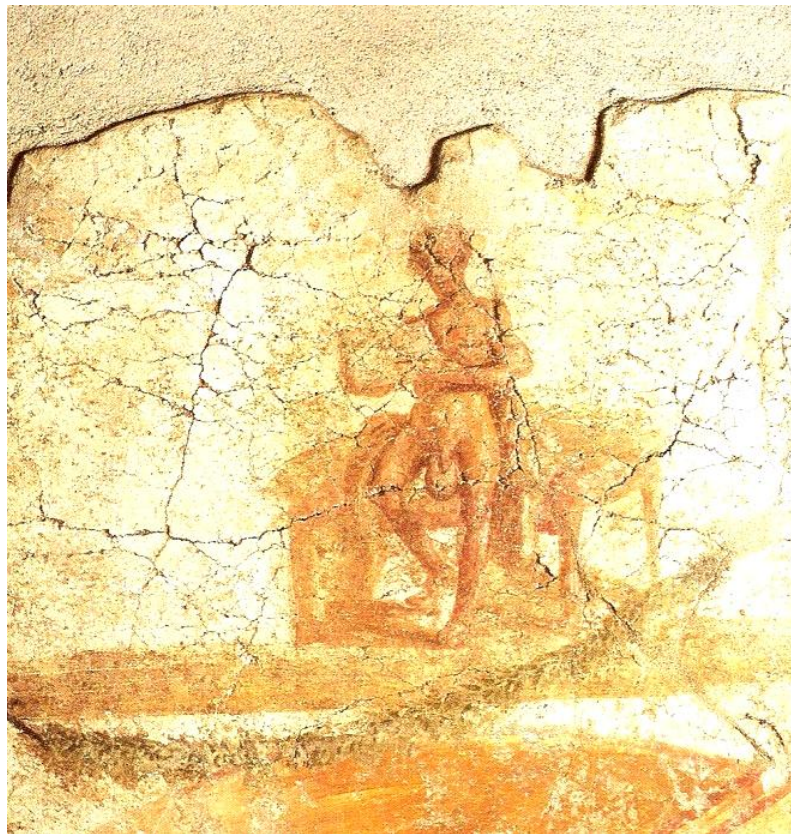


**Figure 10.** Scene reconstituted by Marco Sanfelice. Source: (Clarke, 2001: plate 15)

Scene number VII presents four subjects relating in bed: two men and two women. From right to left, we can see a woman performing cunnilingus on another woman who, in turn, also performs oral sex on a man, and this man is serving as the passive man in the act, being only the last one to keep his status intact. This representation is also interesting because there is a woman relating to a man and a woman at the same time. Indeed, there seems not to be any register of this kind of female pleasure in Latin Literature, and this figure becomes both passive and active, much like the penetrated man receiving

fellatio. Such image breaks all sociosexual frontiers (fig. 9).

In a sequence in which the sexual partners go on increasing numerically, we would probably expect that the last scene would be the representation of five people in bed or that the subjects represented would be in acrobatic positions. However, we see in the eighth scene the representation of a single person, an artist, a naked man, with big testicles, in front of a table, with a book (or a parchment) in his hand. This image can be considered a caricature of a poet – a writer, someone important – who has a testicular disease (probably bilateral hydrocele), which would condemn his phallic power, making him a mere witness of the scene. Since the Latin word *testis* means both a testicle and a witness, this image also brings an ambiguity: that who instead of taking part in a sexual act (like the previous ones) is only a witness to that, someone who observes the acts and is reading.



**Figure 11.** Scene VIII- A naked man afflicted with hydrocele. Source: (Clarke, 2001, plate 16)

Regarding the interpretations of this set of images, in general, due to the representations of explicit sex, for a long time the utility of the place has been doubted, because the use of baths to sell sexual services is acknowledged in Roman society (Laurence, 1994). However, here we propose another interpretation to these paintings: it is not a house of prostitution, because we

only need to compare this environment to the Lupanar of Pompeii featuring paintings exclusively with heteroerotic relations. Beyond that, we should bear in mind that all sorts of people had access to those images, after all, it was a public environment frequented by both men and women of different social classes, including children, who would receive instructions about the body and the behaviours, as already asserted. Luciana Jacobelli (1995) also dissociates the images from erotic stimulus: she believes they were only a means to help memorize the place where the clothes had been stored while also stimulating laughter. This information brought by Jacobelli is quite important: laughter was provoked from the fact that those images described the other side of Roman sexual practices, considered a taboo by the Roman elite.



**Figure 12.** Plaque with Phallus and inscription *Hic Habitat Felicitas*. Source: Photograph by Marco Sanfelice - October 2013. Site of Conservation: MANN- GS - Inv. 27741. Size: 24x50 cm. Site of the finding: Pompeii (IV, 6, 18) Dating: I A.D.

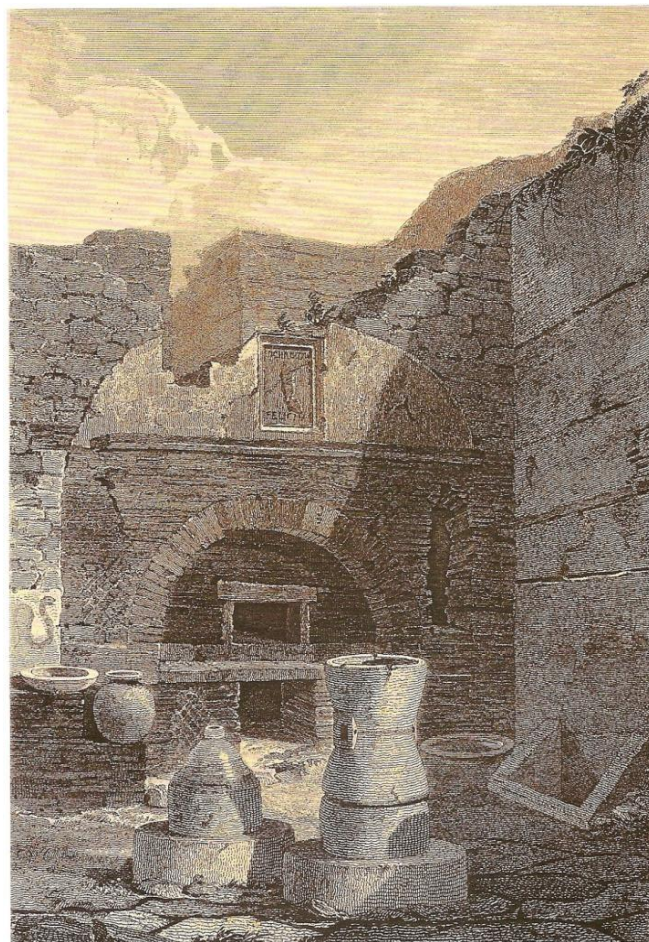
Other possibilities for laughter might come from the idea that this environment can have a powerful apotropaic function, quite common in the Roman universe, in which there are objects related both to religiosity and sexuality (Clarke, 2007). Following Funari (2003), in Ancient World phallic representations and illustrations were used especially to turn away negative forces (the root of the Greek verb *apotropein* - “turn away”), thus attracting



good vibes and prosperity. Therefore, the phallic symbol was a fertility icon, carrying an extremely positive connotation:

In Classical Antiquity, the male member in erection was associated to life, fecundity and luck. (...) The phallus not only dispelled evil but also attracted luck and happiness. Remember that the Latin word *felicitas* means at the same time “happiness” and “luck”, both meanings derived from the original meaning of *felix*, “fertile” (Funari, 2003: 316).

The relationship between phallus and fertility (and happiness) appears in another situation in Pompeii (fig. 12).



**Figure 13.** Register of the site of the finding of the plaque. Fonte: Photograph by Marco Sanfelice - October 2013. Site of Conservation: MANN-GS (Explanatory Catalogue of the image).

The Latin inscription “*Hic Habitat Felicitas*” means “Here dwells happiness”, or, as Funari (2003a, p. 320) states “Here dwells happiness and luck”, i.e., the phallus not only dispelled evil but also attracted luck, happiness and prosperity to business. By noticing that the plaque is located above a bread oven, we can infer that its main objective was to rise dough for bread baking:

such as *mentula* rises and becomes *phallo*, the same would happen to the bread and, consequently, the sales of the product would increase.

Outside the Pompeii context, but still relevant and singular to this discussion, a mosaic found at the entry of a house (House of the Evil Eye - 150 BC) in the ancient city of Antiochia represents the direct relationship between the phallus and the fight against the evil eye. We can see in the image the phallus turning towards the eye, as well as the presence of a bird, a dog, a scorpion, a snake and a trident as strong elements fighting the bad energy that might enter the house (fig. 14).



**Figure 14.** Ward off the evil eye (*invidere* “look askance” – look askance at the others, not at oneself), the fascinated eye; in the inscription “All the same to you”. Source: (Clarke J. , Roman Sex: 100 B.C. to A.D. 250, 2003, p. 109)

In this representation, a primary element to dispel the evil eye would be the presence of the small man depicted, a dwarf, thus causing laughter in the Roman culture. John Clarke (2007) says that Romans usually laughed at the ones who departed from standards of beauty. In this case, dwarves, giants and people with deformities were laughed at and, consequently, all negative energy was dispelled. This situation goes against the last scene of our sequence, which represents the figure of the poet with hydrocele, with a deformity in his testicles, perhaps inferring the closing of a cycle of apotropaic images. According to Funari (1994), there is a possibility that the deformity is effectively a symbol of good luck (fig. 15).





**Figure 15.** CIL IV, 4566. Source: (Funari, 1994: 7)

To Funari (1994), this is an itiphallic drawing, followed by an unclear inscription: "*felicio tominare*". In this graffiti, according to the author, the word *tominare* must be related to *tumeo* (swell) or *torqueo* (balance), whereas *felicio* derives from *felix*, fertile and lucky. In this case, we might interpret that as a reference to the phallus that is swollen or balancing<sup>13</sup>. We should recall that it was also habitual in the Roman society to use a material culture that represents the testicles balancing in the form of a bell (*tintinnabulam*). Indeed, the bells at the entries of the houses were phallic shaped, being a strong talisman against bad omen. These symbols were generally in places of transition, *limen*, "passage from outdoor to indoor, connecting the known to the unknown; phallic representation contributed to ward off the danger inherent in this situation" (Funari, 2003a: 321).

Eventually, it is worth noting that the very representation of copula can be something apotropaic, an argument reinforced by Catherine Johns (1990) through an imagetic parallel of a Gallic ceramic vase of the Roman age, in which the man puts a woman on the altar while penetrating her. According to

<sup>13</sup> We also find representations alluding to the phallus in private baths, such as in the House of Menander (I,10,4), cf. (Sanfelice, 2016: 134).

Johns, from this perspective the copula can also be explained as something sacred, since it is symbolized referring to the gods being praised on an altar.



**Figure 16.** Woman sitting on the altar. Source: (Johns, 1990: 40)

The comments made by the author are pivotal, because in historiographic studies phallic power is usually valued connected to the male member, and, when referring to expressions of sexual act with a woman, surprisingly it is not associated to apotropaic connotations. In Roman culture, there are many artefacts that represent the erect phallus, but when they are interpreted in the realm of protection and fruition of life, they can be thought of as a reference to copula and, somehow, would comprise the power of both sexes to potentialize fertility (Adkins & Adkins, 1996; Funari, 2003a).

After presenting these interpretations, the objective here is not to say that the ancient peoples did not feel stimulated to laugh about the deviating sexual-social codes, or that they did not get erotic pleasure, or that they were sexually stimulated by such images. The objective here is to show the existence of multiple interpretive possibilities. We suggest a more plural look at the readings of the sex-genre systems of the Ancient World which do not necessarily need to be limited to two axes (active-passive), thus highlighting

the possibility of other meanings to representations of sexual practices in that culture.

In summary, the images dealt with here are below gender relations and the instability of such relations, but can offer us a very important symbolic meaning to understand beliefs in the Ancient World. In this sense, there must be a strong relationship between the representation of sexuality and the Roman everyday life in Pompeii. Indeed, in a context in which people were too exposed to looks, images of phalli, fig signs and sexual acts were quite common in the changing rooms of public baths, because there was a belief that it would be possible to ward off all bad energy through them. Taking into account that sex and sexual acts were a natural component of life (i.e., explicit references to copula might have a positive connotation), in some moments they were understood as something special, seen humorously or simply as a gift appreciated by the gods. Not surprisingly, some symbols are used in connection to certain divinities (fish, bracelets and belts associated to Venus; book, *liber*, related to *Liber Pater*; Bacchus also linked to fertility<sup>14</sup>). As observed by Jacobelli, in the Ancient World there was a huge number of representations with apotropaic or religious sexual connotations, which created a degree of familiarity with sexually explicit images, although strange to our culture: “sex was seen as a normal and pleasant component of life and, as such, was represented and lived” (Jacobelli, 1995: 101).

### Final Considerations

In this historiographic debate, it has been argued that there is still a very generic discourse about Roman sexuality, which is focussed on discussing and investigating male practices or the models of virility, ignoring the multiplicity of sexual practices and the meanings of those relations. Therefore, some erotic paintings of Pompeii were selected as a resource to explore new possibilities of relations and beliefs between subjects in Ancient Rome, and, most importantly, to think about the sex/gender system as a flexible category inside a field of possibilities which is reaffirmed or renegotiated through successive “performances”, as suggested by Butler.

Beyond those epistemological issues, a consideration has been proposed about our own modern daily life, taking inspiration from the motto recovered by professor Funari: “*And what so potent cause took you to Rome? Freedom, which, though belated (...)*”, because it is possible to believe that the past can become a privileged place of social transformation and search for freedom in our

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<sup>14</sup> (cf. Sanfelice, 2016).

contemporary world. Therefore, by observing how the ancient peoples dealt with sexuality, their bodies, aesthetic representations, pleasures and beliefs, we can undoubtedly recognize numerous ways of life in the world, encouraging more libertarian possibilities of existences and, mainly, of coexistences.

### **Note of thanks**

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