



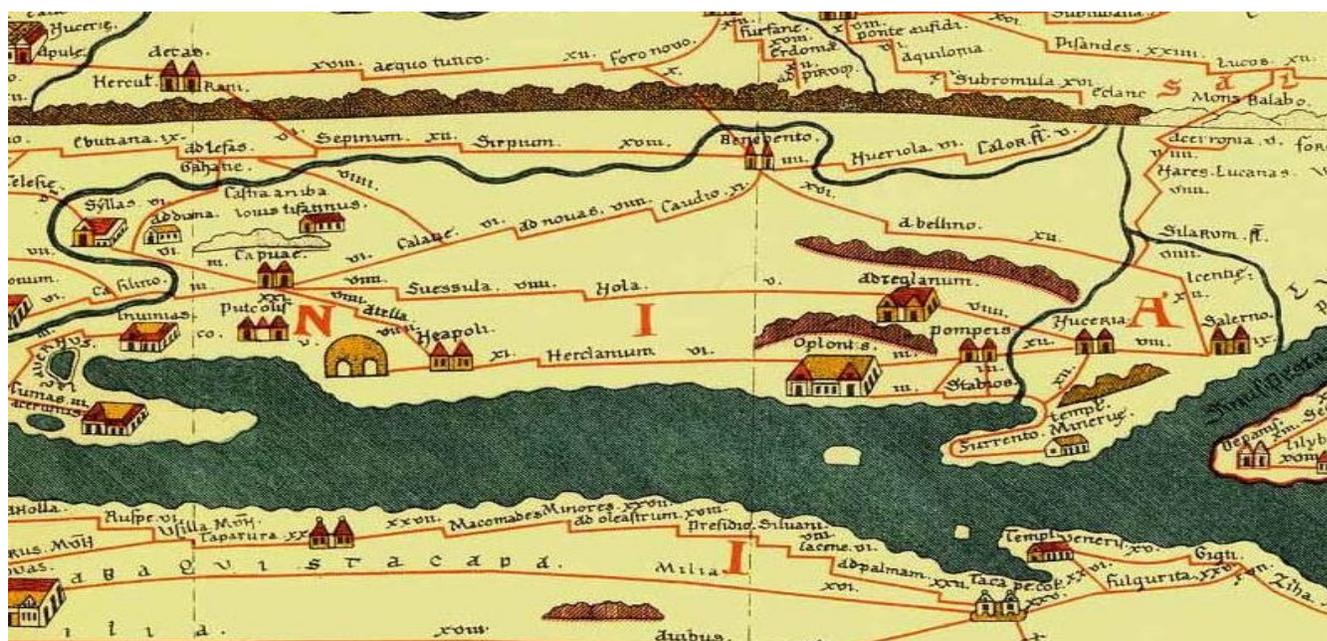
Pompeii fresco in the year 50 of a young woman with gold-threaded hair and large gold earrings, holding a stylus and wax tablets used for accounts exactly like those in a fresco from the Villa of Julia Felix. Naples National Archeological Museum

By Don Fenton 18th August 2021

2,000 years ago, this early feminist flourished in a classical man's world.

Today we visit Pompeii, the old market and trading town on the Bay of Naples.

And here we are looking at one section of an old itinerarium, or road map, found in the middle ages. Scholars usually date this map to the 3rd or 4th century, but it has something extraordinary about it that defies that dating. If you look carefully at the dome structure near the water, in the center at the left just below the red letter N, beside two small red-roofed houses is the name Neapoli. This is Naples. Now if you trace the red line to the right you come to Herculaneum under the red letter I, and then a little further to the right the name Oplontis, which sits above a large villa-type structure and then, to the right of that, two more small red-roofed houses with the name Pompeii.



Pompeii, to the right of Herculaneum and Oplontis on the Roman road system, the *Cursus Publicus*, from the *Tabula Peutingeriana*.

The reason this is so remarkable is that these three sites on the map, Herculaneum, Oplontis and Pompeii were completely lost in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the 1st century, in 79. They were buried under twenty metres of ash and debris and forgotten until the 18th century. So, this itinerarium or old map is actually much older than the 3rd or 4th century. We believe it is based on maps that were commissioned by the 1st Emperor Augustus, through his general Agrippa, in the process of mapping the *Cursus Publicus*.

The *Cursus Publicus* was used by the Emperor for official communications via courier and by Rome's armies during campaigns. It's the ancient Roman road system built to connect the entire empire during the peaceful and prosperous *Pax Romana*, roughly the 1st and 2nd centuries. It ran the length and breadth of the empire from England to Spain, through most of Western Europe, all around the Mediterranean Sea, across the north of Africa, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, to the Middle East and beyond.



Olivierw, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Fresco of Terentius Neo and his wife, Pompeii



Fresco found in the Villa of Julia Felix with money bag, piles of coins, a stylus and wax tablets used for keeping accounts, just like the ones seen in the portrait.

Incredibly, we have copies of this entire map today. It is 22 feet long and a little over a foot high and rolls into a scroll much as it would have in the 1st century. The image above shows a man holding a scroll under his chin. The other, shows one lying on a shelf and slightly opened. A traveler would carry the map on trips and consult it for exact distances between stops and also to see what amenities are available along the way. Oplontis indicates, with its large walled structure that all needed resources are available there for the authorized visitor * – accommodation, food, a bath and care for the animals.

Today we're visiting the Villa of Julia Felix in Pompeii. Julia Felix is such an interesting person and she helps us in our understanding of the many characters who lived in this Campanian town in the 1st century. Julia Felix might have looked like the woman in the first fresco above discovered in Pompeii in the 18th century. Commonly mistaken for Sappho, it actually portrays a Pompeian woman with gold-threaded hair and large gold earrings, stylus to her mouth and holding wax tablets used for accounts, as in this fresco (immediately above) found in the Villa of Julia Felix with piles of coins, a scroll and a stylus and wax tablets.



View of the Villa of Julia Felix taken from the pergola. Looking across the long water feature toward the Baths of Venus in the distance.

Roman naming tradition suggests Julia could be descended from the line of the Juli, and her name Felix means ‘fortunate one’. She certainly was fortunate, being a single woman who owned significant property at a time when this was very rare indeed. She also managed to influence legal authorities to allow the combining of two insula into one, which meant closing the part of the Pompeian street that ran

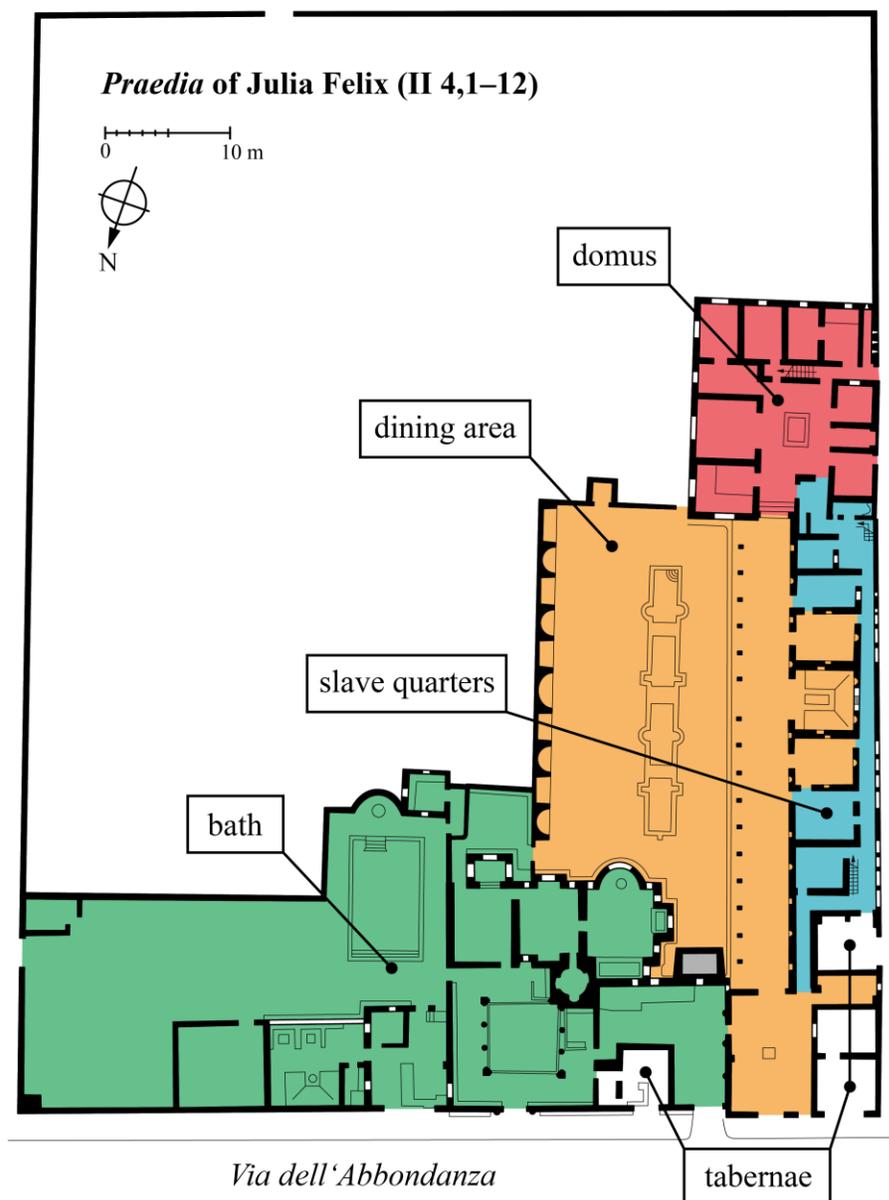
between the two parcels of land. Each insula is the size of a city block. She ran a successful rental and dining business that catered to the well-to-do, complete with private baths, extensive fruit trees and vegetable gardens, and an ornate water system. She also had three tabernae that catered to the ordinary people of Pompeii, only a stone's throw away from the popular amphitheatre and the large Palaestra, an outdoor exercise field with covered porticos for strolling, near the Sarno Gate of the town. (below right)



The town of Pompeii with the large property of Julia Felix on the main street, the Decumanus Maximus, called the Via dell'Abbondanza. Close by, are the Amphitheatre and the large Palaestra.

As her estate covered two entire insula, it had a larger footprint than most properties in Pompeii, approaching the size of the Temple of Venus in the forum, or the gladiator barracks near the town's large and small theatres. After the

earthquake in 62 AD, Julia Felix let out parts of the villa including expensive apartments, her luxurious baths inspired by Venus and the leisure gardens.



Here we see her home, the domus at the top in red, as well as a very large dining area and rooms for servants. At the bottom, in green, is the very large bath complex and three tabernae in white. The rest of the property was planted with gardens and fruit trees and water features, hence the name the Praedia of Julia Felix, or estate. Our research shows that the villa sustained damages in the earthquake of 62 and Julia Felix made extensive repairs, an idea reinforced by the

contemporary 4th style wall paintings throughout the villa, the latest painting style at the time. A notice found at the villa, advertises part of it for rent. “To let, for the term of five years, from the thirteenth day of next August to the thirteenth day of the sixth August thereafter, the Venus bath, fitted for the best people, shops, and rooms over shops and second story apartments in the property owned by Julia Felix, daughter of Spurius.”



Kitchen frescos from the villa of Julia Felix on either side of the water feature in the garden that leads to the Venus baths.

She would have had dealings with many people in the town. For the approval of enlarging her property and closing the street that ran between the two insula, she would have visited the Basilica in the forum. Inside this sumptuous building from 130 BC judges sat for business and judicial affairs. Only an elite woman could own and transfer property without a male guardian.

Beside the Basilica, Julia may have made sacrifice at the Temple of Venus. This Roman Goddess gave guidance, fertility, motherhood, the ideal image of a Queen and the acquisition of knowledge and magic. Nearby to protect people from fraud

in the marketplace, there is a Mensa ponderaria, a guide to official weights and measures. This would have been very useful to Julia Felix, as she provided fine dining and fast food on her estate.



Mensa ponderaria in the marketplace of Pompeii, to regulate weights and measures of goods sold.

Julia may also have visited the Temple of Isis where the devotees of the Egyptian Goddess cult were mostly women. Isis was compassionate and promised salvation in life and after death.

Next door, Julia Felix may have attended a play or recital at the large theatre. This well preserved stone theatre seated 5,000 people, the upper classes in the ima or lower section, the middle class in the media or middle, with the plebians up top in the summa.

Julia could also have enjoyed staged musical concert performances in the roofed small theatre that seated 1,500 more educated Pompeians. This theatre would have resembled Andrea Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy. The Italian Renaissance architect spent his life studying ancient Roman architecture.



Palladio's Teatro Olimpico, Olympic Theatre, in Vicenza, northern Italy circa 1585.

History has been very kind to us in this regard, allowing people today to visit places like Pompeii through the magic of classic time travel. As women today in the West reach the zenith of power, influence and independence, many more, still struggle just for basic human rights. Julia Felix is an exceptional and unique individual from our past who should be more noticed and celebrated for the role she played in the male dominated world of the ancient Roman Empire.

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*Authorities issued a passport only for authorized travelers to use the facilities available on the Cursus Publicus. There are cases of false passports being presented and punishments.



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