on to the right, there are at least four ships, with sails bloated. Before the first ship, above, there may be a man holding out a twig in his hand. The first ship, more than one meter long, is probably a navis oneraria (‘merchant vessel’): we can distinguish the mast, the big square sail, some oars, and a little man on the boat deck. Further on there is another quadruped and at least three pots (amphoras) of different shape (harbor scene?). We can see also a second ship, and a third, in this case showing a beaked prow, with a gubernator (‘helmsman’) wearing a sort of hood and having something round in front of him. Above there are at least two animals with long necks. Under the third ship, we see the rest of a fourth ship (the stern and a part of the sails). A scratched graffito is clearly visible on the hydraulic plaster underneath.80

On the western wall, and always on the white plaster, we can again observe traces of charcoal. Here I see at least three or four very curious triangular shapes with ‘legs’, possibly personified female genitalia (vulvae), a long horizontal shape (phallic?), and the remains of an inscription (fig. 12.22).81

On the hydraulic plaster of the northern wall, there are some scratched graffiti. The most evident one was already published by Aurigemma,82 but I am proposing to read it differently, as part of an unknown verse (hexameter or pentameter), probably of an erotic nature (figs 12.24-25):

Qui primus pueros do(—?). [perhaps docuit]. ‘Who first [taught] the boys.’

The same wall has a singular representation of a coitum (fig. 12.26)83 and a very disarticulated inscription of about six lines, maybe beginning with hic and mentioning a puella.84

The chronology of these documents is not before the 120s AD and probably not later than Severan times.85 We can observe that almost all the graffiti are of an extemporary sort: the poetic (and erotic) subjects are of no surprise on the walls and the big charcoal scenes represent themes very loved by the Romans: naval subjects, fighters, and animals.86 What is remarkable is the size and the visibility of the scenes that dominated the surface of the walls. That is unusual for graffiti in private contexts, but I think more comprehensible in a less controlled place, such as a public, multi-seater toilet.88

Case Study: The Paintings of Philosophers in the Baths of the Seven Sages in Ostia
(Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Eric M. Moormann)

The painted decoration in the Baths of the Seven Sages (III x, 2-3, room no 6) at Ostia deserves attention in the context of Roman messages concerned with ‘toilet talk’.89 Heavily robed Greek philosophers (fig. 12.27-30) seated not on latrines, but on bisellia, converse with each other (or with us viewers) in a hand-lettered, cartoon-like dialogue about ways to effect good digestion and defecation. Their ‘advice’, written in street Latin above their heads, and their names and cities of origin are inscribed beside them in Greek.

Not much was written about them for many years after the first publication by the excavator Guido Calza,91 but in recent decades some fascinating interpretations have been made. As they concern acts that are performed in a toilet, we find it appropriate to include them in this book. Three of these Sages are still visible: Solon (fig. 12.28), Thales (fig. 12.29), and Chilon (fig. 12.30), and part of the name of Bias. While we might expect philosophers to expound about the soul or meaning of life, much to everyone’s surprise, these messages concern the functions of the body and hence are rather non-philosophical. In a lower register the heads of some seated men are preserved (fig. 12.30), originally numbering about twenty. Their bodies were probably destroyed when the room was renovated and received a new dado for decoration. Apparently, these men were sitting on a multi-seater toilet and chatting to each other.

The texts from the mouths of the philosophers are written in iambic senarii which belong to a form of poem appropriate for Roman mimes. Next to Thales (fig. 12.29) we read: (1) durum cacantes monuit ut nitant Thales (‘Thales advised those having a difficult shit to strain (or push hard)’); (2) verbose tibi / nemo / dicit dum Priscianus / [u]laris xylospongio nos / [a?]quas (‘No one speaks to you with many words
while you, Priscianus, use a sponge on a rod. [...] we... water...’). Perhaps the biggest joke of all suggested by the painter of the room is that the small rods wielded by the notable philosophers during their ‘lectures’ may just as effectively be used for cleaning sticks in the toilet (cf. above A. Wilson, p. 103).

Above Solon (fig. 12.28) we see: (1) ut bene cacaret ventrem palpauit Solon (‘In order to shit well Solon rubbed his belly’); (2) iudici (?) / or(di)na (?) (‘Order to the judge/to be judged’); (3) ... Vergilius legespueris (?) (‘... that Virgil read to the boys’ or ‘[a text of] Virgil read to the boys’). Chilon (fig. 12.31) declares: mulione sedes / uisire tacite Chilon docuit subdolus (‘You sit on a muleteer.’ (or, if we read mulio ne sedes/ ‘Don’t sit down, muleteer.’ Then,
‘Sly Chilon taught (how) to fart silently’.

Figures, presumably of more regular, run-of-the-mill ‘contemporary’ Roman visitors to the room, are in a band beneath the Seven Sages (see again fig. 12.30, bottom). They too converse together in comic strip manner, and their discourse is even more colloquial and basic. Unfortunately, many of the words and portraits are poorly preserved, but enough survives to be certain that all the walls were covered in such a manner. In this lower section, above the heads of these men, we read texts: (1) ...denis Bias; (2) agita te celerius /pervenes (‘Move yourself and you will arrive faster.’); (3) - as an answer to this - propero (‘I am hurrying’); (4) amice fugit te proverbium / bene caca et irrima medicos (‘Friend, the saying escaped you: shit well and let the doctors suck you.’). The best doctors of the day could not possibly have delivered more pointed or honest advice about emptying the bowel. Fortuna would have gladly stood by any of these gentlemen to assist them in their hard labors of evacuation and breaking wind, or to protect them from the dangers of the open sewers under the seats.

Several fundamental problems must be tackled first: the building history of this part of the complex, the date of the decorations, and the function of the room. Clarke called it a tavern, pointing to the amphorae painted near the ceiling (fig. 12.32). Others have seen it as a latrine, but in this dark and gloomy space we find none of the necessary constructions to suggest such a function, so that, at present, no definitive interpretation can be given. As to dating, most authors agree that the murals belong to the early 2nd century AD.

Secondly, we should ask to whom these messages were ‘sent’: were they for ‘lower-class’ people, as Clarke argues expressis verbis, or could they be for a more sophisticated clientele, such as the visitors to the baths? The fact that precious wine (falernum, see note 95 below and fig. 12.30, where the word is visible) is depicted on the upper register of the south wall, and that the Greek Sages speak in street Latin suggests the notion of bilingual literacy for those who wanted to understand the overall message. The images of the Sages were probably easily recognizable, thanks to their standard iconography, but their humor was only fully grasped if their words could be understood.

Richard Neudecker suggests that the decorations endorse the philosophical ideas described by Plutarch in his Convitium septem sapientium 159B, whereas Clarke analyzes the images as an example of heteroglossy, philosophers using language that they are not normally known to use. For Clarke, the scenes are lowbrow, instead of highbrow, as Neudecker posits, and they rather show an example of what the Romans really found funny: overturning power. Stephan Mols, contra Neudecker, denies the connection with Plutarch and other literary texts, and sees the humor in the fact of the combination of such serious persons as the Greek Sages - depicted in the standard fashion of Greco-Roman art - and the humble, and sometimes embarrassing, matters of defecation that they discuss. Therefore, he thinks the humor is even more subtle than we find in the philosopher paintings at Ephesus. We agree with Mols that the decorations are probably not just caricatures of famous philosophers, but ‘...a parody of the customary behavior of the wealthy, in showing off their own humanitas, their own humane sensibility, by means of portrait galleries, a parody that is inspired by the Roman genre of mime.’

But to push even further the notion at the heart of Mols’ argument - that insult to authority was what stimulated the most laughter for the Romans - we propose another, similar way to understand
the paintings in the room. To do so, we must consider relationship of the Seven Sages paintings to a type of Roman literary trope, not just to the influence of mime. The toilet-talk pun expressed in these painted walls is indeed exceptionally clever, but perhaps it can only be fully appreciated if the whole wall is considered together, including the decorations in the uppermost band of the room - the band near and on the ceiling. Not quite symmetrically placed above the heads of each of the surviving Sages are different types of amphorae, containers for beverages like expensive wine or foodstuffs (fig. 12.30 with the word *falernum*). Such amphorae can be seen on the ceiling as well, along with a big fish and a man who seems to be floating beside them. There is no question that Falernian wine brings luxury to mind. The fish on the ceiling, although very poorly preserved today, might also be another type of comestible meant to signal more wealthy tastes. We believe that these Trajanic paintings may be a visual representation of the kind of literary trope we can find in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*. The 'authority' figure, Trimalchio, is the real laughing stock from beginning to end, despite his display of erudition, which at every turn is faulty, his wealth, which is continuously excessive, and his gluttonous generosity, which itself becomes an agony for all his dinner guests, who will need toilet facilities for relief, and who most of all will themselves need to evacuate from his house in the end. The 'authority figures' in the paintings, of course, are the philosophers, and they bear the brunt of our laughter in the painted scenario.

Petronius deliberately (and ingeniously) employs descriptive language that reminds us of bodily evacuation in a whole parade of overwhelmingly lavish, greasy, and rich foods mentioned in the course of his dinner party. In reading the satirical novel, we come to visualize those foods almost as excrement itself (soft, brown, wet, creative culinary lumps), and ultimately to imagine the whole overstuffed dinner party as a preparation for a massive bowel movement.

The painter of the Ostian room also plays upon the relationship between luxury and excess (at the top of the room, manifested in expensive wine like Falernian, and perhaps in the fat fish near the amphorae) and the dregs (*faex*), the ordinary toilet users and their production, at the bottom. The upper register mainly represents costly drinks. These savory pleasures are 'digested' into excremental advice from the mouths of famous philosophical authorities in the middle register. Finally, in the lowest register, itself at the very bottom of the room, the heads of contemporary Roman *cacatores*, babbbling their 'silly' conversation seat to seat in the *forica*, will themselves create the ultimate end-product of the whole sequence, fresh urine and excrement. It all boils down to that! The paintings allow the humor of a sophisticated literary trope, like the one in Petronius, to become easily accessible to clientele of these handsome baths, even to those clientele who might not know all the words or who might themselves be illiterate.

12.2 INTERPRETING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE: LATRINES AND THE SENSES (Zena Kamash)

The aim of this section is to approach an understanding of the experience of using a Roman-style communal, public latrine. In recent years, an increasing body of inter-disciplinary work has looked at the role of the senses in human experiences of the material world. The sensuous inter-relationship of body-mind-environment ('emplacement') is our way of finding out about the material world around us. A sensual archaeology of latrines in the Roman world must, therefore, be considered in any attempt to understand the complexities of latrine use across the Roman world.

There is a tendency in the western world to prioritize vision over the other four senses. In experience, however, our senses are knitted together; that is, we do not necessarily experience them simultaneously, but rather they are woven together sequentially. In what follows, I hope to bring out some of the ways in which four of the five senses, vision, smell, touch and sound, might have been knitted together in the experience of a Roman public latrine. In order to make as secure a sensory interpretation as possible, this analysis draws on the well-researched data presented by Wilson in chapter 7. I focus on public latrines because many of the issues discussed here, particularly those related to the social gaze, seem to be a greater threat in public, rather than private latrines.

Most latrines were screened from exterior view, which would have afforded a degree of privacy to the people inside the latrine. Once inside the latrine, two factors suggest that there may also have been visual privacy of the body. It has been argued convincingly in chapter 7 that the wearing of voluminous clothing would have prevented in practice very little of the body from being seen. There is also textual evidence referring to bathhouse practices that has a bearing on this question. Carlin Barton has demonstrated that in the