

Life in the Roman Empire: Episode 195

Pubs and Brothels

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Poppina

Considering that most of the urban population in a place like Rome lived in insulae, we'll need to revisit the insulae to understand the role of poppina.

- If you lived in an insulae, it meant you had no facilities for cooking. Which means the poor always needed to eat out. In this case, you'd eat at a poppinae, a public eating house.²⁷
- Poppina, or taverna, is where we get the word tavern.
- Poppina or taverna were rowdy places but nevertheless functioned as the center of a poor person's social life.²⁸
- The word "taverna" only appears once in the New Testament in Acts 28:15, "The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and **Three Taverns** to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage."
- Over 120 poppina have been unearthed in Pompeii.
- Because the poor—which made up most of the population—didn't have cooking facilities in their homes, they ate meals at poppina.
- In Ephesians 5:18, Paul writes, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, **making the most of the time**, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit..." While we often hear this text quoted in relation to alcohol, Paul places it within the context of how a person is spending their time.
- As a Jewish Rabbi, it's hard to imagine Paul didn't have Proverbs 23:29-30 in the back of his mind: "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? **Those who linger late over wine**, those who keep trying mixed wines."
- The Hebrew word for lingering late is "ahar" and it means, "To remain somewhere for a protracted period of time past the expected norm." Paul is saying, "Don't fill your life with stuff that distracts you and numbs you out from the important stuff God has made you for."

Brothels

Brothels were fixtures of every city. As previously stated, prostitution was legal, and prostitutes were required to register with the local aedile for tax purposes.

- *Pornai* ("whores") were classified as distinct from *Heterai* ("companions"). The *porne* stood in an alley or in a row of girls 'posted in battle-line' at the brothel entrance.²⁹

²⁷ Horace, *Epistles* 1.14.21

²⁸ Robert Garland, *The Other Side of History: Daily Life in the Ancient Rome*, Lecture

²⁹ Eub. (?) Ap. Ath. 13.568e-569d.

- In the third century CE, there were 45 brothels in Rome, and they were not allowed to open before 3 pm.³⁰
- Graffiti from the brothels of Pompeii show that both men and women worked as prostitutes.³¹
- Brothel workers stood in front of small cubicles with their nicknames and prices scribbled on a placard above them.³²
- Brothel rooms uncovered in Pompeii consist of a single masonry bed-base painted white and covered with graffiti left by patrons.³³
- Small brothels catering to the poor featured paintings above the doors showing couples engaged in sexual acts in luxurious settings.³⁴
- Slavery was the main method by which brothels were supplied with workers.³⁵ Both male and female prostitutes worked in brothels. Many enslaved workers had been either purchased or claimed as infants who had been exposed and then subjected to a life of sex work.
- 3 Observations about our sex-soaked world:
 - Observation #1: When people are systematically objectified as sexual objects, there are profitable industries that rob people of human dignity. See IJM.org to learn more about how you can participate in bringing an end the sexual trafficking and servitude of people all over the world.
 - Observation #2: The porn industry is a \$12 billion dollar a year industry in the United States. Pornography is an epidemic in our culture that dehumanizes not only those it objectifies but also those who engage in it.
 - Observation #3. In a culture where casual sex outside of marriage is the norm, science is demonstrating that such a sexual culture actually confuses the brain and makes sex less pleasurable. To read a Jesus-based perspective on this science, see Scot McKnight's book, *One.Life*.
- What the Christian movement demonstrated in the sex-soaked Roman world was that sexual fidelity and sexual ethics actually leads to a better society and a more satisfying life.

Additional Implications:

30 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chapter 8.

31 Jennifer Larson, *Greek and Roman Sexualities: A Sourcebook*, 267.

32 Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 1.2.5-7.

33 Paul Wilkinson, *Pompeii: An Archaeological Guide*, VII.12.18

34 Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*.

35 Jennifer Larson, *Greek and Roman Sexualities: A Sourcebook*, 268.