



# Dining and *Convivia*

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Everyday Life in Athens and Rome  
(HPHP4020)



# Banquets and drinking

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- *Cena* (pl. *Cenae*) – dinner.
- *Convivium* (pl. *Convivia*) – banquet / drinking party, with entertainment.
  - See also Greek - συμπόσιον.
  - “Respectable” Roman women could be present.
- “Highbrow” discussion or raucous affairs!
  - Compare Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistai* with Plut. *Anton.* 9.4, and Petronius’ *Satyricon* (“*Dinner at Trimalchio’s*”).



House of the Chaste Lovers - Pompeii



Ulpiano Checa,  
ca. late 19th to  
20th century

# Ancient and modern tropes

## Excess of food (Suet. *Div. Claud.* 33.1.)

- “They eat to vomit and vomit to eat, and banquets for which they scour the whole earth they do not even bother to digest” – **Seneca the Younger *Ad Helviam Matrem de Consolatione* 10.**

## Licentiousness

- “But how will they stand the frost and snow in the Apennines? Maybe they think they’ll tolerate the winter more easily since **they’ve learned to dance naked at banquets.**” – **Cicero *Second Oration Against Catiline* 2.23.**



# Conspicuous consumption

- “Showing off”, not just food, but other paraphernalia.
  - Guests and host.
  - Sumptuary legislation, periodic and often ineffective (Tac. *Ann.* 3.52-54).
- The “necessity” of “luxury”:
  - Calenus and his inheritance (Martial *Ep.* 1.99).

“...wealth loses all its radiance without an audience,” [when there is] ‘no one to see or to look on.’  
- **Plutarch *Moralia* 528a.**



# Roman Table Manners and Eating Habits

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# Meals of the Day

- Wake up around dawn.
- Morning *salutatio* – clients greet their patrons / go to work.
- Work till around noon or just after.
- Bathing and exercise normally began at the 8th hour (*ca.* 2 pm).
- **Evening *cena* beginning around the 10th hour (*ca.* 4pm).**

- Breakfast (*ientaculum*) – usually very light
- Lunch (*prandium*) – snacks and last night's leftovers
- **Dinner (*cena*)** – eaten mid-afternoon.
- **Main Meal (*cena*) – Courses**
  - Starters (*gustatio*)
  - Main course (*mensa prima*)
  - Dessert (*mensa secunda*)
  - Carousal (*comissatio*)

# Dress to Impress

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- Officially respectable men would wear a *toga cenatoris* to a banquet – no specific restrictions on women.
- Lollia Paulina, pearls and emeralds worth 40 million HS, and the receipts to prove it! – **Pliny HN 9.58.117.**



# Guests arriving

“When we finally went to dinner, Alexandrian boys poured **snow-cold water over our hands**. Others knelt at our feet and with astonishing dexterity **cut our toenails**. Even when performing such a menial task they were not silent, but **sang as they worked**.” — Petronius *Satyricon* 31.

- Crossing the threshold (right foot first).
  - *limen / vestibulum*.
- The *lararium*.
- Purification.





Reconstruction of the *triclinium* of the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii

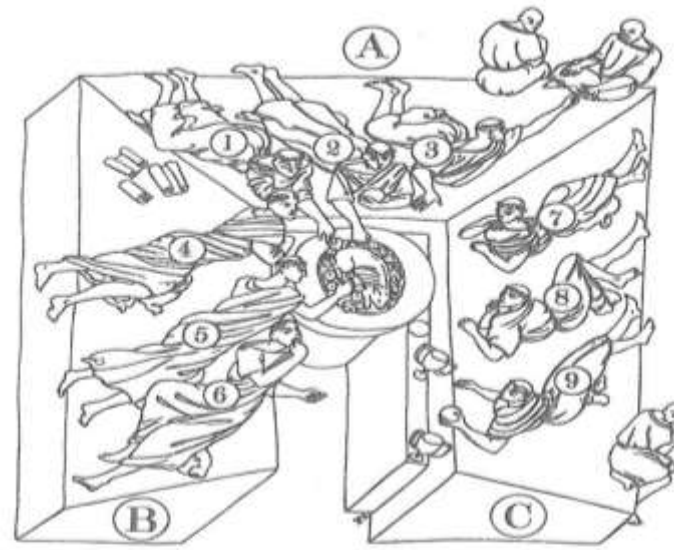


Figure 2.11 - Seating plan

**Couch of honour A**

- 1 Place of the consul, or guest of honour
- 2 Place of the king, or guest of honour
- 3 Guest of honour

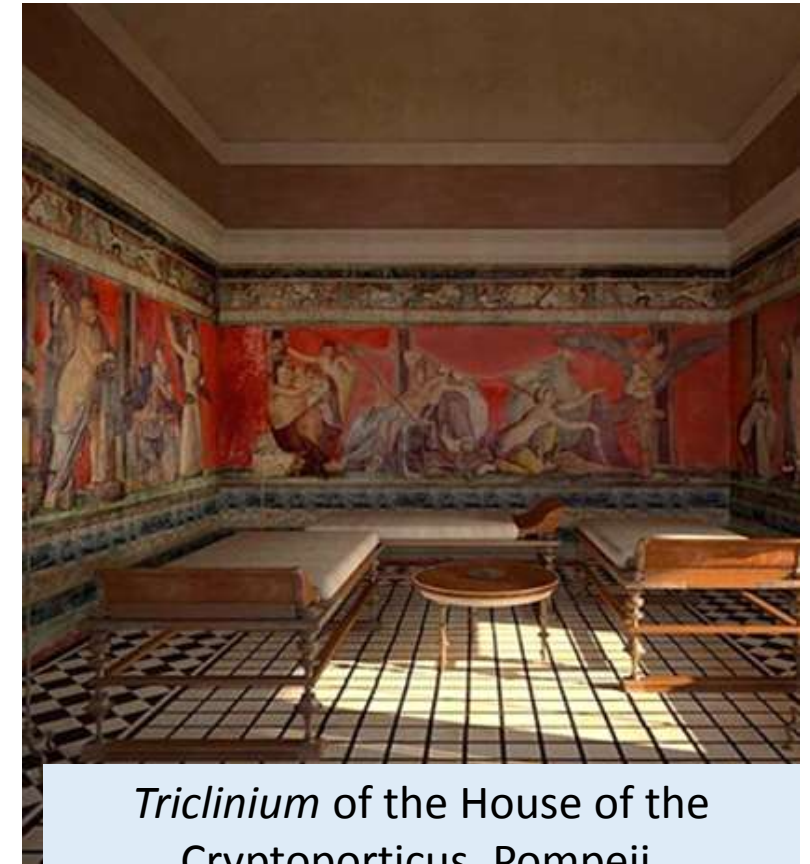
**Family couch B**

- 4 Host
- 5 Place of the hostess or second family member
- 6 Place of the freedman

**Guest couch C**

- 7 Guest
- 8 Guest
- 9 Guest

Image from Faas (2003)



*Triclinium* of the House of the Cryptoporticus, Pompeii.

# The seating order

# (Uninvited) Guests

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- Slave retinue.
- Shadows (*umbrae*) – no official place to recline.
  - “Philippus turned up with so many guests of his own that the host was placed in an embarrassing situation. So Philippus whispered to his friends to leave a little space for desert. In anticipation of the sweet course, they ate like birds, and so there was enough for everyone.” – **Plutarch *Moralia* 707.**
- *parasiti* – those angling for an invite.
  - When I see a rich fool, I pounce upon him. And if the wretch should happen to say something, I react in amazement and compliment him in a loud voice, as though impressed by his words.” – **Athen. *Deip.* 6.236e.**



## Belching, farting and urinating:

“...[Vitellius] asking them if they had enjoyed breakfast, and demonstrating that he had done so by belching loudly.” – **Suet. Vit. 7.**

Cf. Vitellius using emetics.

**Vomiting** probably not common – a *vomitorium* is not what you might think!

**Petronius *Satyricon*** – Trimalchio urinating in a pot.





## Entertainment

- Music and possibly dancing (by “unrespectable people”).
- Acrobats jugglers, knife throwing, jumping through hoops of fire.
- Rhyming, singing, wine throwing, party games – ***Magister Bibendi***.

“It often happened that someone invited his friends not only for the sake of conviviality, but also in order to witness two or three pairs of gladiators engaged in combat. Once they were seated with foods and drink, in came the gladiators. And the masters applauded enthusiastically as they cut each other’s throats.” – ***Athen. Deip. 153.***

# Roman dishes

- Few recipes books survive
  - “Apicius” *De Re Coquinaria*
  - Dishes mentioned in the *Deipnosophistaí* of Athenaeus.
- Quantities rarely given!
- Known dishes, from simple to highly lavish.

“He served to the palace-attendants, moreover, huge platters heaped up with the viscera of mullets, and flamingo-brains, partridge-eggs, thrush-brains, and the heads of parrots, pheasants, and peacocks.” – ***SHA Life of Elegabalus 20.5-6.***

Carbonized panis quadratus, preserved thanks to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius

# What ingredients were Not Available to the Romans?

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**Tomatoes** – from the “Americas” and hence not available to Romans.

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**Potatoes** – Again from the “Americas”

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**Bell peppers** – Again from the “Americas”

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**Pasta** – quintessentially Italian but does not appear until Middle-ages.

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**Sugar** - technically available from South Asia or Southeast Asia but seems to have been used in medicine not food (rarely mentioned).