

It's all very well for most of us to learn about Roman housing, the Roman Forum, Roman temples or theatres or even Roman law - but what was it really like to live in Rome or Ostia or Pompeii? Let's ask ourselves some of the questions which don't so often seem to get asked. First of all, imagine that you are a curious child of twelve who has spent those twelve years sailing round the world in a small yacht. Now you are told that you are going to live in the city instead. What will you want to know (you've already spent half your childhood asking "Why...?") about living in the city? I'm going to jot down a list of the sort of questions I might have asked, and then see whether I can answer them for Roman times, in Ostia, the Port of Rome, two thousand years ago.

"Where will we live? Will we buy a house? Who will our neighbours be?" The chances are we shall have to rent an apartment upstairs in a building four or five storeys tall. The landlord lives on the second floor, in the largest and grandest apartment, whereas ours is higher up. We'll share a living room which has a balcony and a big window with shutters (but no glass) with a man who works as a grainhandler in a big warehouse and a man who used to arrange insurance for ships' cargoes but has lost a lot of money and now has to live in one room, as we do. Each of us rents one or two rooms and we share the big room and the hallway. We have a big solid door with a lock at the end of the hall and we don't have a kitchen - just a cubbyhole under the stairs which go up to the floor above us. In the cubbyhole our slave sleeps; he's the one who fetches in our hot soup from over the street and empties the dirty water down in the courtyard. We don't have a bathroom at all - just a pot we use at night, when going

downstairs to the latrine in the yard or out to the public latrine with fifteen seats at the end of the street would be impossible (too dark, because there aren't any street lights and it's quite dangerous in the street at night).

"What will we eat? Where will the food come from? Can we buy all kinds of stuff?" Meals will be mostly of bread. We can buy it at the baker's shop in the next street over. He has a yard full of grinding mills which is interesting to watch working because he has several little donkeys to turn them. Sometimes he makes his slaves do it instead, though they hate the job, when he's angry with them or extra busy. He gets his sacks of grain from a government-run warehouse and he brings them in a small two-wheeled cart at night or on his donkeys in the daytime, or even slung from a pole between two slaves. That's how the wine-shopkeeper fetches an amphora of wine from the docks too, if he doesn't want a cartload at once. With our bread, which is fairly hard and heavy even when it's freshly baked, we'll have some olives or some fish-spread or some cheese. We'll eat a bit of fruit - grapes or dates or maybe pears in the fall. (The winter pears preserved in honey are too expensive, I expect.) When we want something hot we'll eat pea soup from the tavern over the road, or a hot sausage on a special holiday. It isn't easy to get fresh vegetables cheaply, because they have to be brought into the town from the small farms roundabout, but we'll have onions and garlic, cabbage and salad greens, maybe radishes and turnips now and then. We can buy anything you can imagine, pretty much - if we have enough money anyway. Ground pork, salt fish (fresh is a bit more expensive) dried peas and beans (but how would we cook them? They take a long time and a lot of charcoal on the

brazier). Or we can buy a tunic, a new knife or a frying pan, a pillow stuffed with feathers, a book of the newest poems, some pepper wrapped in a sheet of paper (an old poem!), an oil-lamp, new leather sandals or even old wine, sealed and stamped with a pair of ancient consuls' names as a guarantee of its vintage.

"What will I do all day? Will I have to go to school? Can I have a pet?" Probably school will be in order, if only to keep you children out of the streets where otherwise you would spend the entire day. We'll get up very early, even before it's light in the winter, straighten our tunics, and wash our hands and faces in a bowl of water (Faustus, our slave, will fetch the water upstairs from the watertap which runs all the time down in the yard - if we're lucky enough to live in a block with running water laid on. Otherwise it's down to the fountain on the street corner where half the street collects to gossip. The other half, the men, are hanging about, also gossiping, gambling or just cleaning their nails outside the barber's shop.) When you've had a piece of bread and a drink of water, it's off to school. That means pushing your way down the street with your school books in a little round book box slung by a strap over your shoulder. Two streets over is the teacher's place. It's a room like a shop, half out into the street, and you won't like it much. It's too noisy and too much what the teacher calls "just warmed-over cabbage": same thing over and over. If you don't remember your lessons, he has a cane, which hurts on your hand, hurts worse on your buns - and your tunic is too short to help much! Also your fellow school children may bully you. But if you get along with them, they'll show you how to play with nuts or a hoop or where to find yourself a pet for not too much money: a pigeon or a rooster or perhaps even a puppy. We can keep him as a watchdog, and if he runs the streets all day he won't need feeding much. That's why there isn't much garbage on the streets. The dogs and pigs

and chickens always seem to clean up everything.

"What will we do if there's a fire? What if I get lost? What if I get sick?" Well, a fire will be bad, it's true. But there are the vigiles, the firemen stationed in their barracks over beyond the great theatre, so maybe they would help. Also we have buckets and the landlord has some ropes and hooks and fireaxes. But if you get lost, then that might be much worse. Sometimes the men who buy and sell slaves aren't above picking up a lost kid who has no way to prove he's freeborn. So don't ever take off your bullae - it's effective not just as proof of who you are, but keeps away bad luck. It also might help if you get sick, because there isn't really much we can do. There are old women who sell potions and herbs and there are doctors too, but mostly we'd just keep you indoors on the couch and pray to Febris to cure your fever (she's the goddess of fever with three temples to her up the river in Rome).

"What will our street look like? What's a temple? What will we do for fun?" Our street won't be one of the ones with the poorest houses. There are some which just have shacks, pretty much, down on the south side of town. That's where all the really poor workmen live, the dockers and the sailors off the grain ships. We'll live in a street near the theatre, so that we can go afternoons to see a play. They can even flood the round part below the seats in the theatre at Ostia, the 'orchestra' they call it, and then they put on a battle at sea or sea-creatures fighting. Round the back of our block, on the street beside the big Barracks where the vigiles live, is a really huge bath. That's where we'll go every afternoon. We can play a game of ball in the wrestling-court at the baths, and you can run round the track to get some exercise while I have a rub-down. Then Faustus can watch our clothes so they don't get stolen while we go through the halls: cold, warm, hot and back to the cold plunge-pool again. Our

street will be very narrow, with several taverns. The one on the corner is always full of vigiles on their hours off, drinking and dicing and quarrelling - or paying the landlord to let them visit one of his girls upstairs. The taverns are useful, though, because otherwise we wouldn't often be able to eat a good hot supper. It would be too expensive and too dangerous if everyone living crowded together in the little rooms in these apartment blocks cooked for themselves. The street is very narrow and the buildings are high, so that it's shady and cool in summer even though there's a lot of dirt and smells are strong. But in winter the winds blow so cold down the streets and through our shutters that we'll have to have some coals in our brazier to keep us warm. That's when the hot spiced wine and water in the wineshop next door is really welcome. The temples are all

over town, if you want to see them. There's a couple down in the Forum, one to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva (like on the Capitol in Rome) and then one to Rome and the Emperor Augustus (he's a god now too). Then there's a small one, dedicated to Ceres or to the Luck of the Grain Supply or something similar, in the Great Square of the Corporations behind the theatre. We can visit any of them, or other places too, when we want to have a holiday; we can go down to the beach outside the city, or down to the docks along the Tiber where the ferrymen will ferry us over to the Sacred Island where all the tombs are. Or over to the other side of the Island, to the great Harbour which Claudius and Trajan built for ships coming in from all over the world. There's lots to watch, lots to do. "But why...?" - No more questions now - Dad's had it!

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