

# I

## The Housesteads Latrine

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In a number of cities in the Mediterranean world, buildings of the Roman period have been discovered which have been recognized as public lavatories. Not surprisingly, with such a delicate, not to say embarrassing, subject, there has been little discussion of these buildings and not a great deal of illustration.<sup>1</sup> However, certain features are common to all of them.

They are open to the air, and the building is usually rectangular or square in plan. The seats are in stone and are arranged around the outside wall. A shallow channel carried a continuous flow of water past the front of every seat. There is no sign of any screening between one seat and the next, much less of any door in front. There were often up to 40 seats, and it is evident that every occupant of a seat will have been visible to everyone else in the building. Furthermore, there is no sign that these buildings were reserved for the members of one sex. These buildings are always found alone, not in pairs.

We need not be too surprised at this. The Romans were not greatly afflicted with any sense of false modesty. According to Plutarch,<sup>2</sup> it was the Greeks who taught the Romans not to be ashamed of nakedness when bathing, but in time men and women often bathed together. Some emperors are said to have tried to prohibit the practice,<sup>3</sup> but without success, as the mere repetition of the legislation attests. The Church was still attempting to suppress mixed bathing in the late empire.<sup>4</sup>

But in fact use of the public lavatory was probably an altogether modest operation. We must remember that, in the Mediterranean world at least, knickers were rarely worn. They were hardly necessary, particularly

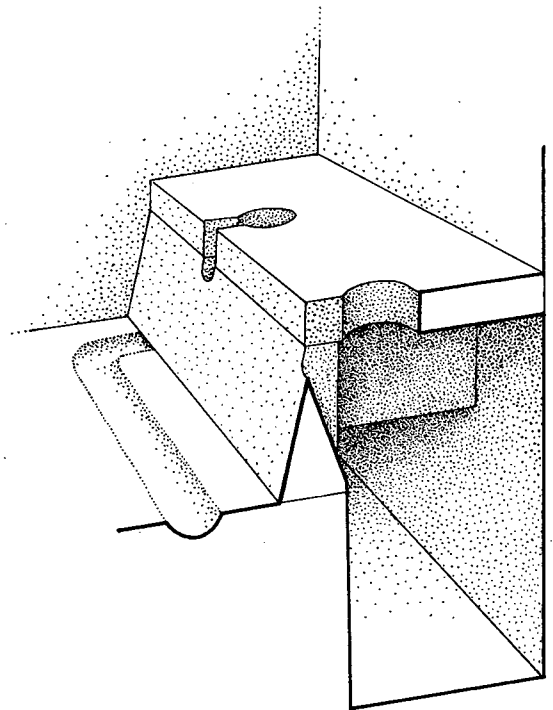
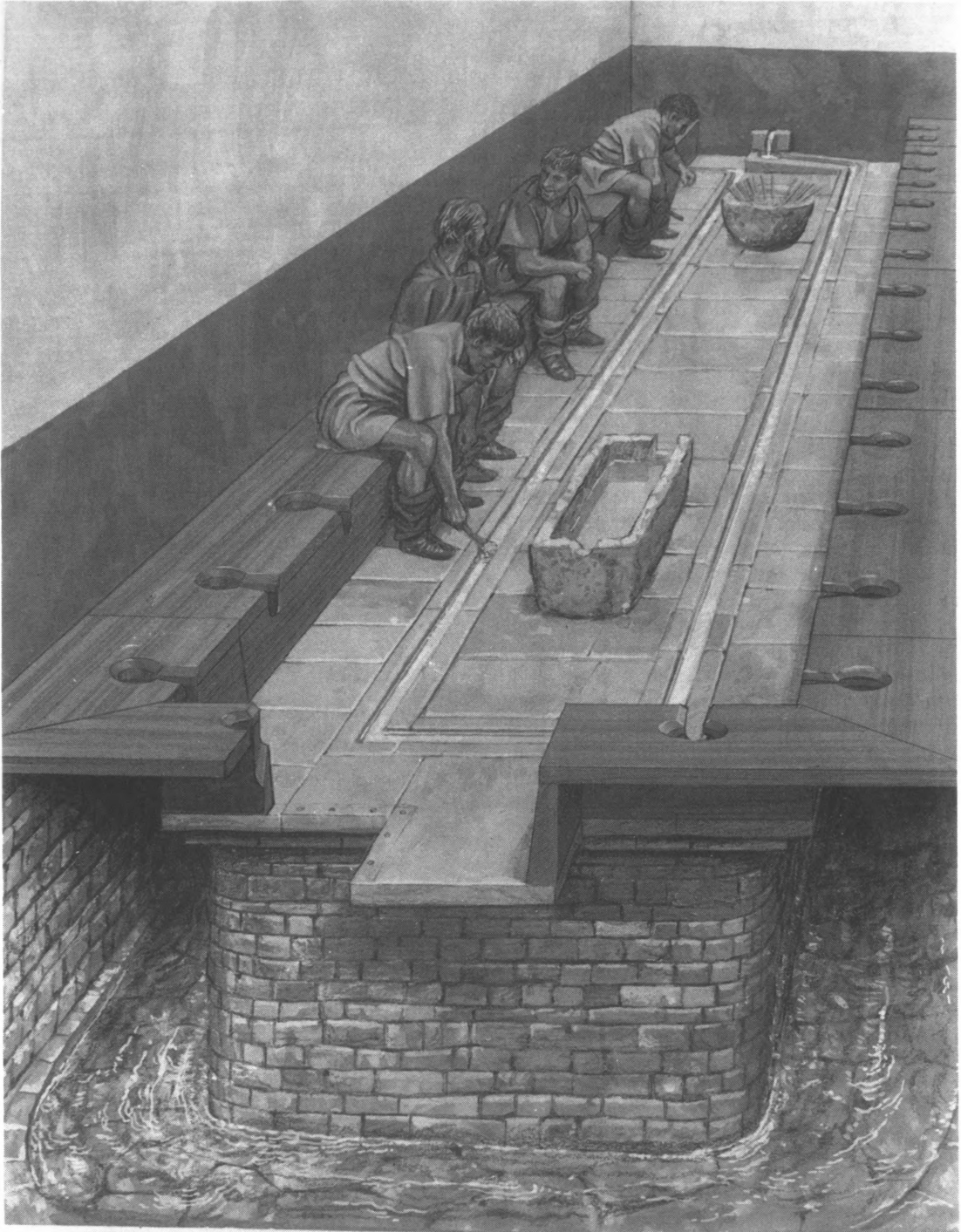


Fig. 1. Cross-section of latrine-seating.  
(Drawn by Peter Connolly.)

under the long robes which were the norm for both sexes. One could therefore enthrone oneself, man or woman, without exposing any flesh to view. Furthermore, one could conduct the whole of the subsequent operation without the slightest embarrassment, for it was not necessary to move from one's seat until the task was finished, when one could straightway rise and leave the building.

This was possible because of the form of the seating. Unlike the Necessary House (or "Net-



Reconstruction of Housesteads latrine. (Drawn by Peter Connolly.)

ty") of the recent past, where there was provision only for a round hole in the top of a seat which was usually of wood, in the ancient form the opening on the top of the seat is carried forward to the front, and then down the front like an inverted key-hole (see fig. 1). The purpose of the frontal opening (which has furrowed many a brow, especially among thinking men) becomes clear when one remembers that the ancient equivalent of toilet-paper was a "sponge on a stick". This is the exact translation of the name for the implement, *xylospogium*.<sup>5</sup> Although they do not use this name, its form and function are precisely defined by Seneca and Martial.<sup>6</sup>

A sponge on its own would not have allowed of a suitably modest transaction of the operation. But on the end of a stick, a sponge could (via the "Keyhole") reach the parts that other methods could not reach. The vital significance of the "Keyhole" becomes apparent. The incumbent, whether man or woman, could make sure that the sponge was quite clean, by washing it in the channel before the feet. It could be applied as often as necessary, via the "Keyhole", to ensure cleanliness and comfort. The whole operation could be performed without moving from one's seat, without the slightest derangement of one's garments, and without interrupting in the least the flow of conversation. It is difficult to envisage a more civilized method of waste-disposal.

None of this would be possible if the sponge were not on a stick. In the case of the Housesteads latrine, we must I suggest think of wooden seating of the "Keyhole" form,<sup>7</sup> fixed by dowels into the stone base. Whether the structure was in fact roofed we cannot prove. Finally we have to note that, in the bleak surroundings of Hadrian's Wall, troops apparently protected themselves from the freezing cold by wearing underpants.<sup>8</sup> But this is unlikely to have greatly modified the *modus operandi*.<sup>9</sup>

A reconstruction of the latrine is offered in Plate VII.

*Note I.* This reconsideration of the House-

steads latrine arose out of a postcard which my youngest daughter Sally sent from Turkey in the summer of 1987. This card showed the public lavatories at Ephesus, with the "Keyhole" form of seating discussed here. Thought was prompted when Sally returned and commented that the guide at Ephesus had claimed that the channel before the sitter's feet was for washing hands in. My daughter did not query this with the guide, but it was in the course of conversation with her after her return that the case of Housesteads came to mind; and the need to look again at the reconstruction of its latrine.

*Note II.* As another daughter, Dr. Jane Mann, confirms, use of communal sponges could give rise to a serious risk of the spread of cystitis, particularly among women. Did one carry one's own sponge, and merely fit it into a communal stick? This possibility is suggested by the events at the Crucifixion: it was of course by means of a sponge, certainly a toilet sponge, that the soldier offered army wine ("vinegar") to Christ on the Cross. The gesture may seem to be intended as one of contempt, in using such an implement, but at the same time, if it were cleaned—as it could readily be, given the nature of sponges—it was the only practical means of reaching a drink up to a man high on a cross. What is interesting is that, in both the accounts that we have (Matthew 27, 48; John 19, 29) it was necessary to find some kind of stick to attach the sponge to. In other words, sponge and stick were not permanently bound together: when needed for use, the sponge was apparently attached to a convenient stick—in a public lavatory, presumably one of the communal sticks provided. As for sponges, it may seem likely that personal sponges were the norm.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reasonably accessible is A. Boethius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture*, 1970, 473 and pl. 246.

<sup>2</sup> *Cato the Censor* XX, 6.

<sup>3</sup>Hadrian: *SHA Hadrian* xviii, 10, Cassius Dio 69, 8, 2; Marcus Aurelius: *SHA Marcus* xxiii, 8; Severus Alexander: *SHA Alexander* xxiv, 2.

<sup>4</sup>*Apostolic Constitutions* 1, 6, 9; *Canons of the Council of Laodicea* 30.

<sup>5</sup>*P. Mich.* 471, 29 (c. A.D. 100); *AE* 1941, 5.

<sup>6</sup>*Seneca Epp.* 70, 20; *Martial* 12, 48, 7.

<sup>7</sup>A fragment of a wooden seat of the "Keyhole" form was recognized at the Roman villa at Neath-

am, Hants: M. Redknap, *Britannia* VII, 1976, 287-8 and fig. 5. Charles Daniels kindly informs me that a broken stone fragment of the "Keyhole" form of latrine seating was discovered at Wallsend, and will be published by him soon.

<sup>8</sup>A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, *Vindolanda: the Writing Tablets*, 1983, no. 38, 4.

<sup>9</sup>This paper has benefited from discussion with Peter Connolly, Mark Hassall and Margaret Roxan.