

Some types of Roman housing:

3. The taberna (shop)

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In two previous issues of Labyrinth we've looked at apartments in Ostia and farmsteads in Campania. Now let's investigate what A.G. McKay has called "certainly the most common housing of the urban proletariat,"¹ the shops called tabernae with a loft or garret above which lined the streets of Rome and were, no doubt, common in town after town across Italy. Rows of tabernae formed the lowest level of the insulae or apartment-blocks of Ostia, and were built into the street-frontages of the comfortable private houses (domus) in Pompeii and Herculaneum. Countless numbers of Roman artisans must have rented these little shops and workrooms, with their dark and poky cenacula 'upstairs at the back', in which we suppose they and their women, children, and slaves slept and worked.

Graffiti, or hand-painted inscriptions not intended to last for longer than the normal life of lovenotes, records of gambling-debts, advertisements for gladiators, election notices or rental signs, have been found at Pompeii, for example, telling the passersby that they could rent, "from the 1st of July next, shops with upper rooms attached, gentlemen's apartments upstairs, as well as a private residence." Interested parties might apply to "Primus, Gnaeus Alleius Nigidius Maius' slave". Perhaps the owner of the building, Cn. Alleius, found discussing the shop-rents with cobblers and butchers and cloth-sellers beneath his dignity. In any case, we may hope that the rents were not too high, as the amenities offered in the tabernae were not remarkable; very few indeed would have had anything resembling a kitchen, a latrine, or even running water, while privacy, at least inside the family group, must have been non-existent.

The typical taberna was a small square or rectangular room, perhaps measuring 4 or 5 metres by 6 metres or so. The front of the shop was almost completely taken up by a wide opening, closed off at night by sliding shutters and at one side, a much narrower swinging door. Above the opening was generally a smallish window which gave some light to the cenaculum, the little loft above the shop. The loft was reached from the back of the shop by a steep flight of stone steps or perhaps a ladder. Once in a while there was a second doorway leading into a backroom, a neighbouring taberna, a small back yard, a side alleyway or even the "private residence" which lay behind the taberna.

Some of the more interesting tabernae are the restaurants or bars, which from several typical features can still be identified fairly easily in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Ostia. These restaurants (popinae) don't really qualify, I suppose, as housing, but nonetheless they are what the rest of this article will be about. And in fact, since we know that the common people in Roman times spent most of their time 'living' elsewhere than at home, the restaurants or taverns being certainly some of the more frequented places, it seems reasonable to take a closer look at what was after all, for many, their only kitchen and dining room.

Here, then, are brief descriptions of three popinae. The first (fig. 1), like the majority of these restaurants, is a simple taberna "which could have served a different trade with a different inventory", as G. Hermansen points out, for "the

rooms are no different from other tabernae." ² This one is in fact a type or composite rather than an actual tavern, and the plan really needs no further description. Notice the bar-counter at the front of the shop with a small fountain-basin underneath through which fresh water, piped in from the aqueduct, constantly ran. This provided the water supply for the calda, or hot water with which Roman drinkers normally mixed their wine, as well as for rinsing out the used glasses - or so one might hope, at least. From the front,



the bar-counter looks like this (fig. 2), with a barrel-vaulted fountain-basin whose overflow runs out into a drain in the floor close by. Marble slabs cover the counter.

The second popina (fig. 3) is probably the best-known restaurant in Ostia, and one of the biggest. It seems to have occupied not one but three tabernae side by side along the Via di Diana; its main doorway has the usual counter, with a stone bench built in at each side under the arched opening; there is a

kitchen with an adjacent smaller room to the west, and a dining room adjoins it to the east. Behind the dining room is an open courtyard with two stone benches on which to sit and watch the water spraying in the square central fountain while the tavernkeeper's slaves bustle up and down, carrying more olives, eggs, radishes or cheese from the cool cellar-pantry under the yard. Over the marble side-table and shelves in the popina is a wall-painting showing the Ostian sailors and mule-drivers what's on the menu.

The third popina is an unusual one. It seems to be part of what must have been a caupona or inn. The restaurant here is not next to the street at all, so we may guess it was intended to serve the travellers lodging in the inn, for the most part. Fig. 4 shows three rooms and a courtyard which occupy the back quarter of a building whose central hallway leads from the street into the popina between rows of what are presumed to be guests' rooms on either side. The walls of the building are thick enough to suggest that they supported 3 or 4 storeys above the ground floor, so the little popina with its courtyard and dining room must often have been busy. In the corner of the courtyard is a small shrine (lararium) with a painting of a peacock which has given the building its name: Caupona della Pavone, or the Peacock Inn. Fig. 5 shows a mosaic of one of the dozens of popinae with entertainment in progress: not a bad way to spend a summer evening in Roman Ostia!

References:

1. A.G. McKay, Houses, Villas and Palaces in the Roman World, Thames & Hudson, 1975, pg. 84.
2. G. Hermansen, Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life, University of Alberta, 1982, p. 185.