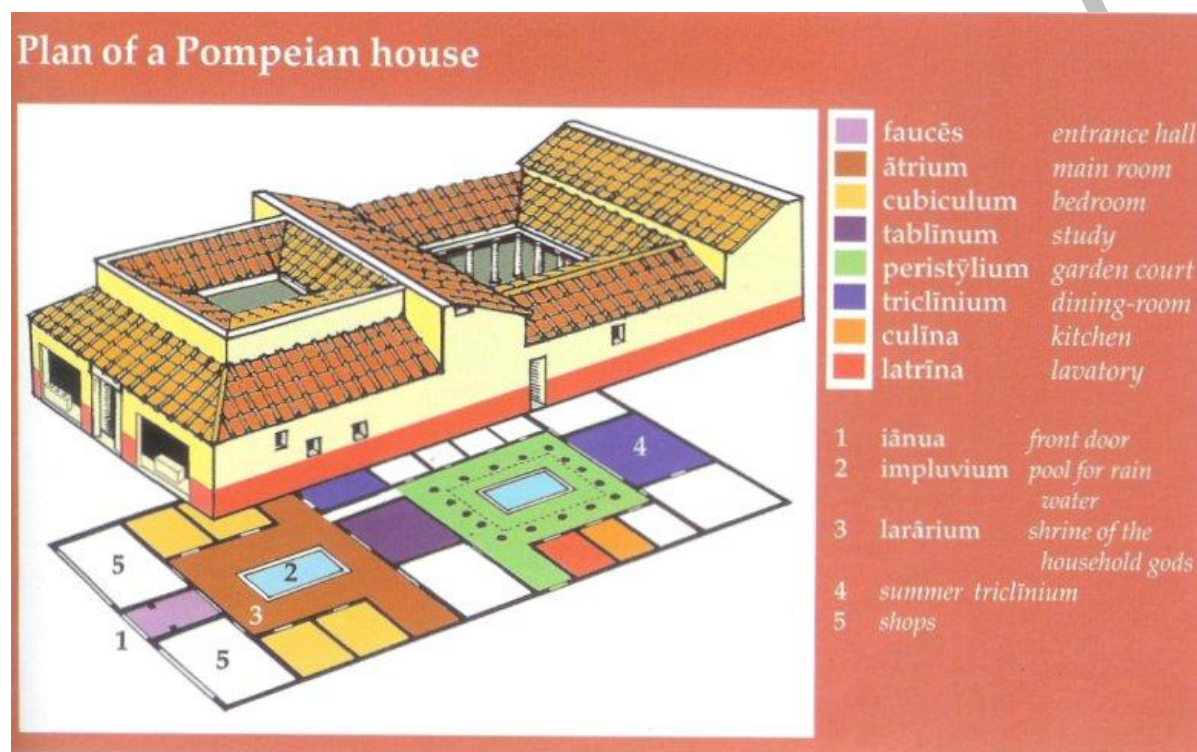
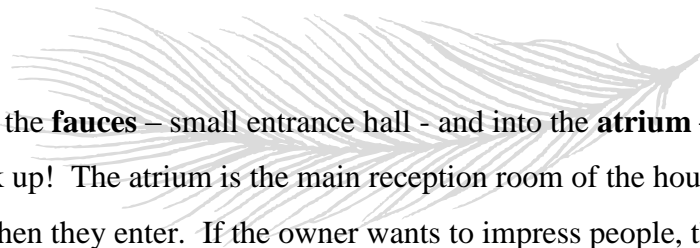


The Roman House

Romans lived in many different types of houses, just as we do today. We will be looking at a typical wealthy businessman's house in the first century AD. Let's go back to 79 AD and imagine we are walking through the house...



The first thing which might surprise you as we approach the house is how plain it looks from the outside. The house comes right up to the footpath and has no front garden. It is only one storey high and has small windows high up: too high to see into the house! The tall, double front door is solid wood and is called the **ianua** (pronounced ee-an-you-ah). On either side of the doorway are what appear to be open shop-fronts, like stalls. The owner has rented out this space to shop-owners to make a little extra money. It's common practice and a businessman always has an eye to the chance! There is no entrance to the house from these shops. From the outside of this house, there is nothing to indicate how wealthy the owner might be. In fact, it looks quite dull and uninviting.



As we step through the **fauces** – small entrance hall - and into the **atrium** – or main room, things begin to look up! The atrium is the main reception room of the house and the first thing visitors see when they enter. If the owner wants to impress people, this is where he puts in the most effort. The walls are painted and richly decorated. The Pompeians love red, orange and blue, so these colours are used to make the room bright and striking. Scenes from well-known Greek myths (the story of Hercules, for example) are painted directly onto the plaster walls. The floors are marble and, if the owner is wealthy enough, mosaics.

The ceiling is high and there is a large square or rectangular hole in its centre. If you had a bird's eye view from outside, you could see that the roof slopes downwards towards this hole. Directly underneath the hole in the ceiling is a shallow pool, lined with marble, which collects any rainwater which falls through the hole. This pool is called the **impluvium** (pronounced imm-ploo-vee-umm). If it is sunny, light streams through this hole. Either way, the effect is of spaciousness and calm.

There is very little furniture in the atrium: just two stone benches on which family or visitors can sit, and a decorative vase or two, a bronze or marble table and maybe a strongbox in which the family valuables are stored. Against one wall is the lararium, or shrine to the household gods. The lares – household gods – protect the house, and the family regularly offer up short prayers at the shrine.

Around the atrium are doors to other rooms such as the bedrooms (**cubiculum** is the Latin word for bedrooms), study and dining room. The entrances to these rooms are generally provided with a curtain rather than a wooden door, although some home owners did use wooden doors.

A wealthy Roman may have two dining rooms, one in the main part of the house, near the atrium, and a summer dining room which is partly open to the garden. Three couches are arranged around a circular table in the triclinium. The table is small, but elegantly carved and decorated. Each couch has places for three people. The diners recline or lie on the couches, leaning on their left elbow and taking food from the table with their right hand. The food is cut up by a slave before being served, and it is eaten with fingers or a spoon. (The Romans

did not use forks.) Only wealthy families recline to eat. Poor people, slaves, children and sometimes women eat sitting up. The Latin name for the dining room is **triclinium**.



The **culina** or kitchen was usually small, dark, and poorly ventilated, relegated to an obscure corner of the house. Wealthy ladies did not prepare meals; that was the job of their numerous household slaves, so it did not matter if the room was hot and smoky. Baking was done in ovens, whose tops were used to keep dishes warm. Embers from the oven could be placed below metal pot stands for a form of 'stove-top' cooking.





A slave preparing dinner

Sometimes, wealthy houses may contain a **latrina**, or bathroom, but most people use the public baths and toilets. (We will be looking at these another day.) If you need to run to the loo in an ancient Roman house, you may use a pot provided for that purpose or a lavatory / toilet if there is one. If you are a slave, you may use a toilet in the kitchen which might connect to the sewers or a stream below the house! Not all kitchens contain a toilet like this, of course.



A slave using the toilet in the culina, or kitchen.

Let's go back into the atrium. As you look straight ahead when standing in the atrium, you see double doors – usually in the form of a lattice screen – leading to the study (**tablinum** is the Latin word for study). This is where the master of the house conducts his business. If we walk straight through the study, we come into the courtyard garden (**hortus** is the Latin word for garden). Around the edge of the garden is a covered walkway with a roof supported by pillars. This is a nice, shady place for the members of the household to stroll or sit in the heat of the day. This walkway is called a **peristylum** in Latin. The peristylum can be quite elaborately decorated and there may be hanging baskets between the pillars.



The garden is laid out with flowers and shrubs in a careful plan. In the small fish-pond in the middle, a fountain throws up a jet of water, and marble statues of gods and heroes stand here and there. The garden is a place in which the family can relax on their own or with friends.

One thing that you would undoubtedly find very surprising in a Roman house of the time is the lack of privacy. The master of the house conducts much of his business and social life from the home. He receives and does business with most visitors in the atrium. The more important ones are invited into the tablinum. Certain very close business friends and high-ranking individuals would receive invitations to dine in the triclinium or relax in the peristylim with the family.

Even if there were no outsiders present, the members of the family were never on their own. They were surrounded and often outnumbered by their slaves. They did not attach as much importance to privacy as many people do today.

Hopefully you have enjoyed your short tour of the Roman house. Now for some exercises to test your new-found knowledge!

