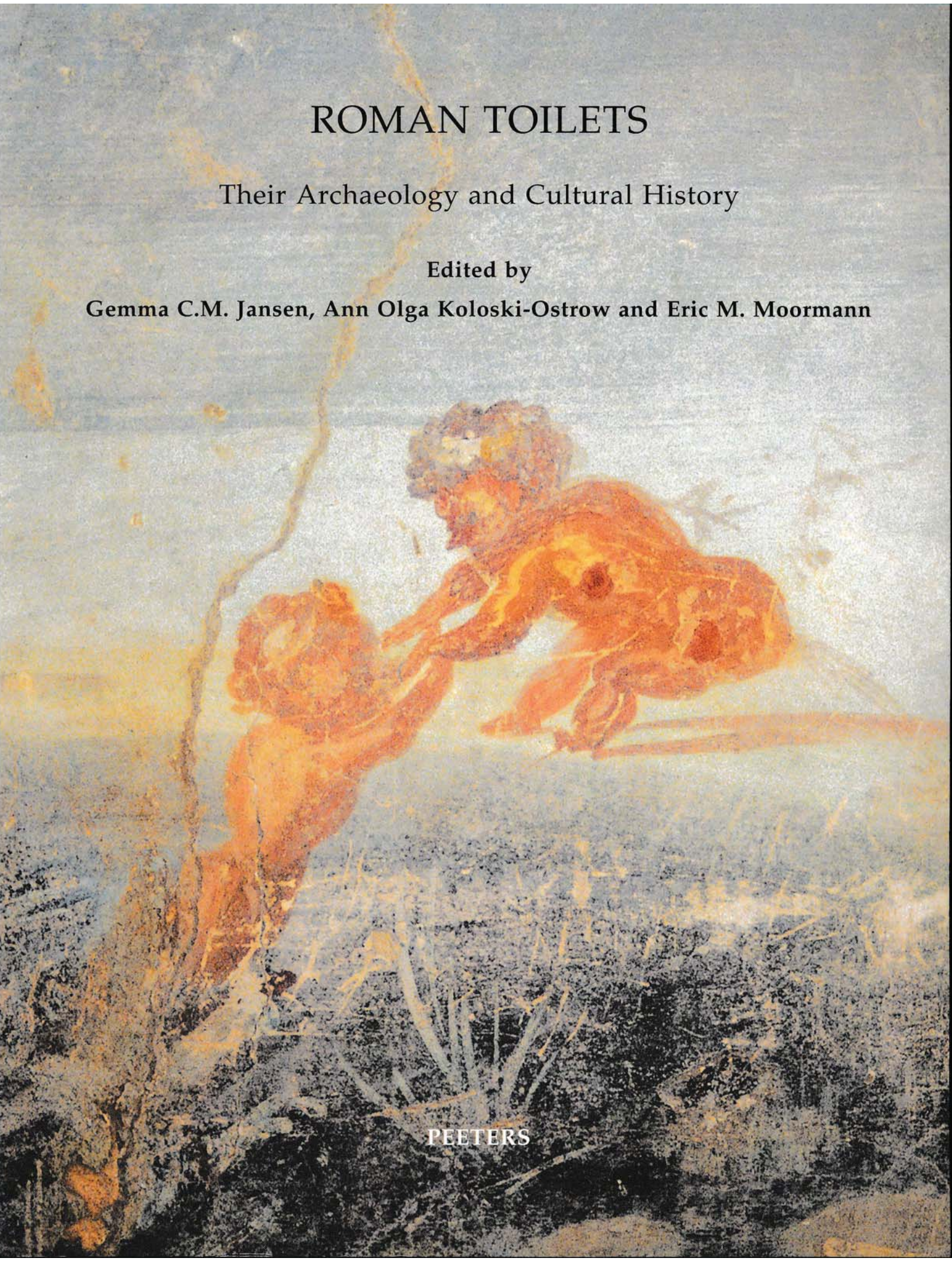
ROMAN TOILETS

Their Archaeology and Cultural History

Edited by

Gemma C.M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Eric M. Moormann



PEETERS

Multi-seater latrines, as we find them in Roman Ostia and in many other sites across the Mediterranean, are well known both to tourists and archaeologists, but very few people understand how they really functioned technically or how they may have been perceived in the context of Roman society. This handbook by an international group of specialists in archaeology, anthropology, and classical literature addresses a wide variety of questions regarding toilets in the Greco-Roman world. Chapters on the technology and construction of toilets, on the archaeology of toilets and their contents, on toilets in various ancient contexts (such as in private houses, baths, or military installations), on the impact of toilets on society and personal hygiene, especially in the Roman world, and on the decorations and graffiti from toilets, all combine to make this the most complete study of this important subject to date.

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PEETERS

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Photo on the cover:
Defecating pygmee in the frigidarium *of the Sarno Baths (VIII 2, 17-21) in Pompeii (photo S.T.A.M. Mols).*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The editors are extremely grateful to the scholars who came to the Ancient Roman Toilet Workshop, organized by us and held both at the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome and at the American Academy in Rome, from June 23-25, 2007. Not everyone who came to the 2007 workshop in Rome was able to write something for this book, but there were some who contributed greatly in other ways, especially to the lively debates and discussions we had, and we wish to acknowledge them here with our gratitude: Mark Bradley, Valerie Curtis, Anne Hervé-Moretti, Manfred Horstmanshoff, Hubertus Manderscheid, Loes L. Raimond-Waarts, and Gilbert Wiplinger. On the other hand, some people were not able to come to the workshop, but they later learned about the project and submitted chapters or sections of chapters. In the end we had a large group of contributors from several different countries and continents and without their strong intellectual commitment at the workshop itself and to the subsequent research and preparation of their submissions on the wide variety of topics represented here, we could never have achieved the high level of collaboration and cohesiveness evident in these pages.
In addition, we wish to thank most warmly the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome for the use of their facilities and for much generous hospitality during the first two days of our workshop. We enjoyed comfortable accommodation, the fine library, the lovely landscape, and excellent discussion rooms. We are particularly grateful to interim director, dr. Gert Jan Burgers, and to Janet Mente, head librarian. Likewise, the staff at the American Academy in Rome, most especially Professor Thomas A.J. McGinn, then the Andrew W. Mellon Professor-in-Charge of the School of Classical Studies, warmly welcomed us, offered us a hearty lunch, gave us free reign of the gardens, and provided a fine conference room for our deliberations. We are also grateful to various members of the Department of Classics at Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, and to the editorial staff at BABESCH who assisted us in improving the manuscript.

Gemma C.M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Eric M. Moormann

1

Introduction

Gemma C.M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Eric M. Moormann

We felt that this is an opportune moment to produce a handbook on Roman toilets. Such a book offers not only a timely recognition of the growth of interest in all matters concerning Greek and Roman daily life, but it offers an overdue acknowledgement that Roman toilets, perhaps more than any other facet of Mediterranean archaeology, have always fascinated legions of non-specialists, while specialists have tended to avoid the topic.

Many subfields related to Roman daily life, especially those considered ancient technologies, have recently been very well treated: for example, daily practices of mining and metallurgy, stoneworking, woodworking, agriculture, food production, engineering and construction, hydraulics and water supply, trade, textile production, ceramic and glass production, land and sea transport, warfare and fortification, and many more minor technologies such as time-keeping, writing, and book production. Quite surprisingly, however, until now a text of sufficient authority and accessibility that includes a comprehensive treatment of ancient sanitation, another major hallmark of Roman daily life, has been lacking. The amateur enthusiast, in fact, would be hard-pressed to find any suitably detailed guide to ancient waste management systems for any period in any language, even if he or she were to look in Dutch, French, German, Italian, or Spanish, let alone English, publications. Toilets are strangely underrepresented in the standard archaeological guides (cf. Filippo Coarelli's *Laterza* guides to Rome, Rome's environs, and Lazio, for example), and are usually treated perfunctorily in both single-volume travel guides and scholarly studies of Rome and other Mediterranean cities.

This handbook, therefore, in the first instance, has been designed to fill this gap with the aim (daunting, perhaps, but achievable, we think) of providing both non-specialists and specialists alike with a reasonably comprehensive introduction to Roman toilets and toilet matters in the ancient Mediterranean. Chapters and case studies include Punic, Egyptian, ancient Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman toilets and sanitary systems from a wide variety of settings (public, domestic, urban, suburban, rural, military, and private), both for study in their own right and for comparative purposes.

While the bulk of evidence presented here is clearly on the Greco-Roman period, we know that the Greeks and Romans appreciated and learned from pre-classical periods and cultures, so we felt it was important to explore these older roots to sanitary systems as well. We started our work with several very basic questions: Where is the evidence for sanitary matters? What is the evidence - archaeological and literary? What do we think we know about toilets and waste management from the ancient Mediterranean? What has new research (in archaeology or literature) recently revealed to help us with what we do or do not know?

One of the barriers to working on ancient sanitation derives from the very nature of classical archaeology and its role. The field has long concerned itself with the high culture of the Greek and Roman world. Its principal aim has traditionally been to show how highly civilized the Greeks and Romans were and how studying their world can enlighten us moderns. Such a focused aim for classical archaeology helps to explain why interest in toilets (and other really probing questions about daily life whose answers may not always reveal a 'pretty picture' of ancient culture) is still only gradually taking hold.

The research topic of lavatories and human excretory habits has another barrier to overcome as well: that of the taboo of the subject. As Roman toilet customs have constantly been considered an embarrassing subject, a subject to be passed over as quickly as possible, or preferably not be mentioned at all, we can easily understand why this field of research is still in its infancy and why the study of this important aspect of Roman daily life has remained, as it were, in the back seat.

When taboos are put aside, it becomes apparent that Roman sanitary practice can reveal many barely known Roman habits and traditions. We can learn not only what toilets looked like and how they functioned, but much about attitudes towards hygiene, the level of privacy various facilities had, and about the Romans' own taboos that encircled acts of urination and defecation. Some caution is necessary, however. Modern authors on such topics must constantly be aware of our own biased views. No one is free from his

or her own cultural values regarding sanitation. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the following short section on the history of Roman toilet research.

1.1 History of Research on Sanitation

The first archaeologists who came across Roman toilets seemed to have an immediate ambivalence towards them. On the one hand, these toilets looked similar to their own, therefore, they did not seem worth mentioning. They were not seen as an expression of the high cultural achievements of Roman society. Early excavators of Pompeii, like Giuseppe Fiorelli, only very briefly mentioned the toilets they found and with no overall analysis.

On the other hand, as early as the 18th century, some scholars did recognize the existence of Roman toilets, and they found a small place in the famous encyclopedia of the time by Daremberg and Saglio.[1] But several excavators were blinded by the longstanding taboos about topics like toilets. They did not even recognize what they were digging up in some cases. Richard Neudecker[2] lists some amusing interpretations. The toilet in the *macellum* of Pozzuoli was regarded a medical steam bath, and it was thought that, because the steam was so strong, one had to sit down as it was emitted into the room. The excavator of the toilet underneath the Domus Transitoria in Rome thought it was a machine chamber of a hydraulic lift. Neudecker found that other toilets were regarded as chairs for medical treatment, bath showers, or prison installations.

In the 20th century the attitude gradually changed, and we can find some milestones in Roman toilet research. The researchers, however, were not all archaeologists or historians, and it is not surprising that a physician was among the first to point out the importance of this research. In the 1920s the Danish physician Hølger Mygind wrote several articles about Roman Pompeii of which two were devoted completely to the water supply and sanitation of the town. In one of these articles Mygind was the first to make an analysis of the total ensemble of toilets, drains, and sewers in one Roman town.[3] He believed that the hygienic standards of a people tell something about the level of their civilization, and from this point of view he wondered why a study of this subject had not been conducted for Pompeii before.

He investigated both toilets *in situ* and those mentioned in the literature. His work is very thorough, and he had a keen eye for solid observation and analysis. His final conclusion is: 'Von einem ästhetischen und hygienischen Gesichtspunkt aus betrachtet, war die Einrichtung des Abtritts des privaten pompejanischen Hauses allerdings nicht lobenswert [...].'[4] It seems that he was disturbed by his own conclusion and in his last paragraph he tried to weaken it by comparing the toilets of Pompeii with those found in Rome (of which there were hardly any at that time) and with toilets in contemporary Italy (that are also located in or near kitchens, as are the house toilets of Pompeii). In comparison with those later toilets, according to Mygind, the toilets of Pompeii were a great step forward.

During the Fascist era, when large-scale excavations were carried out in Italy, dozens of toilets came to light. Amedeo Maiuri excavated many of them in Herculaneum and in Pompeii. Guido Calza discovered dozens more in Ostia, when he was excavating large areas of the city in the preparation for the great exhibition 'Esposizione Universale di Roma', which was scheduled to open in 1942, but, in fact, never took place.

Ostia became the model example for archaeology in the Fascist regime, and was used as a demonstration of how a Roman town functioned and to prove that Italians had descended from an impressively civilized ancient people. In the Fascist programmatic plan to 'resurrect' the glories of antiquity, careful restoration of buildings was a key ingredient. As a part of this plan, the toilet near the Forum baths was fully restored (we could even say 'overly' restored), and given a prominent role in 'making a positive impression' in behalf of the Romans (*fig. 1.1*). The toilet was heavily reconstructed for the specific reason of emphasizing how technically advanced and hygienic the Romans really were. Neudecker calls

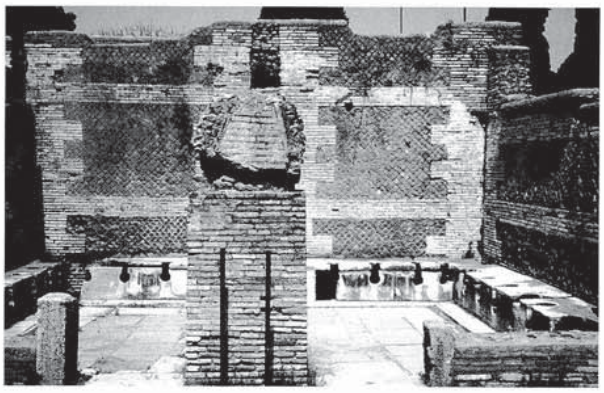

Fig. 1.1. Ostia, famous toilet near Forum Baths (I xii, 1) (photo A.O. Koloski-Ostrow).

it 'neo-imperialistic pride for Roman toilet civilization'.[5] Perhaps because of the role that the Fascist regime gave it, the Ostia Forum toilet is still one of the most well known Roman toilets that we have.

Many more decades passed before Alex Scobie, an ancient historian and classicist from New Zealand, wrote his pioneering article 'Slums, Sanitation and Mortality in the Roman World' (1986). The aim of his study was 'to try to estimate, as accurately as available evidence permits, how sanitary and unsanitary Roman towns were'.[6] Fully aware that literary evidence on the subject is extremely meager, he complained that archaeologists rarely concerned themselves with sewers and latrines. He had to base his archaeological discussion on the available evidence, which itself was very modest, little more than was available for Mygind's earlier study. This meant that he had to work with few classical texts and not very many excavated latrines. He concluded, not surprisingly, that the inhabitants of ancient Rome lived in an extremely unsanitary environment.[7]

So far, the first and only book (before this handbook) that is completely devoted to Roman latrines is by the archaeologist Richard Neudecker (1994). Because Neudecker wrote his book eight years after Scobie's seminal article, he had more archaeological information available to him and more awareness of the problems related to the topic. In addition to his careful treatment of what he called *Prachtlatrinen*, very beautifully decorated and appointed latrines of the late first and second centuries, Neudecker expanded the scope of the sanitary discussion. Based on the archaeological remains of toilets, he tried to establish the vision and attitude of the Romans toward toilets and their personal hygiene. His work now has to be the starting point for all current latrine research. Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow's *The Archaeology of Sanitation in Roman Italy: Water, Sewers, and Toilets* (forthcoming, University of North Carolina Press) covers toilets before the luxury latrines were constructed. Barry Hobson's *Latrinae et Foricae: Toilets in the Roman World* (2009) gives an overview of Roman toilets across the Mediterranean with particular focus on Pompeii.

More or less along the lines of these developments are the new contributions of very recent decades. Koloski-Ostrow and Gemma Jansen have published articles respectively on public and private toilets. Their work fits into a research exchange in which there is more scholarly interest in dirt generally. *Sordes Urbis* by Xavier Dupré Raventós (2000), presenting the papers of a conference in Rome in 1996, is a major breakthrough as dirt and filth are in the center of the debate. Also the German scholar Günther E. Thüry (2001) published a book on dirt in antiquity: *Müll und Marmorsäulen: Siedlungshygiene in der römischen Antike.*

In addition to these pioneering articles and books, others have offered important contributions as well. In recent years researchers have been gathering facts about latrines (what did the toilets look like? how did they operate?). Because of this work, toilets have finally started to receive more mention in books on Roman daily life and on water systems. See, for example, the chapter of Andrew I. Wilson (2000) on drainage in the *Handbook of Ancient Water Technology*, or chapters by Nathalie de Haan, Jansen, Koloski-Ostrow, and Wilson that consider water in the context of urban sanitation in, *Water Use and Hydraulics in the Roman City* (2001), edited by Koloski-Ostrow.

Researchers are now turning to even more probing questions, beyond the sheer facts we know about the ruins, such as 'what can these toilets tell us about Roman feelings towards hygiene and privacy?'[8] and 'what can the toilets tell us about daily life in general?'[9] Jansen and Koloski-Ostrow discuss for the first time what is really going on in a Roman toilet. This is quite a break from former studies, which tended to describe toilets as if no one ever used them. Jeroen Van Vaerenbergh takes the issue even further and dares to ask whether the toilets even functioned according to their design. He brings the filthier side of Roman society into even more precise focus.[10]

1.2 The Need for a Book on Roman Toilets and the Roman Toilet Workshop (Rome, June 23-25, 2007)

Due to all these changes in research and to the fact that more toilets have come to light in urban contexts, there is a current need both for an assessment of results of recent research and for a set of guidelines on how to study these toilets. As the researchers of Roman toilets live and work in different parts of the world, there is not a common idea on how to approach this subject. This relatively new field of research needs a clear vision more than ever. That is why a three-day expert meeting was organized in Rome in the summer of 2007 in order to discuss the latest results of work on toilets, to put forward the more pressing research questions, and to compose a book on the subject.

All participants submitted thoughts and ideas about what they wanted to discuss and these were put together into a summary booklet in preparation for the meeting in Rome. These ideas covered a surprisingly broad and diverse range of topics and themes. They ranged from urine collection, to the discovery of chamber pots in *Carnuntum*, to Fortuna paintings in toilets that aimed to scare off the demons lingering there. The booklet provided rich material for starting the meeting and for beginning the work on this book. Most of the experts who participated are archaeologists, but historians, an architect, and a biologist were also present. Many are citizens of countries all over Europe and two were from United States. Not all are specialists in Roman sanitation, but several devote their research to Greek toilets and some even to Egyptian, Punic or Medieval toilets. The meeting had the character of a brainstorming session more than a conference for the presentation of polished papers. In the famous Dutch tradition, a lot of talking took place. We used a method that consists of several rounds of discussion based on the equal participation of all (*figs 1.2-3*). After all groups had the opportunity to complete their debates, we made a visit to the toilets of Ostia and a tour of a small section of the Cloaca Maxima in Rome (*figs 1.4-5*). When the fieldtrips were over, participants presented the outline of the book and different parts were assigned to different authors for writing over the next year. The finished product is the book before you.

Fig. 1.2. Rome 2007, discussion group on cesspits and sewers (photo G.C.M. Jansen).

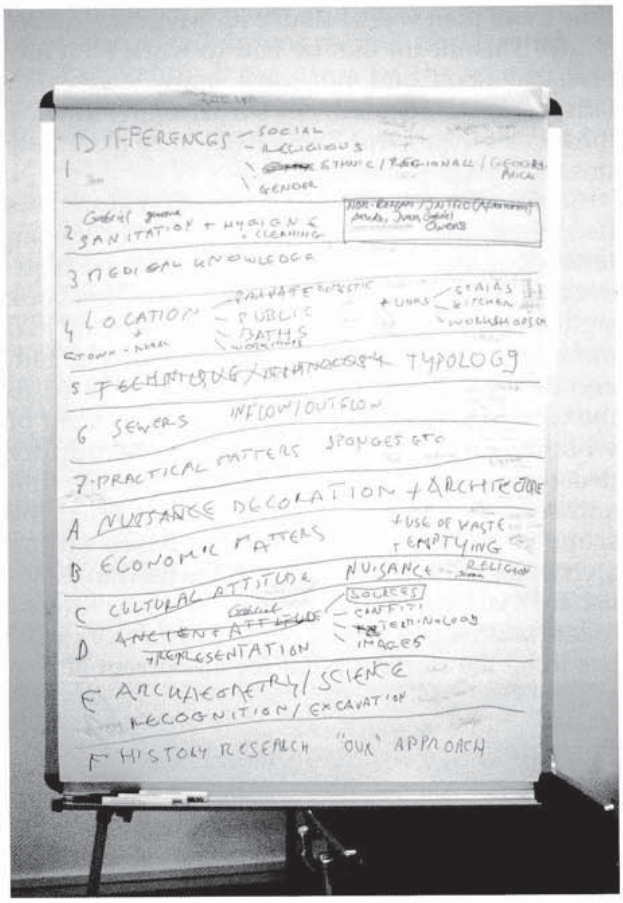

Fig. 1.3. Rome 2007, defining main theme's for the book (photo G.C.M. Jansen).

1.3 Observations about Stylistic Choices and How to Use this Book

Since the authors of the following chapters are international (they come to the topic at hand from the perspective of different training and different scholarly traditions), we editors realized that we would have to make a number of choices about the style, formatting, spelling, and terminology used throughout the book. We decided to standardize these points as much as possible to eliminate confusions and inconsistencies. We have used American (as opposed to British) spelling. In Latin spelling, we have used 'v' for 'w' sounds, for example *privatus* as opposed to *priuatus*. All dates appear with BC or AD. We understand multi-seat toilets accessible in public areas as 'public' toilets. These can also be called 'latrines'. Smaller toilets (with one, two, or a few seats in them) accessible from within private properties are called 'private'. These matters can be complicated, however, and we have asked our authors to be ever vigilant and sensitive to possible confusions or inconsistencies.

While we asked our authors to give us detailed evidence for their claims, we requested analytical

Fig. 1.4. Ostia 2007, discussion group during field trip (photo G. Wiplinger).

Fig. 1.5. Rome 2007, entering the Cloaca Maxima (photo G. Wiplinger).

analyses of whatever problems they were treating, as opposed to purely descriptive points of view. With this in mind, in several of the following chapters and sections of chapters, we approved case studies to accompany the more general analytical narratives to strengthen arguments with detailed excavation reports or research results. We think these case studies offer exciting avenues for future research efforts to be intensified.

Editors and authors of many books before ours have argued with fierce conviction about the importance of their works. We too, however, want to convince all of our readers that the cultural and archaeological history of toilets (especially in ancient Rome) is indispensable for a true appreciation of antiquity. And while all such claims are rarely true, in this case we believe they are. The modern world cannot plausibly hope to understand urban infrastructure (including aqueducts, sewers, roads, baths, plumbing, and toilets) without some grasp of urban sanitation and the facilities necessary to provide it.

We know that we have not covered all possible topics related to toilets in this book. Astute readers will notice, no doubt, many omissions: the famous Knossos toilet system; Bronze Age precursors to toilets of the Hellenistic and Roman periods; discussion of ancient medical and philosophical texts that deal with faeces and urine; treatment of late antique and Byzantine toilets. Still, we ask our readers to hold on to your seats (excuse the pun) for a reading adventure that will overturn many well-established ideas. For example, the notion that visiting a toilet was a social event or that the sponge tied to a stick and used for cleaning was the only cleaning device available in a Roman toilet come under attack. In addition, we think this book offers a great variety of ideas (large and small) that are new, and many facts about ancient Roman toilets and sanitation that were unknown before their presentation here.

NOTES

1 Daremberg/Saglio 1912, 9.
2 Neudecker 1994, 8-9.
3 Mygind 1921, 251-385.
4 Mygind 1921, 319.
5 Neudecker 1994, 9.
6 Scobie 1986, 399.
7 Scobie 1986, 417.
8 Jansen 2000a and 2003.
9 Koloski-Ostrow 1996 and 2000.
10 Van Vaerenbergh 2006.