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THE SECRET HISTORY OF ANCIENT TOILETS

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“I had a lovely conversation with a few people while sitting on the toilet the other day.”

Around 1st Century BC, public latrines became a major feature of Roman infrastructure. In a city with over one million inhabitants, ninety-five percent of the inhabitants did not have access to a private bathroom. Only wealthy Romans could afford the luxury of having a private bathroom by tapping directly into the public aqueducts. For the majority of Romans lacking their own bathroom, public latrines were the option aside from keeping urinal pots at home.

Public latrines were rooms lined with stone or wooden bench seats every few feet. The toilet holes were round on top of the bench with a narrow slit extending forward and down over the edge in a keyhole shape.

Through these slits, it was believed that people cleaned themselves with a sponge-tipped stick shared by everybody.

These sponge sticks were located in the small gutter in front of the seats. When people finished cleaning with the sponge stick, they would scrape the sponge against the side of the stone hole that they were seated on and let it fall under the seats.

Constant running water flushed away the waste into a sewage system that ran under the streets of Rome. This system was made possible by several aqueducts that flowed into the city, keeping it supplied with fresh flowing water.

In some ancient bathrooms, there were space for one-hundred people at a time. The bathrooms were open to all genders and all ages. People were discussing business or gossiping to one another while going to the bathroom.

However, the public bathrooms were not only visited by the common citizen, the wealthy also frequented them. Since every location in ancient Rome where large crowds gathered was an opportunity for wealthy Romans to pander to their constituents, the public bathrooms were a great location for mingling with each other.

The public latrines were places for local gossiping, chatting and doing one’s business. There were no barriers between the toilet seats, but people maintained sense of privacy with their long garments.

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Chelsea Wald, The Secret History of Ancient Toilets, accessed November 7, 2017, https://www.nature.com/news/the-secret-history-of-ancient-toilets-1.19960