

THE MEDIANUM AND THE ROMAN APARTMENT

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THE MEANING OF THE WORDS *domus*, *insula*, and *cenaculum* has been debated as often as the Roman house or the population of Rome has been discussed. The debate has always been particularly heated when it has turned to the figures for the population of Rome. In the *Regionaries* we have the information that, presumably around A.D. 312-315, Rome had 44,850 *insulae* and 1781 *domus* (the *Breviarium* gives 46,602 and 1790, respectively). It is of the greatest importance to know precisely what *insula* means in this case. Any estimate of the population of Rome must start by solving this problem, though the uncertainties are plentiful even with this difficulty put aside. I propose to approach the problem from a different direction: by studying the word *medianum*, I hope to demonstrate with greater clarity what a *cenaculum* was and consequently help determine the meaning of *insula*.

Many interpretations of the word *insula* have been given over the years: an apartment, any inhabitable room, a taberna, a floor in an apartment house, a hearth or fireplace. G. Calza gives a list of interpretations and interpreters in *Bollettino Comunale*.¹ In the same article he takes von Gerkan to task for contending as recently as 1940 that *insula*, used in contrast to *domus*, must mean not a whole building, but an apartment.² Lately J. E. Packer has stated that "the word (*insula*) would appear to mean only a large dwelling in which smaller units are rented out. Accordingly, an *insula* meant either a large building covering an entire block or only a small part of another structure. The term was used rather with a legalistic than an architectural connotation."³ Packer's view seems in the main to agree with the generally accepted meaning "apartment block."⁴

Ancient sources give some simple facts. *Digesta* 19.2.30, for example, says: *Qui insulam triginta conduxerat, singula coenacula ita locavit, ut quadraginta ex omnibus colligerentur. . . .* This proves that an *insula* can be divided into *cenacula*. *CIL* 6.29791: *in his praedis/insula Sertoriana/bolo esse Aur. Cyriacetis/filie meae cinacula numero VI tabernas/numero*

¹"La popolazione di Roma antica," *Bollettino Comunale* 69 (1941) 142 ff.

²"Die Einwohnerzahl Roms in der Kaiserzeit," *Röm. Mitt.* (1940) 149-195.

³*The Insulae of Imperial Ostia*, Diss. Univ. of California (1964), quoted from *Diss. Abstracts* 26 (1965) no. 2702.

⁴So also Lugli, *I Monumenti Antichi di Roma*, Suppl. 2. (1940) 86. Much material is gathered in J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (Harmondsworth 1964) 33 ff.

XI et repossone subiscalire/feliciter. The inscription shows that an *insula* contains *cenacula*, *tabernae*, and a storage room under the stairs.

What, then, does *cenaculum* mean? The only period with which I am concerned in this study is the Empire, and the most eloquent material is again to be found in the *Digesta*. The famous *titulus* about things thrown out of windows seeks to determine where to place responsibility if somebody is hurt by flying objects (*Dig.* 9.3). It contains the following passage: *Si plures in eodem coenaculo habitent, unde deiectum est, in quemuis haec actio dabitur, quum sane impossibile est scire, quis deiecisset, uel effudisset, et quidem in solidum* (paragr. 1.10–3). And later: *si uero plures diuiso inter se coenaculo habitent, actio in eum solum datur, qui inhabitabat eam partem, unde effusum est* (paragr. 5).

The first of these excerpts shows that several persons can live in a *cenaculum*, and paragraph 5 shows that a *cenaculum* can be divided so that each section can be held responsible before the law. This suggests that *cenaculum* might mean an apartment; and this is made clear in the following paragraphs (5.1–2): *sed si quis coenaculariam exercens modicum sibi hospicium retinuerit, residuum locauerit pluribus, omnes tenebuntur, quasi in hoc coenaculo habitantes, unde deiectum effusumue est. interdum tamen, quod sine captione actoris fiat, oportebit praetorem aequitate motum in eum potius dare actionem, ex cuius cubiculo uel exedra deiectum est, licet plures in eodem coenaculo habitent; quod si ex mediano quid deiectum sit, uerius est omnes teneri.* The law repeats the precepts about joint responsibility of the inhabitants of the *cenaculum*, but sometimes the praetor, *aequitate motus*, can allow action against the individual from whose *cubiculum* or *exedra* the objects have been thrown down, causing damage or bodily harm, although several persons live in the *cenaculum*. But if something is thrown out from the *medianum*, then everybody is responsible.

Medianum is the word given in the oldest and best manuscript of the Justinian Corpus, the Florentinus (6th–7th century).⁵ That *medianum* is the original text can be seen in the *Basilica*, where the corresponding Greek text reads ἀπὸ τοῦ μέσου.⁶ The later manuscripts, which are very numerous, read *mediano coenaculo* or *mediano coenaculi*. It seems that the word *medianum* has not been clearly understood since antiquity; and in our time it has not been associated with any archaeological reality. The definition of the adjective *medianus* in the *Thesaurus* is simply a paraphrase of the *Digest* passage. Consequently, since another late tradition reads *meniano* instead of *mediano* in the text of the *Digest*,

⁵On the manuscripts of the Justinian Corpus, see Paul Kruger, *Geschichte der Quellen und Literatur des Römischen Rechts* (Leipzig 1888) 377 ff.

⁶*Bas.* 60.4.5.2: εἰ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ μέσου ἐκχύθη, πάντες ἐνέχονται.

meniano has been adopted by some scholars: Carcopino renders the text, in English translation: "The same will hold good if the vessel or the liquid has been thrown from a balcony."⁷ Carcopino and his followers must have argued that everybody had access to the balcony and, as a consequence, they would have been jointly responsible for whatever was thrown down from it.

Before discussing what *medianum* means, it might be in order to say a few words about Roman balconies. When Roman balconies are discussed in this and similar connections, it is impossible not to think of the narrow balconies, known from several houses in Ostia, from Via Biberatica, the Ara Coeli house, and probably indicated by the corbels of the house built into the Aurelian Wall at Porta Tiburtina, etc. These balconies were hardly meant to be occupied. If we examine the houses in Ostia and Rome where some of the floor above the mezzanine has been preserved, except for one example in the Roman facade at Porta Tiburtina, we shall not find much good evidence of doors leading out on the balconies. The single upstairs balcony at Porta Tiburtina seems to be the only basis for the many balcony reconstructions in Gismondi's drawings. The narrowness of the balconies of the Roman mezzanines seems to deprive them of real useful purposes, and R. Meiggs states that "their purpose seems primarily decorative."⁸ Italian architecture as late as the last century has preserved much of the Roman tradition and shows the Roman design in action: For example, in Via del Tribunale in Naples are seen houses with protruding store fronts with a balcony on top, and many of the older houses in modern Rome have narrow balconies. But antiquity's most narrow type which is seen in Via Biberatica, for instance, is hardly ever found in modern Rome.

But it would be very unlike the Romans not to have a practical purpose for their balconies. All the complaints in Juvenal and other writers and the very detailed Roman legislation indicate that a good many objects came flying down from above. There were broken jars and roof tiles and many other things at night, but also in the daytime there must have been much activity. The Romans, like modern Italians, probably spent much time resting their elbows on the window sills (cf. the conversation between St. Augustine and his mother in a window at Ostia [*Conf.* 9.23]), and it must be realized that the windows in antiquity were minor social centres where you could have conversations with your neighbours, especially the ones opposite you, across the narrow streets. A window sill was a very handy place for various things, and this window-living would lead to the dropping of objects on people below in the streets. So one of the most important functions of those

⁷*Op. cit.* (above, n. 4) 55.

⁸*Roman Ostia* (Oxford 1960) 240.

narrow balconies must have been to protect people who walked in and out of the shops and the gates of the Roman apartment houses and to catch any objects which fell out of the windows or off the flat roof.⁹

Returning to *Digesta* 9.3.5, we can see that it cannot refer to a "balcony." The word *medianum* is genuine and has a different significance. It occurs in a few places with the clear meaning of a room or a space in a house. All the examples of the word in this meaning are from about the same time: the passage in the *Corpus Iuris* is part of Ulpian's commentary on the Praetor's Edict, and its language mirrors Latin usage of the second to the beginning of the third century of our era. Near to this in time are quotations from the Itala:¹⁰ Luke 22.12 reads *ille uobis ostendet maedianum stratum magnum*, and the corresponding text in Mark reads *ipse uobis ostendet locum medianum stratum in superioribus magnum*. In the corresponding places the Greek text is ἀνάγαιον, while the Vulgate has *cenaculum*.¹¹

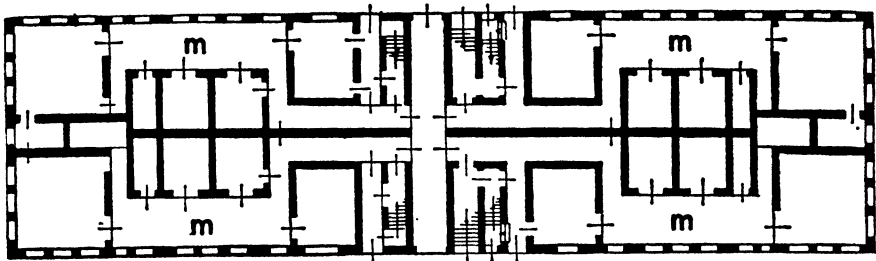
These quotations seem to show that a *medianum* must be a room in a *cenaculum*. The meaning of the word is best understood, if the standard floor plan of the Roman apartment is taken into consideration. The excavations in Ostia have uncovered the necessary material to illustrate the Roman apartment: the centre of the apartment in Ostia is everywhere a rectangular room which is always facing the street and mostly lighted by many windows (see fig. 1). This room, which is called a kind of atrium by Meiggs and others,¹² gives access to all the other rooms, and in order to get to any of the individual rooms it is necessary to pass through it. This room is the *medianum*. Since everybody had access to it and since presumably it cannot belong to any individual renter in an apartment

⁹A comparison with modern Italian customs might explain a paragraph in the same *titulus* (*Corpus Iuris* 9.3.5.12 *in fine*), where there are provisions for things falling down from *suggrunda* or *protectum*, and then is added: *idem seruandum respondit* (i.e. Servius) *et si amphora ex reticulo suspensa decidisset*. . . . The amphora in a net may refer to business dealings with street vendors as they are conducted today in the sidestreets of Naples and Rome. Negotiations are shouted between the customers in the windows upstairs and the vendor in the street, then a basket or net with the money in it is lowered down in a string and hoisted up again with the merchandise. An amphora in a net must have been a frequent sight, since most of the upper floors in Rome got their water supply from the *aquarii*, the water vendors. They cannot always have walked up the stairs.

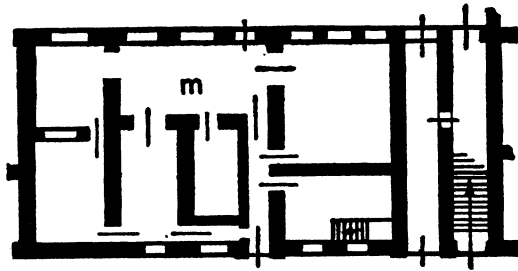
¹⁰See *ThLL* s.v. "medianus," quoting cod. *a*.

¹¹*Corpus Gloss. Lat.* ed. Goetz 3.191.1.21 has *andrio media manuum* according to one manuscript, and *andron media manu* according to a second. Schulze has conjectured ἀνδρεών: *medianum*, see index s.v. "medianus." *ThLL* refers to μεδειανόν, obviously a Latin loanword, in *CIG* 2.3278.4.

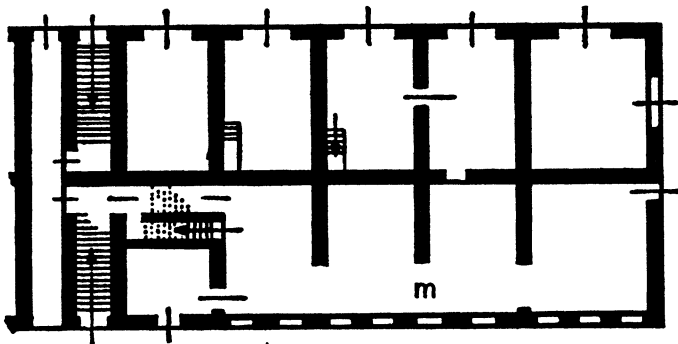
¹²E.g., Meiggs, *op. cit.* (above, n. 8) 247: "The corridor, liberally lighted from the street, is much wider than a corridor need be: it is both hall and corridor, as if it were the vestigial remnants of the atrium."



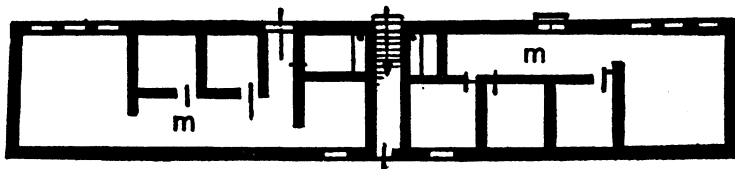
CASE GIARDINO



CASA DEI DIPINTI



CASA DI VIA DELLA FONTANA



CASSETTE TIPO

Figure 1: Eight Ostia apartments in four different types of houses. The *medianum* in each of them is marked *m*.

shared by several persons, everybody in the apartment can be held responsible if something has been thrown out of the windows.

If this interpretation is accepted, it becomes clear that *cenaculum* means an apartment. *Digesta* 19.3.5 then mentions three individual rooms in a Roman apartment: *cubiculum*, *exedra*, and *medianum*. It can now be understood that in Latin from the second century to the time of Justinian an *insula* was divided into *cenacula*, which were subdivided into several rooms, among which may have been *cubacula*, *medianum*, and *exedra*.

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