Alice P. RADIN

Fictitious Facts: The Case of the Vomitorium

One of the "facts" about classical antiquity current in popular culture has neither ancient authority nor scholarly provenance: the assertion that Roman houses contained a special room called the"vomitorium" set aside for the use of diners to purge themselves in order to gorge anew. In addition to being a fixture of entertainment, the "Roman vomitorium" is presented as historical reality in recent publications ranging from travel guides, restaurant reviews, and Latin phrase books, to serious articles, books, and electronic resources in fields as diverse as eating disorders, conservation, fundamentalist Christianity, and Natural Family Planning. More alarming is the discovery that the "vomitorium" has also become a common component of Roman Civilization courses taught in schools and colleges on several continents. My research has followed three lines of inquiry: 1) How did the misconception arise and spread? 2) Why has it become so prevalent? 3) What can-and should-the classics profession do?

My initial assumption that the architectural term for the wide corridors in arenas and theatres [ìvomitoria," attested to only in a discussion of metaphorical language in Macrobius, Sat. 6.4, but used as an architectural term in English ever since the 18th century] was conflated with descriptions in Roman authors of excessive eating and purging [Suetonius, Seneca] is not supported by the earliest uses of "vomitorium." Indeed, the familiar connection between an architectural"vomitorium" and the eating habits of Romans [e.g., Lewis Mumford,"Forum, Vomitorium, Bath," in The City in History, 1961] may reflect a rationalization of a misunderstood pseudo-Latin colloquialism that arose in what folklorists call "unofficial culture," probably British schoolboy humor.

The prevalence of the "vomitorium" attests to the flexibility of its appeal: a vivid metaphor for decadence, a proud emblem of emancipation from the conventions of society, an attempt to associate a new field with the prestige of antiquity. Although some authors do cite references, in each separate field the earliest source refers to the "Roman vomitorium" as something that "everybody knows."

What should we do? Most people acquire their information about classical antiquity from non-specialist teachers and a variety of non-academic sources. With the increasing use of the internet, the spread of misinformation is accelerating. Surely, the classics profession can find a way to help people sort fiction from fact.