

Living in an insula: additional literary and epigraphical evidence

1. Juvenal (*Satire* 3.194ff.) vividly describes the dangers of living in an **insula**:

We live in a city where most of the buildings are held up by flimsy bits of wood; that's how the owner stops his flats falling down; he patches up an old crack, then tells us to sleep soundly in a ruin that's about to collapse. It would be good to live in a place where there are no fires, where nobody panics in the night. The tenant below is shouting out for water, now he's moving his worthless belongings, and your third floor room is already full of smoke: you don't realise what's happening; if the alarm is raised on the ground floor, the last person to burn is the one up in the attic; the only thing protecting him from the rain is the tiled roof where the gentle doves lay their eggs.

Using evidence from this passage, describe what it would be like to live in an **insula**.

2. Juvenal (*Satire* 3 continued) describes how Codrus' apartment was destroyed by fire and he became a destitute beggar. A list of his possessions follows: a small couch; a sideboard; six little jugs; a pitcher; a bust of Chiron; an ancient settle; an old box containing a few Greek books (poetry), gnawed by mice. Codrus is reduced to begging for crusts (210-211):

**nūdum et frūsta rogantem
nēmo cibō, nēmo hospitiō tēctōque iuvābit**

*naked and begging for scraps
no-one will help him with food, no-one will help him with a roof and lodging*

3. In a letter to his friend Atticus, Cicero (*Letters to Atticus*, 14.9) mentions the poor state of some property he owned:

Two of my shops have fallen down and the rest are cracking. So not only the tenants but even the mice have migrated.

4. Martial (*Epigram* 12.32) describes the eviction of Vacerra and his family, who owe two years' rent:

*Oh disgrace of 1st July,
I saw your possessions, Vacerra, I saw them;
they were being carried away by your wife
after they had been refused in payment for two years' rent.**

...

*a bed with three legs and a two-legged table,**
a lamp and a wooden bowl,
and a broken urine flask dribbling from its cracked side,
the neck of an amphora supporting a green-stained portable stove*

...

*Why do you look for accommodation and laugh at the managers (*vīlicōs*),***
Vacerra, when you can live for free?
This procession of baggage is just the thing for a bridge.*****

Notes

* A landlord had the legal right to take a tenant's possessions as payment of rent. It seems that Vacerra's belongings are so undesirable that the landlord won't accept them.

** Both the bed and the table have a leg missing. Tables generally had three legs. See the pictures in the student's book (Story 1 Frame 17 and the cut-away drawing on page 16).

*** Presumably Vacerra is said to laugh at the managers of rented accommodation because he expects to be able to get an apartment without paying rent.

**** Traditionally bridges were places where beggars were said to congregate.

- i. Make a list of Vacerra's possessions.
- ii. What do we learn from Martial's poem about the situation of a tenant?
- iii. What is Martial's attitude to Vacerra? Does he show any sympathy for him and his family?
- iv. Discuss attitudes to homeless people nowadays.

5. This inscription (CIL 6.7193a), on the tomb of Ancarenus Nothus, a forty-three year old former slave, is popularly known as 'The Tenant's Lament'. Nothus' ashes were buried outside the walls of Rome in a shared tomb (**columbārium**) on Via Latina. Ancarenus is speaking, as if from the grave:

My bones rest peacefully.

And I am not worried that I might suddenly be hungry.

I don't have aching feet, I don't have to find a deposit for the rent,

And I am enjoying free lodging forever.

- i. Judging from this epitaph, what do you think life was like for an ordinary Roman?
- ii. How typical do you think Ancarenus was? (Would he have to be comparatively well-off to be able to afford a tomb and a long epitaph?)

6. This advertisement for a property to rent was found on a street corner in Pompeii:

*To let from 1 July. In the insula Arriana Polliana, property of Cnaius Alleius Nigidius Maius, shops and workshops (**tabernae**) with their own mezzanines, high-class upper floor apartments (**cēnācula**) and houses (**domūs**). Agent: Primus, slave of Cnaius Alleius Nigidius Maius.*

What does this sign tell us about renting property in Pompeii?

7. Petronius, *Satyricon* 38.10. Word of mouth was another way of finding an apartment to rent:

C. Pompēius Diogenēs ex kalendīs Iūliīs cēnāculum locat; ipse enim domum ēmit.

Gaius Pompeius Diogenes is renting out his apartment from 1st July; he has bought his own house.

8. Trimalchio, in Petronius' *Satyricon* (74.14), insults his wife by saying:

hic quī in pērgulā nātus est aedēs nōn somniātur

If you are born on a mezzanine you don't dream of a house.