



# Sexual Imagery at Pompeii

Pompeii: The life, death and  
rediscovery of a Roman town  
(HPAH5078/HPAH6078)



Why might the artist have chosen to represent the male and female couple in these positions?



Marble bas-relief inserted onto the wall of the rear triclinium, behind the Caupona of Lucius Numinius (VII.7.18)

## Key observations

- Latin sexual vocabulary rich, but no single term fully exactly equating to our catch all term “sexuality”.
  - Titillate, insult and ward off evil.
- Focus on acts rather than being?  
Different codification of acts.
  - Gender framework for sexual acts: active and passive dynamic.
  - Also, social and legal status.
- Interpreting the evidence.
  - Not always “erotic” or a “snap-shot”.

# Methodological challenges

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- Conservatism of some excavators and authorities in the late 18th to early 19th century.
  - First *secretum* (“secret museum”) in the Herculaneum Museum recorded in 1795.
  - A secret cabinet established in Naples Archaeological Museum in 1817.
- Issue with provenance.
- Studies in sexuality more common from 1970s.



GABINETTO SEGRETO

# Roman attitudes to sex

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- A male Roman citizen, taking the active role was relatively uninhibited.
  - But must not sleep with other citizens' wives, daughters or sons.
  - Adultery a crime, but only applying to men sleeping with other men's wives.
- To be passive (for a man) was to surrender one's masculine status.
  - Risk being labelled a *cinaedus* or *pathicus*.
- Homoeroticism sometimes represented by conservative Romans as a Greek import.



House of the Lovers (I.10.11)

# Roman sexual grid

|                                                            | Vagina                                        | Anus                                          | Mouth                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Active                                                     |                                               |                                               |                                     |
| Activity                                                   | <i>futuere</i>                                | <i>pedicare</i>                               | <i>irrumare</i>                     |
| Person ( <i>Vir</i> )                                      | <i>fututor</i>                                | <i>pedicator/pedico</i>                       | <i>irrumator</i>                    |
| Passive                                                    |                                               |                                               |                                     |
| Activity                                                   | <i>Futui</i>                                  | <i>pedicari</i>                               | <i>Irrumari / fellari</i>           |
| Person<br>(Male) <i>Pathicus</i><br>(Female) <i>Femina</i> | <i>cunnilinator</i><br><i>Femina / puella</i> | <i>cinaedus / pathicus</i><br><i>pathicus</i> | <i>fellator</i><br><i>fellatrix</i> |

**Looking at the grid, can you determine which acts might be seen as the most controversial?**



# Sexual symbolism in Pompeii

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# Sexuality, status and symbolism

- “Sexual” imagery and vocabulary: wall-paintings, reliefs, material culture, graffiti, etc.
- “Suggestive” mythological scenes and banqueting scenes.
  - “High art” and expressions of good fortune and status?
- Private and public contexts.



House of  
Marcus  
Lucretius  
Fronto (V.4.a)



House of Caecilius  
Iucundus (V.1.26)

# Symbols of good fortune

- Good fortune and warding off the evil eye.
- Phalli are often represented in greater detail in iconographic depictions than female genitalia.
- Depicted as liminal points and locations of potential danger.



House of the Vettii (VI.15.1)

Bakery on the Via del Terme



"Good fortune dwells here"  
(CIL 4.1454)



**Can you identify the individual who may be in the most transgressive position in this scene?**