

1. the apartment block (insula)

In this issue of Labyrinth you will find a review of a book on Ostia (see The Book Shelf) which may do as much to enlighten you about Roman apartment-blocks as it did me. While the general layout of the typical Pompeian atrium-house (the domus) is fairly familiar to anyone who studies Roman social life, most of us don't seem to know much more about the insula than these few facts: it might be as much as five storeys tall (20 metres or so), had shops at the bottom and lots of windows further up, and was full of crowded little boxlike rooms called cenacula. Now we learn that that nest of boxes might be considerably more complicated and interesting inside than we had suspected. With due credit given to Dr. Gustav Hermansen's fascinating research, then, let's look at one type of Ostian insula from the inside out, for a change.

It is apparent that there was a wide range of insulae-types, of course, from those which contained a central courtyard with shops around it on the ground floor and luxury two-storey domus-like apartments above the shops, down to the crowded and dark 'one room, one family' slum dwelling which was no doubt common enough in the capital city, and which was normally built in such flimsy wood and plaster that it was notoriously and dangerously perishable from fire or collapse.

In between these two extremes, apparently, came a kind of lodging house (or single family) apartment distinguished by several quite recognisable recurring features. Typically these better- (but not best-) quality apartments had a central common room, the medianum, which had one or more large windows and perhaps a walkout to a balcony overlooking the busy street below. At one end of the medianum was a large living room called the exedra; a somewhat smaller living room balanced the exedra at the other end. To the back or non-street side of the rather elongated medianum were two or three bedrooms whose only lighting would usually be from a doorway or window opening directly into the medianum. A kitchen and latrine would be situated behind the smaller living room, conveniently but only partially isolated from the living areas by an L - shaped narrow passageway. The main entrance was normally into the medianum, which Hermansen suggests (Ostia, pp. 22-24) served as both the reception room and dining room (that is, as counterparts to the atrium and triclinium of the domus respectively).

As I read Hermansen's account, it occurred to me to enquire whether a medianum-apartment owned or rented by a single family might not have used a smaller living room, marked '?' to the right of the medianum in the drawing, as at least their winter dining room, leaving the medianum and balcony to do duty as an airy and pleasant combination of atrium and peristyle, and dining room in summer too, perhaps. However, it is quite correct, I feel sure, as Hermansen suggests, to see the medianum as a commonroom in any situation in which the apartment was being used as a lodging house.

In that case we may imagine each of the rooms around the commonroom as rented out to one, two, or even several lodgers, who all would use the medianum as their dining and living area, much as a number of unrelated adults who live in a roominghouse these days may share a common kitchen and livingroom. An interesting detail cited by Hermansen supports this view. The Digest, a collection of Roman legal sources made in the 6th c. A.D. under the emperor Justinian, quotes the jurist Ulpian, Hadrian's learned legal adviser, on the legal responsibilities of lodgers in what must be a

medianum apartment. In any such apartment which was rented out room by room to unrelated individuals, a lodger who caused damage by throwing something out of his own window might be sued individually. But if the offending object fell "from the medianum of the apartment, it is more right", notes the Digest, "that everybody should be held responsible." Clearly the law in the 2nd c. A.D. recognised that all the lodgers had common access to the medianum and its balcony or windows.