

Designing for a market: '*medianum*' apartments at Ostia

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Introduction

Since their discovery in the early part of the 20th c., the apartment blocks of Ostia have been interpreted as multiple rental units, and have often been used by proxy to illustrate the living conditions of most of the inhabitants of Imperial Rome.¹ Within the available sample at Ostia there is, however, a group of larger, more luxuriously appointed apartments following a common plan, now often called '*medianum*' apartments, which clearly belong to the upper end of the rental market (fig. 1).² The common feature is the hall or wide corridor lit from large external windows opening onto a court or street (the '*medianum*'), around which the remaining rooms are grouped on three sides. This paper focuses on those which occupy potentially valuable ground-floor space and are the best preserved, although their elongated form presumably has its origins in building on upper floors above rows of *tabernae*.³ This kind of large apartment on the ground floor has no known parallel at Rome, either from the Severan Marble Plan or in the few excavated *insulae* at Rome; the only surviving example is on the *upper* floor of the Casa di via Giulio Romano, at the foot of the Capitoline, over a row of *tabernae*.⁴ These apartments thus raise questions about the supply of urban housing at Ostia.

Already in 1973 R. Meiggs had asked "How far did architects build to meet known demands?", but his question has remained largely unanswered.⁵ Yet this question is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of the physical development of the city, where land and construction represented a considerable investment. If these apartments were indeed built for rent, it would assume that as good a return could be obtained from residential as from commercial rentals at ground-floor level, and that the nature of the apartment must have suited some section of the current property-market.⁶ The same would apply to a developer building to sell. In either case, who decided on the design and how? Vitruvius (6 *praef.* 6) alerts us to the possibility that the landowner could be his own designer, but the task could equally fall to a master-builder or architect; in some circumstances, the input of a particular prospective occupier might also be possible. This leads to a second group of questions, on the nature of the occupiers. To what socio-economic strata might they have belonged? Did all the existing Ostian sample of large *medianum* apartments serve the same socio-economic group? And what size and kind of households were they intended for?

Obviously we cannot answer these questions fully without documentary sources, but the particular circumstances at Ostia allow some insight into design decisions and these in turn suggest solutions to the other questions. All these apartments were built within a period of no more than 50 years, from early in the reign of Trajan to the middle of the 2nd c. A.D. All belong to multiple-unit complexes, where there are two or more apartments of this type which are part of a single unified building project. They provide a coherent sample for analysis.⁷ Three

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- 1 See the series of articles by Calza: the most important are those of 1914, 1915, 1916, 1929, 1941.
 - 2 Meiggs 1973, 247; Packer 1971, 8-11; Frier 1980, 5-20; Hermansen 1982, 17-49; Gering 1999, 102-15; id. 2001.
 - 3 Several examples of such apartments of this kind survive at Ostia — e.g., on the upper floors of the *Insula degli Aurighi* (III.x.1: Gering 1999, 110) — but presumably represent only a fraction of those that once existed.
 - 4 Packer 1968-69.
 - 5 Meiggs 1973, 586.
 - 6 See Frier 1980, 31-32 on the apparent concerns of high-class owners for a steady income rather than profit from rents.
 - 7 The apartment at III.vii.5 has been omitted from the general discussion as there is only the single apartment, integrally connected to the so-called *Domus Fulminata*, which is more likely to have a *collegium*