Fig. 22. - RICOSTRUZIONE DELLA CASA IN VIA DELLA FORTUNA (ARCH. I. GISMONDI).

Top, Italo Gismondi reconstruction drawing of an apartment block in Ostia Antica, the 1st C Port of Rome. Photo by Don Fenton.

By Don Fenton 18th November 2021

Ostia Antica – and 5 reasons why you will love it!

We rented a villa in Anzio, thirty Roman miles south of Ostia Antica, the old port town that supplied Rome with her grain and just about everything else, for several hundred years. Antium, the original name for Anzio, is in the Lazio region of Italy, and was the capital of the ancient Volsci people, founded by Anteias, son of Odysseus.

It was here, following his 58 BC exile, that Cicero gathered and stored the scrolls from his battered libraries. Maecenas, the friend of Augustus and patron of Horace and Virgil, had a villa

here by the beautiful, sandy shore. Augustus and his imperial heirs had villas here and Nero and Caligula both called Antium, home.

The drive to Ostia Antica was very pleasant, with the approach to the old port especially beautiful under the tall stone pines, cypress and umbrella trees. Rome's old port town is now a little ways inland from the mouth of the Tiber River that gave it its name, from the Latin Os, for mouth. It used to almost touch the shore of the Tyrrhenian Sea before all the silt accumulated.

Ostia Antica is the town of the working classes: importers and exporters, ship owners and sailors, merchants and money lenders. There are many good reasons to visit. Although the old port silted up in ancient times and played a diminished role in the 3rd and 4th centuries, it continued to be a fashionable country retreat, until the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century.

Archeological work conducted by the architect and archeologist Italo Gismondi between 1910 and the 1950s, and the dictator Benito Mussolini between 1937 and 1942, and others have unearthed extraordinary remains of this ancient town, and today, we can see well preserved neighbourhoods and understand what life was like here from the 1st century BC until the 4th century AD.

Only about a third of this prosperous town has been excavated, but Ostia Antica has much to offer: temples, baths, public toilets, an amphitheatre, the Piazzale of Corporations, warehouses, an ancient restaurant and bar, apartment blocks, a museum, and even the oldest mainstream synagogue outside Israel from the time of Claudius, emperor from 41 to 54 AD.

The amphitheatre in Ostia Antica. Photo by Don Fenton.

One of the most significant insights Ostia Antica gives us is a rare opportunity to see 1st and 2nd century apartment blocks, or insulae, still standing, unlike the thousands that once blanketed the ancient city of Rome, 19 miles up the Tiber.

The first image shown above, is a reconstruction drawing by Italo Gismondi, director of excavations at Ostia over a forty year period. It gives us a realistic picture of what one such insula would have looked like.

Rome had an estimated 42,000 to 46,000 insulae to house its one million inhabitants during the late Republic and the transition to the early Empire at the time of Augustus, 27 BC-14 AD. At about 1400 hectares in size, the density of the city of Rome was nearly 4 times that of Manhattan today.

The success of Rome as the ancient world's superpower, beckoned people from all over the Mediterranean and beyond. Architects built insulae to house them, and successive emperors issued edicts to control the number of floors, as they rose in height.

The best known apartment block in Rome was the Insula Felicula, seen below in the Gismondi model, in the centre. It stood an impressive 8 or 9 stories tall and was an ancient world tourist attraction.

The Insula Felicula in Rome, centre, from the Gismondi model, was 8 or 9 stories tall.

Unfortunately, for the poor souls who lived in the upper stories, there were fatal flaws in this red-hot, urban real estate and housing market. Vitruvius, the contemporary architect and engineer who wrote the famous work, De Architectura, said that the necessary thickness of the foundation

walls of an Insula, limited as it was to 1 to 1 ½ Roman feet, due to crowding in the city, was not able to support such heights unless the upper stories were made of light materials.

Builders complied and the results were often disastrous.

The writer Juvenal, 55-140 AD, says Rome's apartment buildings were held together with gimcrack stays and props, and often collapsed or burned down. He writes that landlords papered over great cracks in the buildings, and attic tenants, way up among the nesting pigeons, had nothing but tiles between them and the weather.

The Great Fire of Rome in July, 64 AD which the historian Tacitus blamed on Nero, burned for six days and smouldered for three more with flames leaping from building to building, eventually consuming 2/3rds of the city, or 10 of its 14 districts.

Contrary, however, to the probable fiction spread by Tacitus that Nero fiddled while Rome burned, the emperor actually welcomed people to take refuge in his private gardens and made restrictions during rebuilding on heights, as a remedy, following those of Augustus 50 years earlier. He decreed against adjoining walls between buildings and expanded the width of streets between the Insulae.

Before this, the ancient Roman 1%, shamelessly exploited the poor and the working class, and anyone trying to rise out of it.

Crassus, the wealthy patron of Julius Caesar, had his men gather at burning or collapsing apartment blocks, to offer a purchase price as the building came down. The price fell, like the apartment building, as more and more of the property crumbled.

The image below shows the only surviving apartment block from the period still standing in Rome today. Built in the 2nd century, it would have had several added floors above what we see here, made of wood and plaster and subject to various hazards. It's called the Insula dell'Ara Coeli and sits forlornly alone, near the foot of the Capitoline Hill.

Insula dell'Ara Coeli, Lalupa, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Contrast this to our first image above of an apartment building in Ostia Antica today. With amazing good fortune, and thanks to the centuries of mud that preserved them, we have such buildings still standing in the ancient port city of Ostia Antica. They would have looked like this Gismondi model, below, of an apartment block in the reign of Hadrian, in the early 2nd century, near the large temple in the forum of Ostia.

In fact, we have many insula in Ostia that we can still see today, an exciting historical treasure.

Gismondi model of an Ostia Antica apartment block, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Ostia Antica was critical to Rome for the importing, storage and shipment of goods needed in this thriving ancient metropolis. From the time of the reign of Augustus in the 1st century BC, Ostia received, processed, warehoused and shipped to Rome most of its food and clothing, as well as building materials, household implements and furniture.

Just about the only thing Ostia Antica didn't provide Rome was its water supply. According to Frontinus, the 1st century civil engineer, water came to the city by way of eleven aqueducts, an estimated 600,000 cubic meters or 158 million gallons every day of pure, clean water from springs as far as 60 Roman miles away.
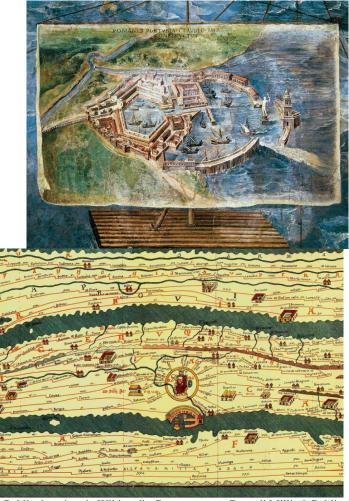
As for Ostia Antica, Cicero, as Consul, rebuilt and fortified the ancient port. Julius Caesar expanded the harbour, as did Tiberius and Claudius. Trajan added his hexagonal inner harbour, still visible today. This fresco from the Vatican collections, below left, shows Trajan's harbour in 113 AD with its lighthouse and fortified walls.

Hadrian put his stamp on the town with its 'modern' brick faced buildings, evident throughout Ostia Antica. The yellow bricks, with the added hues of red, with marble and stucco ornament, are ubiquitous in this town and part of what makes Ostia Antica so pleasing to the eye as you stroll the Decumanus Maximus and the Cardo.

Ostia's history shows that it was attacked during the civil war between Marius and Sulla in the 1st century BC, disrupting the storage and delivery of food and goods to Rome.

Later, it was sacked by pirates who destroyed large parts of the war fleet, prompting the Senate to give Pompey, the General, the power to rid the Mediterranean Sea of pirates once and for all, which he then famously did and earned his title, the Great.

The map, below right, from the Tabula Peutingeriana shows the close proximity of Ostia Antica to Rome and the supply route up the Tiber River.

By JASON URBANUS, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons   Conradi Millieri, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

At the time, most of Rome's population lived in apartment buildings. Most of these Insulae were limited to six or seven stories tall, by decree of the Emperor Augustus, with shops on the ground floor, large and expensive apartments above and smaller units higher up.

Strabo, the Roman author and geographer who lived during Augustus' lifetime, said the decree about height was due to the many insula collapses and fires and that Augustus organized a fire brigade to help deal with the situation.

Owners like Crassus and Cicero collected rent and capitalized on the housing problem by rebuilding these rickety structures. Collapses and fires must have been a frequent disaster for the average Roman over a long period of time.

The House of Diana in Ostia Antica, photo by Don Fenton

Ostia Antica invites us to look in detail at well-preserved examples of the ancient Rome's apartment buildings. For example, the well-preserved House of Diana in Ostia, seen in the photograph above. Coincidently, there's my partner, Mary Fisher, sitting on the rare sidewalk, way in the distance.

We find the House of Diana, a well-appointed four story apartment block by walking though the town from the Porta Romana, facing upriver toward Rome. Before we enter though, we pass the tombs outside the walls, as was the fashion, and these include expensive tomb houses of the rich as well as small urn and grave burials of the poor. In the 2nd century, the influence of Christianity introduced burials alongside the cremations.

As we walk through the town along the Decumanus Maximus, the main street, we can see the Baths of Neptune, the amphitheatre originally built by Augustus' General Agrippa, the piazza and storefronts of the 60 or so corporations.
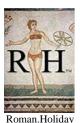
After an imagined bath and between entertainments in the theatre, we could be strolling in the piazza with its temple to commerce, walking and shopping under the portico past the many corporate stalls, and perhaps taking a rest in the open public latrines.

By the time we reach the House of Diana, we find the thermopolium, a restaurant and bar that looks inviting enough to sit down and order lunch from the ancient menu on display.

Beyond that, there is much to see before we reach the Porta Marina on the other side of town. There is the Capital or Capitolium, the town hall or Curia, the law courts or Basilica.

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