

# Discovering commercial hospitality in Ancient Rome

Commercial hospitality in Ancient Rome, argues **Kevin O’Gorman**, was complex and sophisticated. He is concerned that over-reliance on the surviving texts can lead to confusion: it is important to examine physical historical sites, like Pompeii, to get a sense of how these establishments worked, and to investigate them within a context of what we know about hospitality throughout history.

## Hospitality and the Roman Empire

**T**HE ROMAN EMPIRE (27BC–467AD) became a vast centre of consumption, importing much of its food from its many colonies under exclusive agreements and expected unusual food gifts for the aristocracy.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the market expanded and there was wholesale exportation of goods, services and cultural ideas through the colonisation of conquered lands. At its fullest extent, around 117AD, Rome dominated Western Eurasia and northern Africa, the area shown in the map opposite, and ruled the majority of the region’s population, controlling approximately 6m km<sup>2</sup> of land. The Roman citizen could travel throughout the Empire and be protected by one legal system,

omy of Roman times was part of their approach to life and undoubtedly emerged as the reward celebrating their successes in the expansion and growth of the Empire. Extensive commercial hospitality businesses existed for travellers, merchants and sailors who came to trade and sell, or those who were stopping overnight along the way to other destinations.

## Foundations of the Roman hospitality ethic

Throughout Classical Antiquity (generally accepted as between 770BC to 529AD) hospitality brought expectations: a warm welcome, food, a comfortable place to sit, charming company and entertainment. Since the traveller would not usually be wandering from their home into the dangers of the world, it was assumed they were on some mission. Hospitality in Rome was never exercised in an indiscriminate manner, as

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Throughout the heroic age of Greece, but the custom of observing the laws of hospitality was probably common to all the nations that make up modern-day Italy. In many cases, it was exercised without any formal agreement between the parties, and it was deemed an honourable duty to receive distinguished guests into the house. Public hospitality seems, likewise, to have existed at a very early period among the nations:

throughout the City the front gates of the houses

were thrown open and all sorts of things placed for general use in the open courts, all comers, whether acquaintances or strangers, being brought in to share the hospitality.<sup>2</sup>

These kind and generous acts of hospitality led to long-lasting friendships between the host and the guest. No doubt it was from these personal bonds that the public ties of hospitality were later to be formed:

*After recovering from their wounds, some left for their homes, to tell of the kind hospitality they had received; many remained behind out of affection for their hosts and the City.<sup>3</sup>*

Private hospitality with the Romans, similar in its nature to that of Ancient Greece, seems to have been more precisely and legally defined. The character of a *hospes*, ie a person connected with a Roman by ties of hospitality, was deemed even more sacred, and to have greater claims upon the host, than that of a person connected by blood or affinity. The connection of hospitality with a foreigner imposed various obligations on a Roman. Amongst those obligations was that of receiving the *hospes* (traveller) in their house:

*they enjoyed the hospitality of private citizens whom*

*they treated with courtesy and consideration; and their own houses in Rome were open to those with whom they were accustomed to stay.<sup>4</sup>*

There were also duties of protection and, in case of need, to represent a guest as his patron in the courts of justice. Jupiter was thought to watch over the *ius hospitium* (law of hospitality) in the Roman Empire; the violation of hospitality was also as great a crime and impiety in Rome.

## Roman cuisine

Contemporary Western cuisine still has evidence of the culinary practices and commodities of classical Rome, including the staple dish of meat and vegetables, which was originally introduced to sustain the

a person connected by ties of hospitality, was deemed ...to have greater claims upon the host, than that of a person connected by blood or affinity

invading armies.<sup>5</sup> The study of classical Roman food and cookery relies on an Apician viewpoint. Who or what exactly was Apicius is unclear—Apicius was the



Figure 1 The extent of the Roman Empire and the landscape of Mediterranean world in the mid-first-century BC. This map shows the regions and sites that figured prominently in the military campaigns of Caesar, Crassus and Pompey.

From *The Romans from Village to Empire* by Mary T. Boatwright, Daniel Gargola and Richard J.A. Talbert, (Oxford University Press, 2004) © 2004 Ancient World Mapping Center

name given in surviving proverbs and comments to several connoisseurs of food.<sup>6</sup> The most famous (and probably the second) was Marcus Gavius Apicius who lived in the early Empire (around 30BC). Much to the disgust of the moralist Seneca, this Apicius is held to have kept an academy, in the manner of a philosopher.<sup>7</sup> A third Apicius (or even a group of Apicii) lived in the late 4th or early 5th century and edited the surviving Roman cookbook bearing his name.

Pliny the Elder and Tacitus both note that the famous M. Gavius Apicius moved in the circles of Emperor Tiberius (AD14–37).<sup>8</sup> Pliny considered that Apicius was born to enjoy every extravagant luxury that could be contrived.<sup>9</sup> This Apicius invented various dishes and sauces in which the pursuit of the refined delicacy was taken to eccentric extremes. According to Athenaeus, having heard of the boasted size and

Petronius as hedonistic and witty.<sup>12</sup> Petronius also wrote the *Cena Trimalchionis* (Trimalchio's Dinner) (*Satyricon* 26:6–78:8) that describes the typical food, drink and conversation of a Roman feast.<sup>13</sup> The cook in Rome commanded the title of 'Artist'; the social importance of the feast and the associated religious hospitality significance meant that the power of the professional cook was encouraged and indulged.<sup>14</sup>

## Roman commercial hospitality establishments

In the 1950s four principal categories of ancient Roman commercial hospitality establishments were defined: *hospitia*, *stabulae*, *tabernae* and *popinae*.<sup>15</sup> These terms have become the standard terms for the archaeological categorisation of ancient hospitality businesses.

In summary: *tabernae* and *popinae* had no facilities for overnight guests while *hospitiae* and *stabulae* usually did. *Hospitia* were normally larger than *stabulae* and a *stabula* would have had accommodation to keep

animals as well as guests. This list has been augmented with *cauponae* and other names for bars. The material remains of these different hospitality establishments

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sweetness of the shrimps taken near the Libyan coast, Apicius commandeered a boat and crew, but when he arrived, disappointed by the ones he was offered by the local fishermen who came alongside in their boats, turned round and had his crew return him to his villa without going ashore.<sup>10</sup>

All of the subsequent translations of the Apician writings across the centuries concede that they were written to enhance the mystique of the Roman cook rather than provide recipes that were easy to follow, as there were no exact measures, for instance. This could even be an attempt at self-preservation: the secret codes required to decipher the text were a way to protect the cook's earning power and place in society.

Roman celebrity cooks enjoyed notoriety and fashion leaders like Petronius (AD27–66) contributed much to the consumption of gossip and the trend-setting of the day.<sup>11</sup> The notorious Petronius was the *arbiter elegantiae* (arbiter of good taste) at the court of the Emperor Nero and Tacitus describes

Latin names	Description and facilities	Modern equivalent
<i>Hospitium</i>	Larger establishments that offered rooms for rent, and often food and drink to overnight guests; often specifically built for business purposes.	<b>Hotel</b>
<i>Stabula</i>	Buildings with open courtyard surrounded by a kitchen, a latrine, and bedrooms with stables at the rear. Often found just outside the city, close to the city gates; offered food, drink and accommodation.	<b>Coaching inn</b>
<i>Taberna</i>	Sold a variety of simple foods and drink. They usually contained a simple L-shaped marble counter, about six to eight feet long	<b>Bar</b>
<i>Popina</i> or <i>Caupona</i>	Served food and drink, offered sit-down meals; these terms were often used to describe public eating-houses and sometimes included a few rooms	<b>Restaurant</b>
<i>Lupanar</i>	Provided a full range of services of a personal nature.	<b>Brothel</b>

Table 1 Commercial hospitality establishments in Ancient Rome

makes exact identification difficult—not least because no two inns or taverns are exactly alike.<sup>16</sup> The problem of identification is also compounded by the fact that many establishments are missing their second floors. These could have had apartments for rent, storage space, guest space or rooms for innkeepers and their families and staff.<sup>17</sup> What would seem to be important is that there were two basic types of establishment, one dealing with accommodation and the other with food and drink. A summary of the various hospitality businesses is given in Table 1.

*Hospitia* were establishments that offered rooms for rent, and often food and drink to overnight guests.<sup>18</sup> Some *hospitia* were expressly built for business purposes, although a number of them represent secondary uses of existing private homes in Pompeii.<sup>19</sup>

*Stabulae* were *hospitia* with facilities to shelter animals, often found just outside the city, close to the gates, and frequently described as the ancient equivalent of modern motels. *Stabulae* would be the ancient equivalent of coaching inns: they had an open courtyard surrounded by a kitchen, a latrine and bedrooms with stables at the rear. Businesses within city gates were smaller than those in the countryside due to pressure of space. Figure 2 shows a floor plan of a typical *stabula*. *Cauponae* were establishments that provided meals, drink and maybe lodgings; *Popinae* were limited to serving food and drink. Some may have offered sit-down meals; this term was often used to describe public eating-houses. *Hospitia*, *stabulae*, *tabernae* and *popinae* should not always be understood as stand-alone businesses; often a *hospitium* or *stabula* would have a *taberna* or *popina* connected to it.

In the first century AD *taberna* referred to either a shop or a tavern; however, in many publications, the term *taberna* refers to almost any kind of shop, so there is a good deal of confusion when compiling a list of such establishments from literary sources alone and several other Latin words for bars: *tabernae*, *thermopolia*, *ganeae*. Bars in their first century sense served a variety of simple foods and drink. They usually contained a simple L-shaped marble counter, about six to eight feet long, with a simmering pot of

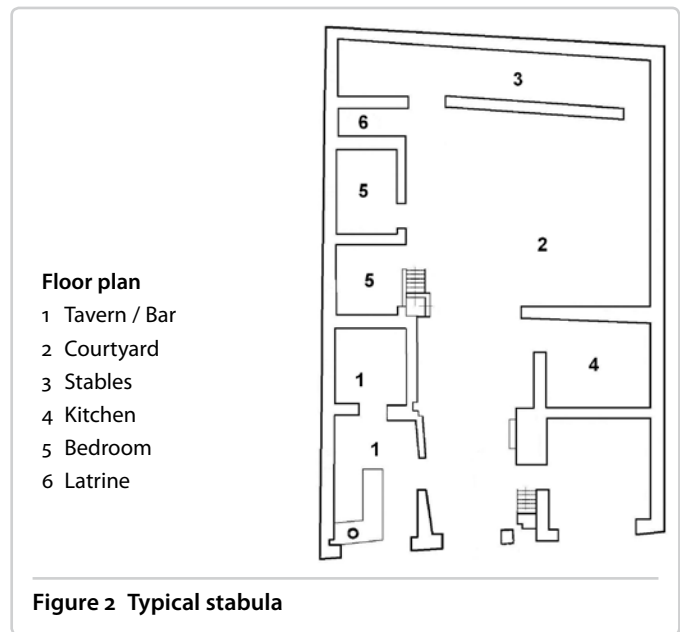


Figure 2 Typical stabula

water and shelves of other food on the back wall of a tiny room, often just large enough for the proprietor and several assistants.

Due to the reciprocal nature of private hospitality it is already clear that not all travellers required such services.<sup>20</sup> Accommodation along major roads and at city gates gained a reputation for attracting the lower classes who were too poor or socially insignificant to have developed a network of personal hospitality.

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Commercial hospitality businesses existed for travellers, merchants and sailors who came to trade and sell, or those who were stopping overnight along the way to other destinations. Individual places of hospitality either offered associated services or were located near other places of hospitality provision. Although originally at lower levels, the subsequent provision of higher levels of hospitality establishment and service was a direct consequence of the ability of the higher classes to afford to travel to lands where they were not known. It enabled them to visit environments which were commensurate with their wealth and status, without the need to establish a household there.<sup>21</sup>

## Potential hazards of investigating Roman hospitality

Researching hospitality from the literature alone is not without its problems. For example in the secondary literature there is the general observation that women working in the hospitality trades were prostitutes. Inns and taverns have been described as ‘hardly distinguished brothels which lived in constant fear of the police.’<sup>22</sup> Inns were often seen as sources of seduction and prostitution<sup>23</sup> and frequently women who worked in inns were accused of working undercover as prostitutes.<sup>24</sup> The derogatory comments were not restricted to serving girls in the taverns: Cicero cites other occupations as *sordidi* (dishonourable or vulgar).

*First, those means of livelihood are rejected as undesirable which incur people’s ill-will... Least respectable of all are those trades which cater for sensual pleasures: fishmongers, butchers, cooks, and poulterers, and fishermen... Add to these, if you please, the perfumers, dancers and the whole entertainment industry.*<sup>25</sup>

This quote led to some authors becoming obsessed with the term and speculation that all working women were prostitutes; others even hypothesised

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that women who worked in butcher shops and bakeries were often prostitutes.<sup>26</sup> There is no other evidence in the primary sources to support this; *sordidi* means ‘dishonourable’ or ‘vulgar’ and should not be confused with ‘sordid’ in the modern sense. There is however plenty of primary literature portraying Roman bars as dens of iniquity:

*Virtue is something elevated, exalted and regal, unconquered and unwary. Pleasure is something lowly, servile, weak and unsteady, whose haunt and dwelling-place are the brothel and the bar.*<sup>27</sup>

However the clientele in bars at least seemed to be colourful and diverse:

*search for him in some big bar. There he will be, lying next to a cut-throat, in the company of sailors, thieves and runaway slaves, beside hangmen and coffin-makers, or beside a passed-out priest:*

*This is liberty hall,*

*one cup serves for all,  
no one has a bed to himself,  
nor a table apart from the rest.*<sup>28</sup>

In Roman law there is certainly an indication that some women working in inns were prostitutes. The law code of Justinian lays down a clear mandate in relation to slave girls who have been sold:

*A female slave, who has been sold under the condition that she does not make a shameful commerce of her body, must not prostitute herself in a tavern under the pretext of serving therein, in order to avoid a fraudulent evasion of the condition prescribed.*<sup>29</sup>

However the law code of Theodosius, which dates from the time of Constantine, clearly differentiates between the wife of the tavern owner and a servant girl: it protects serving girls from prosecution and affords them safety under the law.

Commercial hospitality in Roman times certainly included brothels (*lupanar*); however, some evaluation of the culture behind brothels is necessary. It was assumed in Roman society that slaves were used as sexual partners for their masters. Seneca stated that sexual dominance was a necessity for a free man, a crime for a slave, and a duty for the freedman.<sup>30</sup> Cato

the Censor (c 150BC) was famed for monitoring the behaviour of public officials and had a strong desire to return the people to conservative conduct and morality. Horace notes that Cato advocates such behaviour

when young men reach a certain age; it is only appropriate that they make the necessary arrangements.

*When a well-known individual was making his exit from a brothel, ‘Well done! Pray continue!’ was the stirred verdict of Cato: ‘as soon as libido has swollen their members, it’s right for young men to come down here rather than drudging away with other men’s wives.’*<sup>31</sup>

Other authors advance the observations of Horace: Prophyrio observes that libido must be kept in order, without committing crime and Pseudo-Acro notes that young men should be praised for visiting brothels, not living in them.

*Cato encountered him leaving a brothel, called him back and praised him. Afterwards when he saw him leaving the same lupanar more frequently, he said: ‘Young man, I praised you for coming here, not for living here.’*<sup>32</sup>

## The importance of historical sites

Although much information and insight can be gained from the analysis of the literature, archaeological investigation can provide a great deal more in terms of reinforcement and enhancement of understanding. One of the most significant sites associated with Roman Classical Antiquity is Pompeii. The almost instantaneous destruction of the city in history by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius on 24 August 79AD, and its literal fossilisation as an archaeological site, created the unique complex of Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy near modern-day Naples.

The comparative analysis comments in the official World Heritage Site designation documentation prepared by UNESCO that 'nowhere else is it possible to identify any archaeological site that even remotely stands comparison with these two classical towns'.<sup>33</sup> At the time of its destruction the city of Pompeii had a population of approximately 10,000 people. Pompeii was lost for 1,600 years before its accidental rediscovery in 1748. Since then there has been the opportunity to undertake systematic excavation and analysis on a huge scale, hindered very little by the usual taphonomic (decay and degradation) processes which traditionally affect the preservation of archaeological remains.<sup>34</sup>

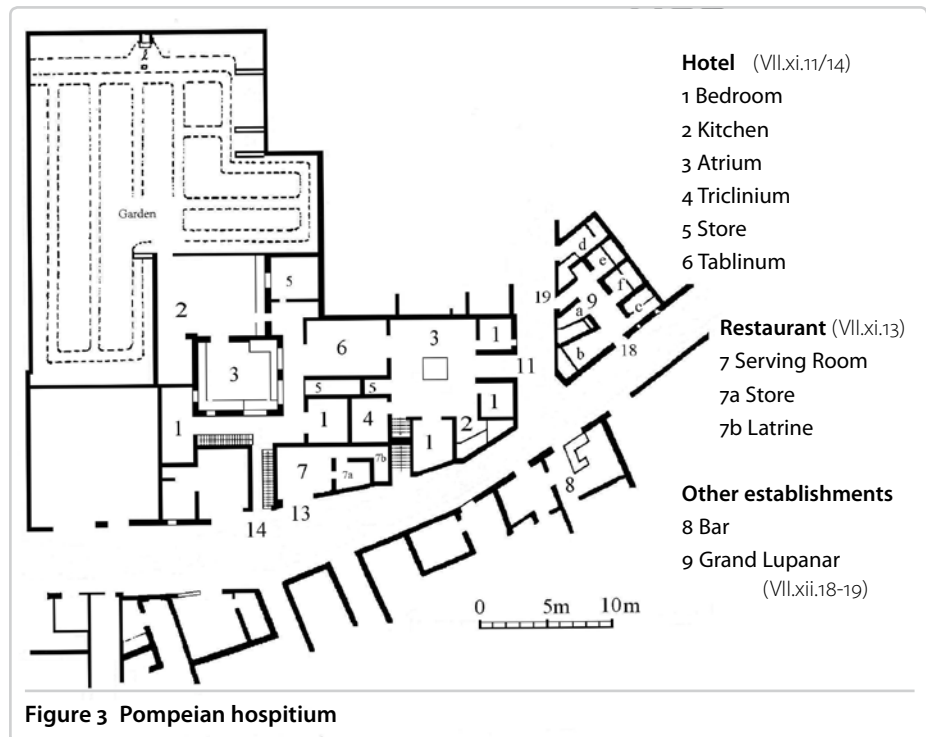
The excavation of Pompeii has provided an extraordinarily detailed insight into the commercial hospitality industry in a city at the height of the Roman Empire. Pompeii is of importance to the examination of the Roman commercial hospitality industry as it was a major centre of commerce and entertainment in the Roman world, where commercial hospitality existed in a highly organised fashion. Typically the houses in Pompeii did not have the basic utilities required to permit safe domestic preparation and consumption of food.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, there was a significant requirement for commercial hospitality provision which fuelled subsequent development, growth and entrepreneurial activity in the sector.

## Commercial hospitality in Pompeii

Pompeii has approximately 160 properties that could have been bars and restaurants, as well as numerous hotels.<sup>36</sup> These have been found, together with detailed kitchens and bakeries, some with fossilised loaves of bread. There was a cluster of hospitality establishments in the centre of Pompeii less than two blocks from the busiest street and close to the administrative centre. Figure 3 is the floor plan of the largest *hospitium* identified so far in Pompeii: it could accommodate more than 50 guests and also had a large secluded garden.<sup>37</sup>

The main entrance is flanked by two bedrooms on either side with doors opening into the atrium; left of the atrium is a kitchen, another bedroom, and a staircase to the upper floor. Along the back wall of the atrium, there are three rooms; the latrine and a dining room are to the right of the walkway. Off the walkway to the left, are two rooms, one of which probably was a storeroom. On the east side was another



entrance from the street; an entrance from the garden led to a large area, with a room connected to it, which opened onto a large kitchen garden; possibly customers dined here in the garden with three alcoves on the

**Pompeii... was a major centre of commerce and entertainment in the Roman world, and commercial hospitality existed in a highly organised fashion**

north side providing shelter. It was in the atrium of this building that a graffito with the word 'Christianos' was found.<sup>38</sup>

Adjacent but not internally connected to the *hospitium* is a restaurant with a main dining room and a connecting smaller room with a latrine in the back. One of the inscriptions in front attests to the fine wine served here.<sup>39</sup> The name of the restaurateur was Drusus, who posted a sign in front of his bar which forbade loitering; of course this sign might exist because this restaurant was close to the *Grand Lupanar*.<sup>40</sup> The *Grand Lupanar* has 10 rooms, five on each floor; from the layout it appears that only the first floor was devoted to sex for profit. Within each room on the first floor is the typical masonry bed used for sexual encounters, but not for sleep; there is even a concrete 'pillow' at the head of the bed. On the interior walls is the greatest cluster of *hic bene futui* graffiti in the city and above the door into each room is an erotic picture depicting a couple in the various positions of the sex act or foreplay. In each case the setting of the picture is in more comfortable surroundings than the cramped room behind it.

The bar shown in Figure 4 is a typical tavern: a long counter took up most of room 1; this was for selling food and drink to passers-by and contained stools for customers to sit on; Salvius was the tavern keeper. There are four erotic pictures painted on the walls in cartoon style which depicted tavern life, some of which survive, while others have been destroyed and only survive in pen-and-ink drawings.<sup>41</sup> Some of these drawings were of a sexual nature, while the majority were images of everyday life. These pictures caused some authors to categorise all such hospitality buildings with that type of art as *lupanar*, thus

giving an excessively high estimate of the number of women working as prostitutes.<sup>42</sup> Others are vague on the significance of the picture, while another refers to them as images of the various sexual entertainments that were enjoyed by the Roman populace in general.<sup>43</sup>

Across Pompeii there are several locations where prostitutes advertised their prices and some even had complementary graffiti. This only occurs on a small minority of commercial hospitality establishments. The assumption that most female bar workers were prostitutes, though supported in a few places in contemporaneous Roman law, is not supported by the archeologically or inscriptional evidence found in Pompeii.

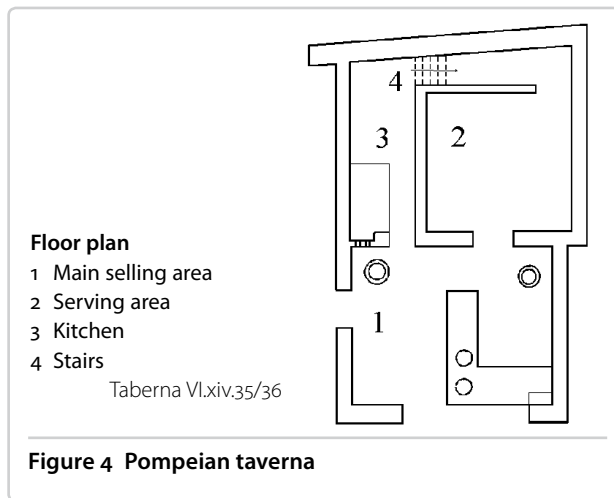
Commercial motives are evident in both the organisation of facilities and advertising efforts, menus of the day etc. Early entertainments and events were highly organised activities, central to the leisure of the period and given prime geographical location to emphasise this importance. The skills involved in organising these, often mass, spectacles are not to be overlooked. Pompeii in its role as a centre of leisure

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would have attracted and required the best hospitality employees that the Empire could offer in order to maintain and improve its reputation. It was ultimately a place for mercantile and leisure activities with a correspondingly well-developed and sophisticated commercial hospitality provision.

## **Enhancing understanding through research**

As hospitality begins to broaden its research paradigm researchers are also seeking interdisciplinary links.<sup>44</sup> For example, in a recent special edition of the journal *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, consideration was given to feasting, food and drink (and other hedonistic pursuits), social notions of quality, and



authenticity and identity-creation through foods.<sup>45</sup>

Stimulus is needed for more opportunities for academic research questions related to modern-day issues of hospitality provision and consumption and also leisure management. An example of links that have already been made to the current studies of commercial hospitality in Pompeii is Ashworth and

Tunbridge's modelling of the tourist-historic city written from a tourism-geography perspective.<sup>46</sup>

In Ancient Rome, an ancient centre of consumption, consumers demonstrated lifestyle perspectives by virtue of their engagements in the many aspects of hospitality, including symbolic hospitality, food and eating rituals. The analysis of these elements can aid the determination of provision and consumption patterns across a wider area and provide highly qualitative information on lifestyle patterns and cultural practices.

The exploration of Pompeii helps to reinforce and develop our understanding of commercial hospitality in Ancient Rome. Archaeology has made some initial investigations into the role of hospitality provision and consumption through the literary and academic assessments of the role of food and drink in Roman society. The social-science studies approach as an umbrella for such interdisciplinary work has great potential for interesting collaborations and understanding. Such research reinforces the need for continued theoretical underpinning by the scientific methods of cognate disciplines.

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