

P O M P E I I

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# Of Mice and Men

New discoveries in the servants' quarters of the Roman villa of Civita Giuliana near Pompeii

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The villa of Civita Giuliana, situated about 600 metres north of ancient Pompeii, was first discovered and partially excavated in the years 1907/8. At that time, the villa was known as “villa Imperiali” after the owner of the land plot. After the excavation, the trenches were backfilled, as was often the case then—things would only start to change one year later with the discovery of the

villa of the Mysteries. Some finds (approximately 25% according to the law) were brought to the Antiquarium of Pompeii, where they got destroyed during the bombing of the site in 1943. The other 75% of the objects were kept by the landowner who sold most of them, some abroad, without leaving any records (Stefani 1994).

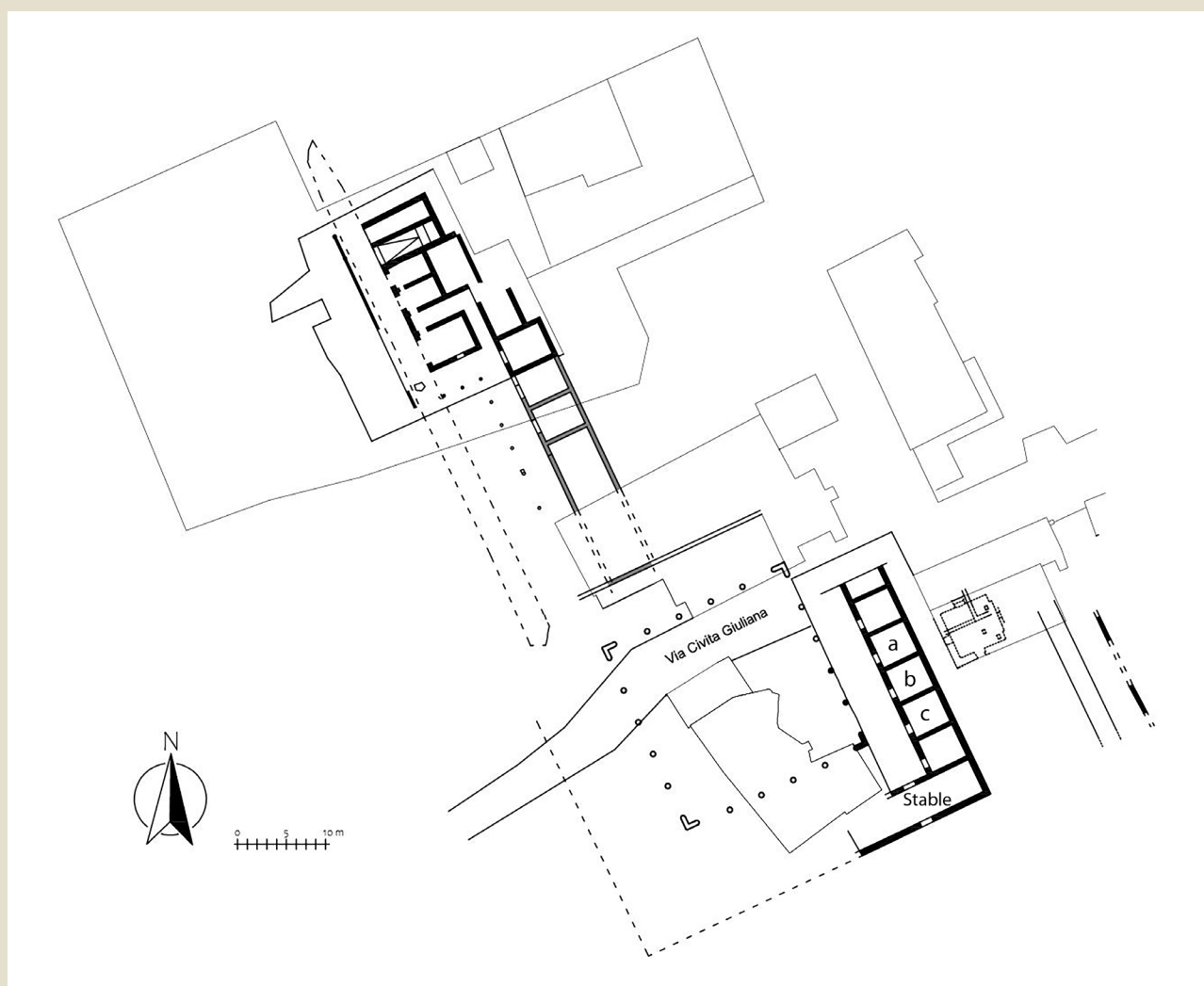


fig. 1

<sup>1</sup>Archaeological Park of Pompeii, Via Plinio 26, 80045, Pompei (NA)

New excavations on the site have begun, more than a hundred years after the first exploration of the villa. In 2017, the Archaeological Park of Pompeii started to cooperate with the local Public Attorney's Office who were investigating illegal excavations in the area. As it turned out, the owners of a house situated on the spot of the ancient villa had dug an underground network of tunnels to systematically loot the site and deprive it of frescoes and precious finds destined to be smuggled abroad and sold on the antiquities market (Osanna, Toniolo 2022).

The archaeological excavation of the villa, begun under the direction of then director M. Osanna, is still going on and has led to a series of unexpected discoveries (**fig. 1**). Among these were a stable where it was possible to make a plaster cast of a horse, the remains of a ceremonial carriage (*pilentum*) decorated with silver and bronze medallions and appliques, and two victims of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, of whom casts were made (Osanna, Toniolo 2022, pp. 97-233).

As if this had not been thrilling enough, several rooms excavated since 2021 have provided a unique insight into the living conditions of enslaved people in antiquity. In two rooms it has been possible to reconstruct much of the ancient furniture and to recover numerous small finds (room "a" and "c" in **fig. 1**). As a result, we get a glimpse of virtually photographic quality into the lives of a group of people who hardly appear in the written sources, and if they do so it is almost exclusively from an elite perspective.

Room "c" was excavated in autumn 2021 and became known as the "slave room" of Civita Giuliana (*la stanza degli schiavi*: see Osanna, Toniolo 2022, p. 235-270; Zuchtriegel 2022, p. 166; 2023, pp. 144-148). Like the other rooms of the servants' quarters brought to light so far, it measured about 16 square metres in size. Entering from the portico that surrounds the courtyard, where the carriage had been parked, a visitor would have faced the backwall of the building, from where a single window, rather small and in



fig. 2

the upper part of the wall, illuminated the room. The walls in *opus reticulatum*, dating to the late first century BC, were not plastered, except for a white patch beneath the window. At its centre, a nail had been driven into the wall. The oil lamp that hung from it was found broken on the floor beneath. Thus, the function of this patch of plaster must have been to reflect and amplify the scanty light of the lamp.

As room “c” was filled to the height of about 1 m from floor level with the pyroclastic layer that had enveloped everything as a hot ash cloud and then become solid, thereby conserving the imprints of organic materials that have long decomposed, much of the wooden furniture and the textiles could be reconstructed as plaster casts (**fig. 2**). The method to obtain plaster casts from decayed organic objects that leave a void in the ash was first applied systematically by Giuseppe Fiorelli in 1863, although earlier attempts are attested, the casts of furniture being among the earliest examples (Osanna, Capurso, Masseroli 2021).

The room contained three beds of a very primitive type, for which in ancient Latin the term *grabatus* seems to have been common, from Greek κράββατος (see De Carolis 2007, pp. 91-92). Roughly dressed posts were assembled to form the bedframe; the whole thing could have been taken apart and reassembled in a few minutes. There was no mattress. Instead, thin ropes were fixed along the posts to form a loose netting, almost like a hammock, on which the blankets were put (**fig. 3**). On the autumn day of AD 79 that was to be the last one of ancient Pompeii, the blankets were left in a disorderly manner on the netting. The beds along the north and east wall each measured about 1.70 m, the one along the south wall 1.40 m, presumably because it was for a child or a small person. Beneath the beds, there were wooden containers, clay jugs and what looks like a night pot. In addition,



fig. 3

amphorae lying under the beds were interpreted as makeshift suitcases for the personal belongings of the people living here.

Unfortunately, the tunnels of the looters dug along the walls in search of wall paintings have destroyed about half of the beds along the north and south walls, while the one along the east wall is only partially preserved because a section of it was buried in pumice that had fallen in through the window before the arrival of the pyroclastic surges that create the conditions for the conservation of the imprints in the ash.

Apart from being a bedroom, this meagre space was also used as a storage room. Six large amphorae stored in the northeast and the southeast corners alongside smaller vessels were found during the excavation. In addition, the steering mechanism of a carriage was found leaning against the bed along the southern wall, while the centre of the room was occupied by a box containing what looks like horse-gear and a harness. Sleeping, working, storing: all these activities seem to have taken place simultaneously in this room. (G.Z.)

The restoration and analysis of the amphorae and other finds is still underway. Yet, there is already evidence that the servants sharing this room were not the only inhabitants. The micro-excavation of the pottery vessels and archaeozoological analyses indicate that also some small rodents were present in room c (cf. Nappi 2001). Remains of two wood/yellow-necked mice (*Apodemus sylvaticus/flavicollis*), one adult and one juvenile, respectively, were found in the amphora stored horizontally under the bed along the southern wall of the room (fig. 4). Given that the amphora was empty at the moment of the excavation (i.e., the ash did not fill it), it is likely that it contained some organic material (textiles, grain or other perishables) which blocked the ash from entering the vessel. The two mice evidently remained hidden among the contents of the amphora and may have died during the eruption though we cannot exclude that their remains were already there at that time.



fig. 4



fig. 5

Another rodent, a subadult of a black rat (*Rattus rattus*), was found in a coarse clay jug with trefoil mouth that had been put under the south-eastern corner of the bed along the north wall (fig. 2 jug in bottom left corner; fig. 5). The jug contained a semi-liquid substance the exact nature of which remains to be identified. It can be inferred that the rat had been attracted by the contents of the jar and was trying to get out during the eruption, until it was killed by the pyroclastic surge that filled the room with hot ash, as suggested by the imprint of the rat's body showing its forepaws leaning on the jug wall while its hind paws were placed on the base. Though this species originated in Asia (Masseti 1995), the remains from Civita Giuliana suggest that the black rat was already widespread in the Pompeii area in the first century AD. Other remains of this species were collected from Pompeian contexts dated to the second century BC (Salari 2014). In the first century BC, Varro (*De Re Rustica*, 1.8) mentions a type of mousetrap for vineyards that was widely used on the island of Pandateria (modern Ventotene). (C.C.)

Although rodents figured prominently in ancient literature (e.g., the comic epic *Batrachomyomachia*, Aesop and Horace's, satires 2.6, elaboration on the fable of the town and the country mouse) as well as in popular jokes (see *Philogelos* no. 173: a man trying to sell honey in which a mouse has fallen), the scale of ancient rodent infestation and its possible impact on the spread of diseases is still debated (cf. Harper 2017, p. 201: the evidence according to which the "Roman world was crawling with rats" is actually not very compelling). The data from one room in a villa in the Pompeian countryside will not change this; however, the presence of no less than three rodents suggests that the impact of mice and rats on ancient hygiene, disease control and storage conditions should not be underestimated.

Given the scarcity of space in room "c", as reflected in the way the beds were arranged, it is surprising that the neighboring room "b" presented itself almost entirely empty, although it was subject to the same eruption conditions and to the same post-depositional processes as room "c". Not so room "a", which offers yet another opportunity to study the casts of furniture and objects of daily use in their original context (**fig. 6**). There are both similarities and differences between rooms "a" and "c" in this regard—a fact that invites us to further reflect on the social and cultural environment in which enslaved people lived in the Pompeian countryside.



fig. 6

Like the other rooms, room “a” has an entrance door offset to the south. Again, there are no traces of plaster covering the *opus reticulatum* walls, a fact that fits into the general picture; as has long been observed, the servants’ quarters in Pompeii are often recognisable by the absence of wall decoration. To the left of the entrance there is a bed of the *grabatus* type as described above, of which only about 30% survives due to the damage caused by the tunnels dug by looters before 2017. The bed is 0.68 m high, the original length can be reconstructed as approximately 1.80 m, the width as 0.90 m (**fig. 7**).

The loose weave of the rope netting of the bed is perfectly preserved by the plaster cast as is the blanket left strewn untidily on the bed. As with the other beds of this type, there does not appear to have been a mattress on this bed. The remains (carbonized wood) of a big L-shaped shelf were discovered above the bed on the west wall. A large wicker basket found towards the center of the

room in the cinerite must have once stood on the shelf but was hurled off by the pyroclastic surge. Contained inside it were two smaller baskets – all are preserved as plaster casts. On the shelf that surrounded the room were found cups, plates, and various other pieces of crockery.

Along the north wall a bed of a different type has come to light (**fig. 8**). It is known in Italian as *letto a spalliera* and represents a more comfortable bed as compared to the *grabatus*. An ancient term for it was *lectus cubicularis*, because it was used to rest in the *cubiculum* (bedroom), unlike the *lectus tridlinaris* on which banqueters reclined during meals and feasts (De Carolis 2007, pp. 80-91; it has to be kept in mind that all such classifications remain schematic and do not necessarily reflect the use of these terms across a large geographic area or a long period of time). At least two of the wooden side panels that are characteristic of this type of bed could be identified thanks to the stain left on the ash by the red painted outlines of



fig. 7

rectangles that once decorated the panels. The bed has been severely damaged by the looter tunnels. However, the dimensions can be reconstructed as follows: the mattress was roughly 0.30 m above floor level, while the panels reached a height of at least 0.95 m from floor level. The bed was about 1.80 m long and 1 m wide.

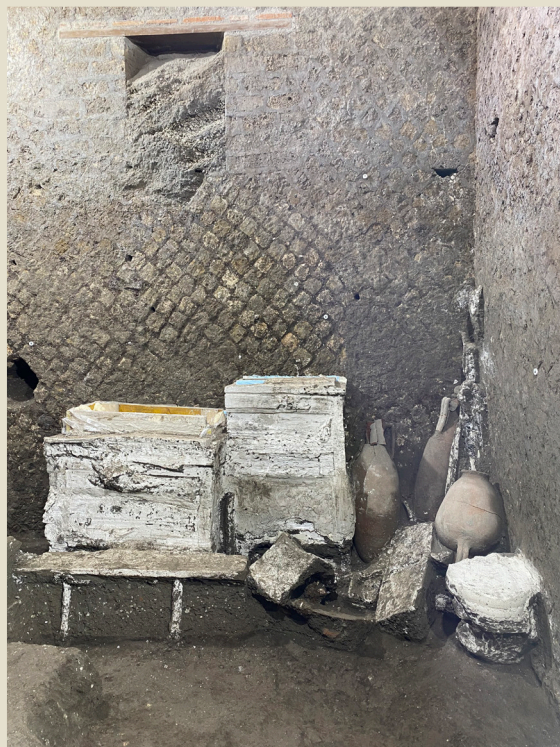
In the northeast corner of the room stands an upright amphora of Dressel 25 type wedged between the wall and the bed. Along the east wall beneath the window, which is 2.20 m above floor level, there are two small cupboards next to one another. The northernmost one measures 0.83 m height, 0.95 length, 0.56 m depth. It contained some metal objects among which there was a knife blade and a small scythe that are currently being analysed and conserved. The smaller cupboard is 1.10 m high, 0.68 m long and 0.33 m deep (**fig. 9**). Both cupboards, although damaged by the looting tunnels, display evidence of having been made of long, narrow planks of wood as the plaster cast of them shows (cf. De Caro 2007, pp. 190-191, “armadietto”). In front of them, sits a very simple bench with four legs, about 0.36 m high, 1.60 m long and 0.24 m wide.

In the southeast corner, there are two Dressel 2-4 amphorae one of which was found stoppered with a pebble stone. A bunch of wooden poles lean against the wall; next to them, another amphora, which is upturned, awaits complete excavation.



*fig. 8*

In front of the amphorae in the southeast corner there are the various plaster casts of wooden elements that are not immediately recognisable and may have fallen from the shelf above. In amongst these a rectangular iron blade of a hoe can be identified.



*fig. 9*

What do these extraordinarily preserved roomst tell us about slave quarters that the available written and archaeological evidence about the material life of Roman slaves (Joshel, Hackworth Peterson 2014) has not yet revealed? We will be able to fully answer this question only after the completion of the excavation. However, we can already draw some preliminary conclusions from the data that have emerged so far. On the one hand, the slave quarters of the villa of Civita Giuliana do not give the impression of a prison-like building that prevented enslaved people from running away. As far as we know, no iron grills blocked the—admittedly small—windows. Neither the doors of the single rooms nor the passage leading from the stable toward the outside of the complex seem to have been closed with locks—no traces of door



locks have been found. At the same time, the small lock of the box found in the center of room “c” is perfectly recognisable, thus suggesting that iron door locks, if there were any, should be preserved as well. This, on the other hand, might help explain the situation inside the villa complex. As there seem to have been no unsurmountable physical barriers to prevent the enslaved workers living in the villa from escaping, there must have been other mechanisms of control. Having the slaves live and sleep in groups of two or three in one room might have fit this purpose. As a matter of fact, the slave community not only fostered the creation of friendships and families (although enslaved persons could not be formally married) but also made it possible to establish forms of mutual control. The *lectus cubicularis* in room “a” might have belonged to a servant in a somewhat elevated position, maybe some kind of overseer. Such slaves often would be granted privileges in order to make them reliable allies of the master, e.g., by allowing them to live with a female slave in a de-facto marriage (cf. Varro, *De re rustica*, 1.17; Columella 1.8.5). The promise of manumission, which had become quite common in the early Imperial period, also contributed to spur slaves, especially elder ones, to side with the master in the task of controlling the slave community rather than with fugitive slaves or even take up the risk of running away themselves—especially with uncertain outlooks, given that survival outside the sphere of the villa could turn out even more dire, and harsh punishments for run-aways (Knapp 2011, p. 142-147).

Besides reflecting possible family ties among the slaves, the double and triple bedrooms might have conformed to the necessity of establishing a constant mutual control between the enslaved workers, even during the night. Permitting the foremen and other slaves to form families is actually presented by Varro (*De re rustica*, 1.17.5) not only as a means of rewarding them and of increasing the workforce (children born

from enslaved women were automatically slaves themselves), but also explicitly as a way of making them “more attached to the estate” (*coniunctiores fundo*). Thus, to get the whole picture, we should add an atmosphere of suspicion to the image of simplicity and intimacy offered by the rooms in the slave quarters of the villa. There certainly was solidarity, maybe even friendship and love (bonds which often lasted after a slave was set free), but there must have also been fear and terror of being accused before the master by a fellow slave. The fifth-century author Salvian (*De gubernatione Dei*, 4.3) encapsulates this when he talks about the lives of enslaved people: “They fear the accusers [among their fellow slaves], the informants, the overseers. Indeed, slaves are slaves to these almost as much as to their actual masters: any of them can kill them, any can grind them down.” (*Pavent quippe actores, pavent silentarios, pavent procuratores: prope ut inter istos omnes nullorum minus servi sint quam dominorum suorum: ab omnibus caeduntur, ab omnibus conteruntur.*) The term used here for those who spy on their fellow slaves is significant, although we cannot tell if it was in use four centuries earlier when the villa of Civita Giuliana was still inhabited: *silentarii*; literally, those who silence someone (*silentarius* was also a title given to a class of courtiers at the Byzantine court).

When looking at the rodent-infested rooms at Civita Giuliana, we are invited to appreciate how in spite of everything, the people living here struggled to maintain a minimum of dignity and comfort. Yet, we should also not forget the silence and isolation into which the bonds of slavery pressed these people—maybe even more so as these bonds were not physical (given the lack of grilled windows, door locks and so forth) but invisible and therefore potentially undermining any authentic form of communication. *Omnis servitus amaritudine plena est*, says Augustine (*Ennarationes in psalmos* 99.7): “All slavery is filled with bitterness.” (G.Z.)

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# Collection of images



## Captions:

- Fig. 1 - Plan of the villa of Civita Giuliana (drawing R. Martinelli).  
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