



INSULAE: HOW THE MASSES LIVED

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Ersin: The ideal Roman town house, or *domus*, conjures up visions of sweeping *atria*, idyllic peristyle gardens, impressive mosaics and ornate statuary. And yet, only the top 3% of the city of Rome's population would've lived in this luxury.

In the 1st century AD, about 1 million people lived in the city of Rome, giving Rome a population that was not matched in the western world until London in 18th century. These people lived cheek by jowl, and the population density of the city would've been comparable to modern day Mumbai or Calcutta. So where did these masses live? They lived primarily in apartment buildings called *insulae*.

Few of these buildings survive in Rome, but they would've been spread right across the whole city, and on the doorsteps of the wealthiest houses. A few miles away, here in Ostia, the harbour town of Rome, we can see what these buildings would've looked like.

Up on this viewing platform, we really get a sense of the size and layout of these rooms. It is hard to know precisely what kind of people lived in apartment blocks like this one; but would it have been a single male dock worker, or would it have been an entire family who would've occupied one of these?

The rooms would've been dark, and in winter, without any heating, extremely cold. Tenants would've lit fires inside the rooms to keep themselves warm. So we should imagine this space also being filled with a lot of smoke. Not all Romans living these *insulae* would've had access to a toilet. They were public toilets down the road that people would've had to pay to use. We've also found chamber pots. Sometimes people chucked their contents right out into the street.

The rooms on the ground floor are more similar to what we'd think of as a Roman *domus*. Here there are mosaics and paintings on the walls, but the upstairs rooms were quite a different story.

Going up these stairs makes you really think about the people living on the top floor. There was no such thing as the Roman penthouse. In fact, those living at the top, would've been the poorest and most desperate, who would've had more stairs to carry their water up, and further to fall if the building collapsed.

The inadequate foundations made these buildings unsafe, and liable to collapse. And many were constructed predominantly from wood, which made them especially at risk to fire. In 64 AD, during the rule of the Emperor Nero, there was a huge fire in Rome, which spread easily between the flimsy timber structure of the apartment buildings. At the time, Rome had a basic fire department, but little could be done to stop the spread of the flames and over one third of the city was destroyed.

After this catastrophic event, laws were introduced, calling for more public access to water, and enforcing a minimum distance between buildings.

Here in front of me, I have a catalogue of inscriptions from Gaul, and there is one here which is really quite remarkable. It tells us of a man who died when his *insula* caught fire. His friends, who set up this monument, describe his vain attempt to flee from the burning building while still half-naked. This gives us a real insight into the dangers of living in an *insula*.

Living conditions in these *insulae* could've been atrocious. Tenants lived in constant fear of fire or collapse, and disease was rife. It is, however, striking to see these buildings standing next to a wealthy *domus*. The paradox of the city was the co-dependence of rich and poor living next to one another; one in luxury, one in squalor.