

Some types of Roman housing:

2. The Farmstead (villa rustica)

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In the last issue of Labyrinth we discussed a particular type of Roman housing, the apartments with a central 'commonroom' situated in Ostia, Rome's port-city. For a complete contrast, let's look at what we know about some typical farm buildings in Roman Italy.

The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD destroyed much more than the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, of course. On the lower slopes of the mountain were many small communities, country estates and farmsteads which were deeply covered with ash, volcanic mud or pebbles. Excavation of some of these sites has revealed details which often substantiate what the Roman technical writers (Cato, Varro, Columella and Vitruvius) have to say about the proper siting and construction of useful and attractive farmsteads. An interesting survey of some of these farm buildings can be found in K.D. White's Roman Farming (Thames and Hudson, 1970), Chap. XIII. As for the Roman writers, Vitruvius, for example, in Book VI, Chap. VI of his On Architecture, gives a brief account of how farmhouses should be constructed for convenience in use, paying particular attention to considerations of health and appropriate size for the amount of produce and number of oxen. He goes on to refer to kitchen, bathrooms, stalls and stables, press-rooms, storage rooms for wine, oil and grain, sheep pens, granaries and haymows, dining rooms, rooms for general use, stairs and passageways. Columella (Book I, Chap. VI of his On Agriculture) gives a more detailed account of the villa, which is perhaps of a rather grander type than Vitruvius has in mind, for he considers that there are normally three parts to the well-to-do farmstead: the villa urbana or owner's country house, the villa rustica or farmhouse where the overseer (procurator), foreman (vilicus), farmworkers (familia rustica) and stock were housed, and the villa fructuaria or granaries, mows and barns. So in addition to Vitruvius' specific comments we find in Columella references to bedrooms, porticoes, the ergastulum or slave quarters for the chain-gang, foreman's and steward's offices, drive sheds, tool sheds, herdsmen's and shepherds' rooms adjacent to the byres and sheep-pens, threshing-floor and even manure-pits (two are needed, apparently!).

Turning now to Cato and to Varro (Cato, Chap XIV and here and there throughout; Varro, Book I, Chap. XI) we can confirm all of these essential features mentioned by Vitruvius and Columella, and add one or two more: limekilns, fulling-rooms, aviaries, pigeon-cotes, poultry houses and so forth.

Now let's look at the ground-plan (see illustration) of a very well-known villa, known as 'Number 13' at Boscoreale, excavated in the 1890's. (Boscoreale was a small community about two miles north of Pompeii and so even closer to the summit of the volcano). You will see that all of the essential features were actually present in this villa, with the probable exception of space for farm animals other than the minimum stabling needed to accommodate the oxen used on an estate devoted primarily to producing wine and oil, as we suppose this one must have been. Some details you should particularly notice: first, the fact that all the buildings are enclosed by one outer perimeter wall which has a single main entrance to the courtyard. This method of construction provides security, preventing both thieves from breaking in and slaves from running away (the closest of the general purpose cubicula to the entrance was very likely the overseer's office from which he could watch all the incoming and outgoing traffic). Secondly, there were undoubtedly second floor rooms over the farmhouse proper (rooms 2-7) and perhaps over the pressrooms, barn and so on, since a dry and airy storage area provided by loft space was certainly required. The size of the actual farmhouse is none-

theless modest, even if one scholar's identification of the owner's apartments as occupying the upper floor (except for the dining room at 3) is correct. White remarks that "most of the other villas in the region [Campania] have a larger number of smaller rooms" (page 424). Thirdly, notice that there is quite a large area which is unroofed: the courtyard (1) with a small portico on its north western side as well as the storage or fermentation area (11) next to the courtyard. The actual buildings form a U-shape, in fact, around these two courtyard areas. Lastly, notice also that there is a small but fully equipped bath suite, containing a warm room, hot room, changing room with latrine, and furnace room, which lies between the kitchen and the bakery. The importance of the working animals is suggested by the position of the stable next to the kitchen, precisely where Vitruvius recommends is best.