The Libraries of Pompeii

By L. RICHARDSON, jr

In Pompeii rooms tended to be furnished, not with chairs and tables, but with wall paintings. Chairs and tables were usually light and easily transported, often collapsible, and a slave would fetch from a storeroom whatever might be needed and set it up where it was wanted, in the sun in winter, to catch the breeze in summer. Then he would put it away again after it had been used. So most Pompeian rooms would have looked very bare, were it not for the decorations spread lavishly over the walls.

These are surprisingly literary in their content. Not only are there numerous illustrations of the epics of Homer and Vergil and the classics of the theatre (a wide range of both tragedy and comedy, some of it unfamiliar to us, is represented), but we can even find subjects from the bucolic poet Theocritus. Euripides seems to have been especially popular, and the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus* are illustrated, as well as the *Medea* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. The last was so much a favorite that the gem cutter Pinarius Cerialis devoted an entire wall of his little dining room, painted to represent a stage, to it.

Yet even more striking than the range of poems and plays the Pompeians drew on for their pictures is the pervasiveness of the theme of reading and writing in the less important parts of the wall decorations. In the great frieze of the Villa dei Misteri a young boy read from a scroll, very likely doing his lessons under the tutelage of his mother, who sits beside him and holds another scroll. Further along in the frieze is a young woman who has a scroll thrust casually under the scarf worn in a roll about her hips, evidently a convenient place to carry it. Reading is a common occupation in the gyneceum scenes of the early imperial Third Style and among the figures that people the architectural framework in the last Pompeian style, the Fourth. Sometimes the reader holds a codex, a packet of the wax-coated tablets that were commonly used for ephemeral messages and accounts; sometimes he has a literary scroll. A special class of Pompeian still life pictures is made up of the *instrumentum scriptorium*: pens and styluses, ink pots, tablets and scrolls, sometimes with a cylindrical book box filled with scrolls.

Even in their portraiture the ancient Pompeians showed their appreciation of writing. A common informal pose for a man sitting for a portrait shows him resting his chin pensively on the end of a scroll that he holds in one hand. His wife may be shown holding a packet of tablets and touching the end of a stylus to her lips, as though in the midst of composing a letter and pausing to think how to phrase her next sentence. These pictures suggest how much of their lives Pompeians wanted us to believe was spent in these pursuits.

Graffiti, too, reflect the literary tastes and opinions of the Pompeians. Among these casual scribblings on the city walls is a considerable selection of quotations. One might have expected to find lines from the *Aeneid*, since it became a schoolbook almost as soon as it was published and schoolboys had to commit long passages to memory. It is more surprising to find that Vergil's elegant bucolics were well known and

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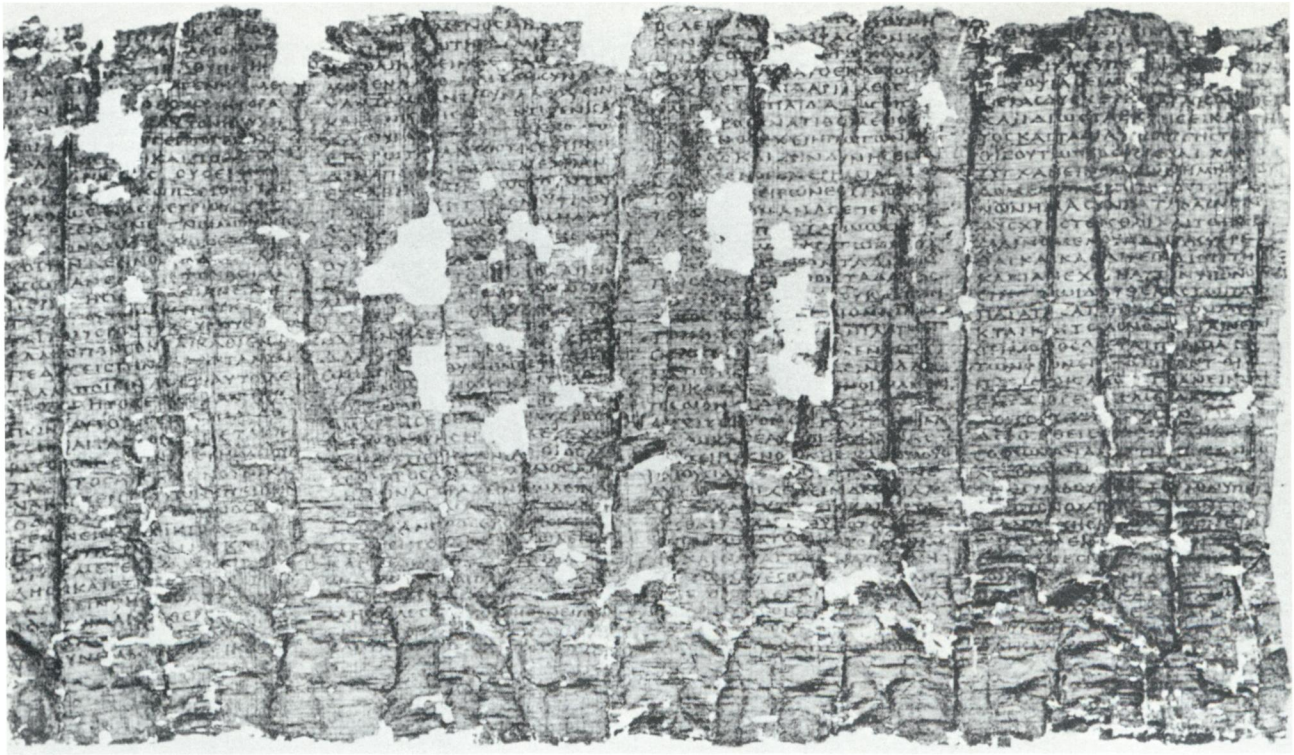
A part of the frieze on the north wall of the great triclinium of the Villa dei Misteri, most likely showing a Roman matron at home, teaching her young son to read.

quoted in Pompeii. Perhaps the tags from Lucretius might be explained by the numerous members of that family living in the city at the time of the eruption and the possibility that Lucretius had Pompeian connections, but there is also at least one quotation from the early epic poet Ennius (239-169 B.C.), for which no easy explanation is available. And while the wit and quotability of Ovid (43 B.C.-A.D. 17) made his works a mine of catchphrases that lingered in the popular memory and then found their way on to walls, there are several quotations from the Augustan elegist Propertius (ca. 54-2 B.C.) and at least one reworking of a bit from his contemporary Tibullus. There are quotations in Greek as well as Latin, and from the Greek Anthology as well as the classics that would have been studied in school. Most astonishing of all is a quotation from the *Agamemnon* of Seneca, Nero's tutor, which shows that at least one Pompeian was keenly interested in contemporary writing and extravagant rhetoric.



Section of a carbonized scroll containing works of the philosopher Philodemus. From the Villa dei Papiri, Herculaneum.

It is small wonder that with so much evidence of literary interests there was hope almost from the beginning of the excavations that Pompeii would provide a wealth of new information about ancient books and libraries, and also permit us to form some notion of the relative popularity of individual Latin poets. This hope was stimulated by the discovery, beginning in early April 1753, of numerous rolls of carbonized papyrus in the tunnels being driven through a large villa on the outskirts of Herculaneum, an ancient Roman resort about a third of the way around Vesuvius from Pompeii. The slow seepage of oxygen over the course of nearly seventeen centuries had turned the rolls to charcoal, but having been sealed in stone, they kept their form, and the writing on them was still legible. If a way of unrolling these fragile spirals without crumbling them to powder could be devised, the world stood to gain considerable additions to ancient literature—or so it seemed. And if Herculaneum, a place that was hardly more than a satellite of Naples, could yield such treasure, what might be expected from the thriving city of Pompeii, where there had even been an imperial residence?

The circumstances of the burial of the two sites, however, were really very different. Herculaneum was buried in an avalanche of volcanic mud, a flood strong enough to lift a great marble basin and carry it across the room, but liquid enough to make a perfect cast of a delicate object when it hardened. Pompeii was buried in layers of tiny bits of pumice and ash, much easier to excavate than the soft tufa that Herculanean mud became and much less damaging to the wall coats but permeable to air and rain, so that little perishable material is recovered. Bronze emerges heavily corroded, while wood or cloth is apt to have left only the imprint of its shape in the volcanic detritus, which a touch of the pick will destroy.

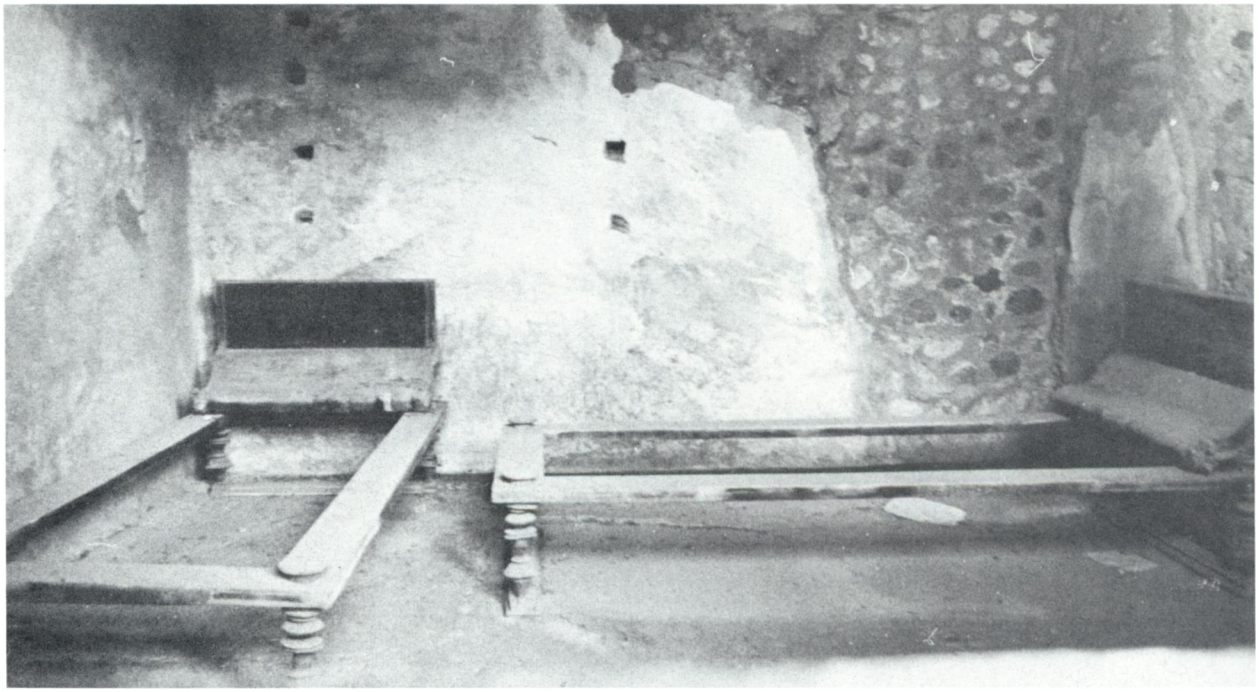
Still, excavators hoped to find libraries where the marks of shelving would survive. Moreover, the Roman writer Vitruvius in his *Ten Books on Architecture* provides certain prescriptions for the architecture of libraries. After the appointment of Giuseppe Fiorelli as superintendent of excavations in Campania in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the introduction of such advanced techniques as the injection of plaster of paris into cavities where matter had decayed to recover amazingly realistic casts of objects that had perished, the hopes of recovering substantial remains of libraries awakened again. These were strengthened by the discovery in Pompeii on July

Representation of Menander from the Casa del Menandro located in the exedra off the south portico of the peristyle. The young poet is shown crowned with ivy, seated and reading from his works.

3, 1875, of a wooden chest that had been packed full of wax-coated tablets. These were an archive of receipts of L. Caecilius Jucundus, an entrepreneur, and many of them are still legible. Clearly, if perishable materials were packed tightly, they could survive at Pompeii.

But libraries proved elusive. The domestic architecture of Pompeii, although rich and varied, has never been thoroughly understood. The uses of a great many rooms are uncertain or debatable, but none seemed apt to be a library. Representatives of the various special apartments Vitruvius mentions as suited to unusually grand architecture came to light one after another: the colonnaded Corinthian atrium, and Corinthian and Cyzicene rooms. But there was nothing that seemed to suit his description of a library, which he tells us should face east, not south or west, to avoid the damp that brings bookworm. The library of Vitruvius must then be an exedral room, open across the whole of one front to a peristyle colonnade. Such an arrangement makes more sense when one considers the inadequacy of ancient artificial illumination. The Romans needed sunlight to read by.

It was not until 1930 and the excavation of the Casa del Menandro that a library came to light. It is in a house both sumptuous and severe that belonged to Quintus Poppaeus Sabinus, probably a close relation of Nero's second wife, the beautiful Poppaea. He was a rich man, as the great treasure of silver plate found in a cellar attests, but not ostentatious. The house was of good size, but not grand; much of it was given over to the slaves, carts, animals and equipment for farming a property that must have lain out

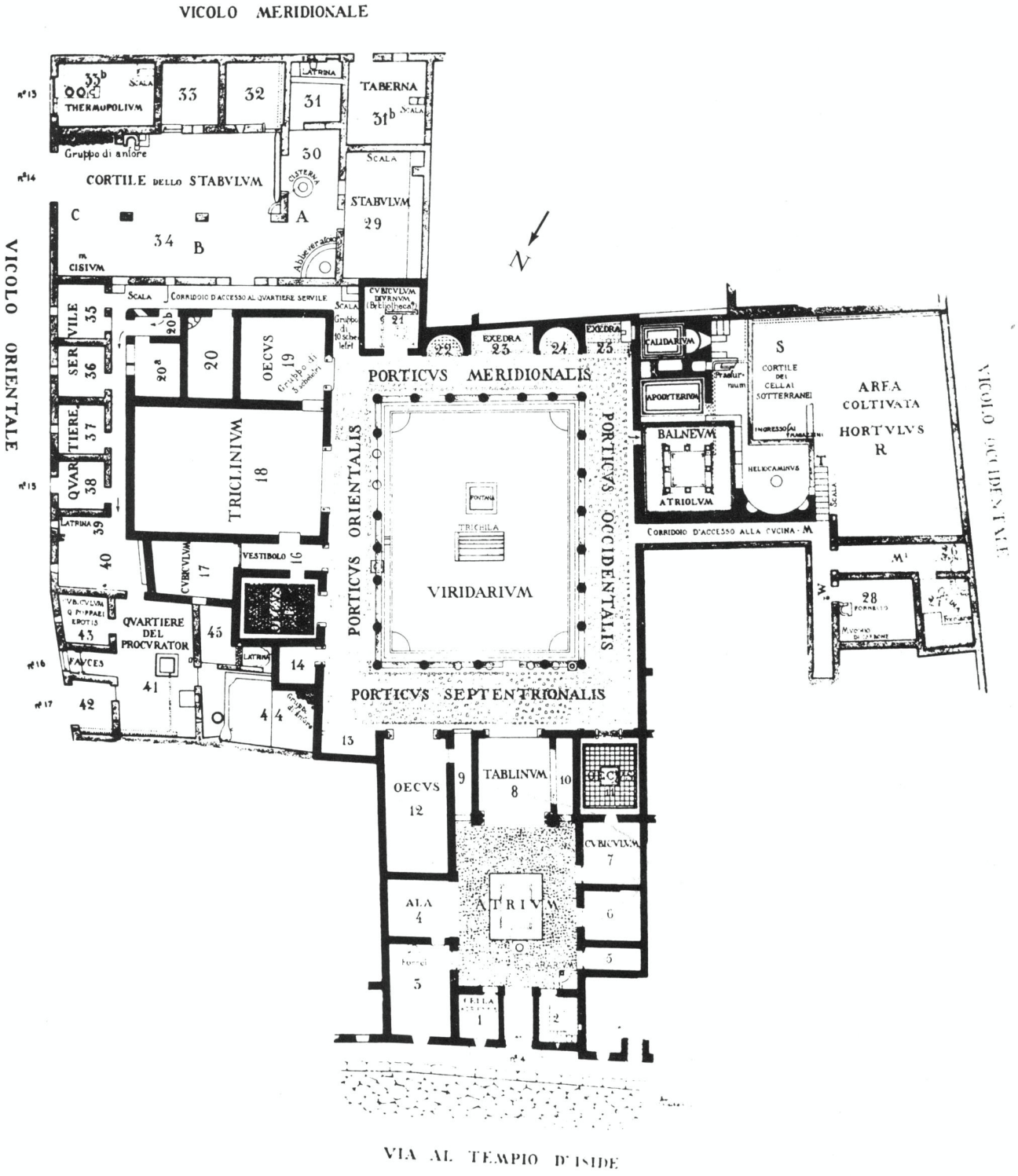


View of the room at the east end of the south portico of the Casa del Menandro. This remains the best candidate for a private library in Pompeii. Since there is no way of telling how many shelves there may have been in a cabinet, one cannot estimate the number of volumes it might have held. The beds shown do not belong in this room.

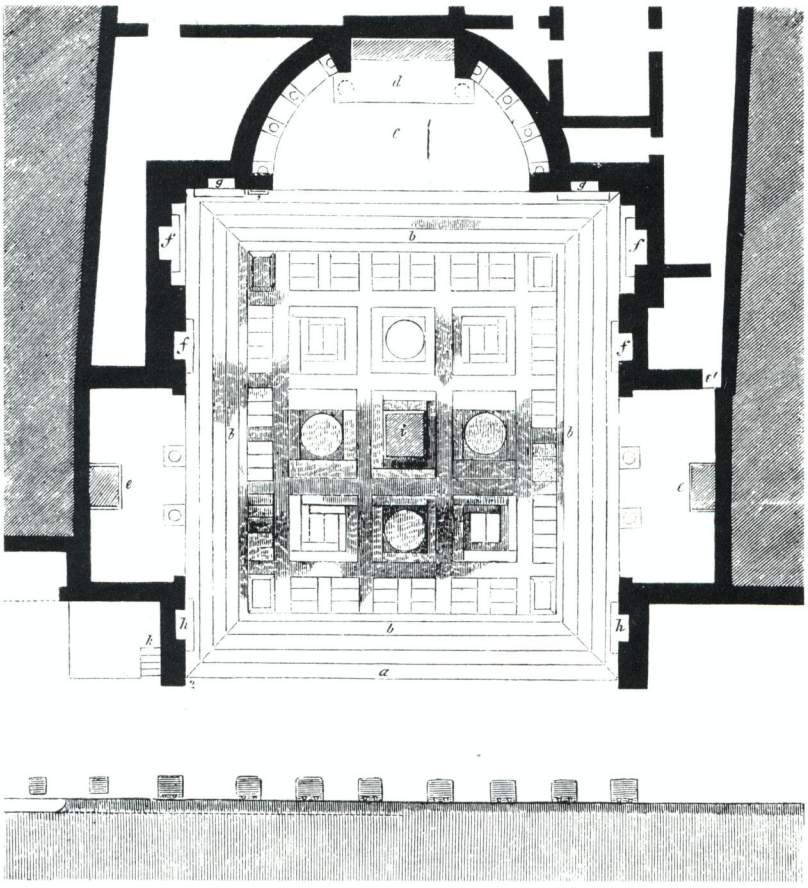
in the Sarno valley. The family quarters are solid and comfortable, with a single great room for dinner parties. There is evidence that the owner was a religious man. A household shrine in the atrium and a shrine to his ancestors off the peristyle, as well as a number of pictures and sculptures of religious character are testimony to his piety. He was also certainly a man of literary tastes; one room has a series of three illustrations of the fall of Troy, and many of the other pictures in the house have literary allusions.

Along the south side of the peristyle opens a series of exedral niches, two of them rounded, two rectangular. The rectangular central exedra, the largest, is decorated with full length portraits a little under life size. One is of the great comic poet Menander, identified by the inscription on the scroll he holds. Another poet with grey hair, his face almost completely destroyed, is opposite Menander. The older man is very likely a tragedian, for a table that holds a number of masks for tragedy is painted on the wall between the portraits. This niche must have been for reading, with place for a comfortable chair and a box or two of books, facing north, away from the noise and traffic of the main part of the house.

The room at the east end of this wing is squarish; it was undecorated in the last period of Pompeii and fitted with shelves, a storeroom. But there is a mosaic pavement of the period of the Second Style in which panels set off spaces where substantial pieces of furniture once stood against the back wall and east wall. In the past this room had been described as a bedroom for two beds, but the Romans did not have the twin beds of modern times, nor is this near the other bedrooms. In view of the proximity of a reading alcove, I believe large cabinets for a library must originally have filled these spaces. If this is, indeed, our first private library in Pompeii, we should probably re-examine similar rooms discovered in the past with this in mind. Because of the susceptibility of papyrus to damp, cabinets make much better sense for books than the shelves we were looking for earlier. There are very few houses in Pompeii of any pretentions that do not have niches where such cabinets stood, but in the past these were always thought to have been wardrobes and cupboards for household equipment. Modest libraries may have been common; we were simply looking for the wrong sort of evidence.



The rooms in the Casa del Menandro along the Porticus Meridionalis of the Viridarium have been identified as a private library and reading alcoves. After A Maiuri, La Casa del Menandro *(Rome 1932).*

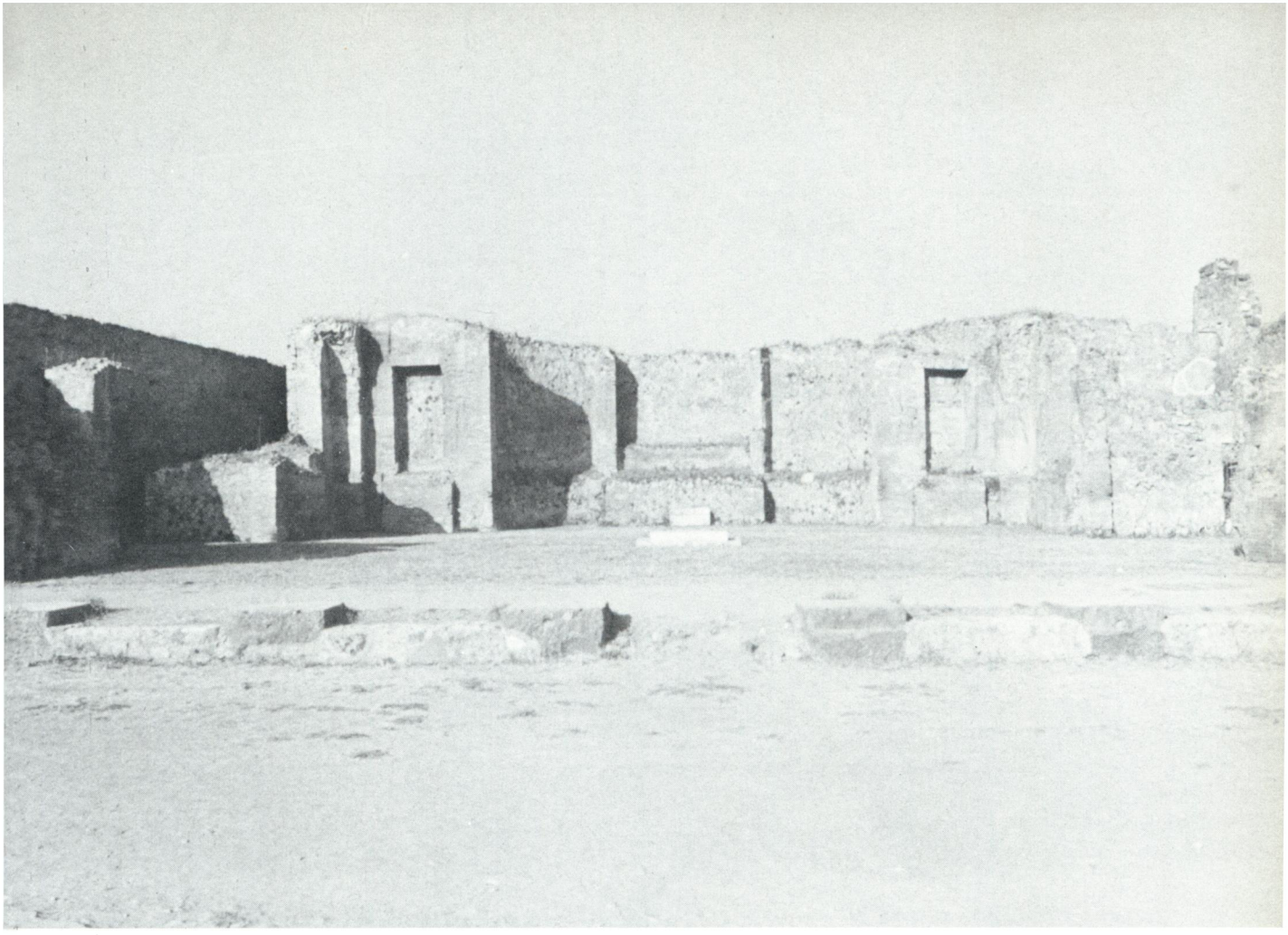


Plan of the so-called Sacellum Larum Publicorum on the forum of Pompeii. The pattern of the pavement, which is all that survives of the decoration, anticipates that of the Pantheon in Rome. From Overbeck-Mau, Pompeji.

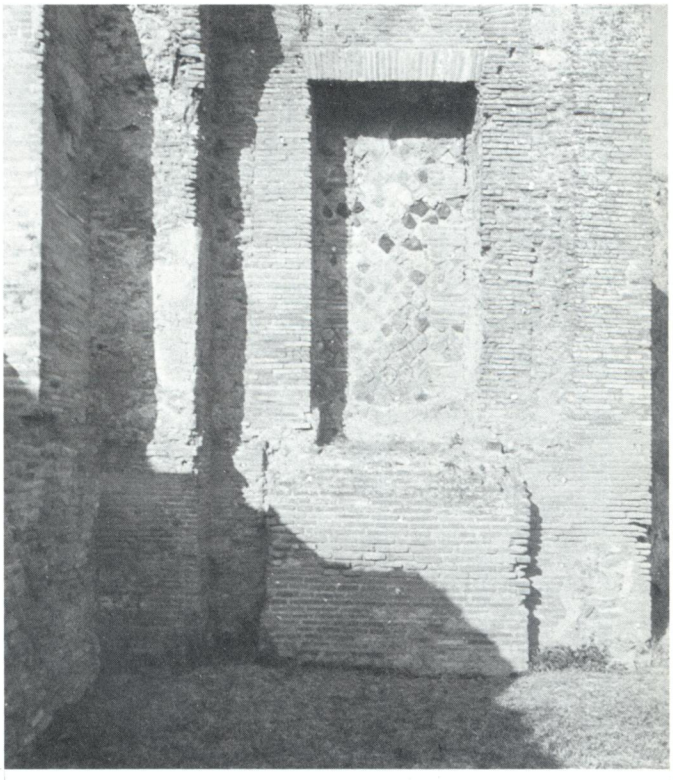
There was probably even a large public library in Pompeii. On the east side of the forum, between the food market and the so-called *Templum Vespasiani*, stands a large building open to the forum square along its whole west front. Footings here show there was once a colonnade of eight large columns, probably supporting a second order above. This building is commonly called the *Sacellum Larum Publicorum*, but there is no basis for such a designation in any inscription or other document. The architecture is baroque in character. Large niches, rectangular to either side, apsidal at the back, interrupt the three main walls. Those at the sides had pairs of columns in the openings; the niche at the back had a curved colonnade run on a raised plinth to either side of a large central niche. Each of these large niches is flanked by a pair of symmetrical niches that might have held cabinets. A doubly recessed niche to either side at the inner end completes the series. There are in all eight small niches in the main room, with further space in the large niches off it.

The whole edifice was stripped by salvagers after the eruption of A.D. 79 destroyed Pompeii. Only some of the marble flags of the pavement survive to show that it was very richly worked in a pattern of circles and rectangles. It does not seem likely that so magnificent a pavement would have been left exposed to the weather. There is no evidence of drains, and the thickening of the lateral walls strongly suggests that there was a gable roof with an east/west axis. The area to be covered is not so great as that of the *Theatrum Tectum*, which we know from inscriptions to have been covered, so there is no difficulty about the engineering of a roof. The large niches will presumably have had independent roofs at a lower level.

This was once a very fine building and was undoubtedly one of the showplaces of the city. For Pompeii it was extraordinarily advanced architecture, comparable to the innovations being made at Rome at this time: a great cube open across the front, out of which developed important niches. It is recognizable as one of the



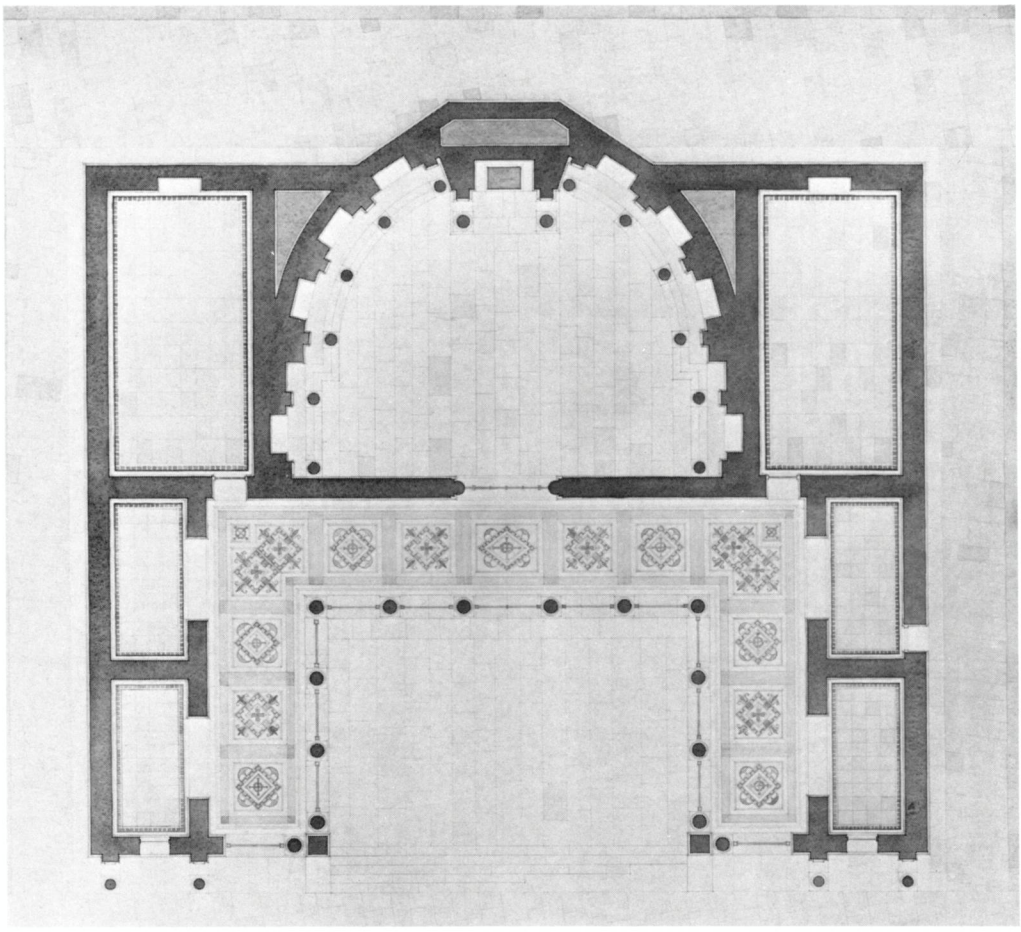
View of the Sacellum Larum Publicorum. The niches may have held wooden cabinets in which book boxes were kept.



Detail of niche of the Sacellum Larum Publicorum.

forerunners of the trilobate banqueting hall of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, and in the plasticity of the walls it anticipates the *Aula Regia* of Domitian's palace on the Palatine. If we had it in its original form with colonnades and walls faced with colored marbles, it would be sumptuous as well as innovative. Certainly not a utilitarian building, it also cannot have been the curia, or council house, of Pompeii, as Overbeck-Mau has suggested, for the architecture is not suited to such a function, and the curia was at the south end of the forum. As a temple it makes even less sense; the square base at the center, often interpreted as remains of an altar, would have been under cover of a roof, a patent impossibility. The plan and size point rather to identification as a public library.

In its proportionate volumes and unity,



Plan of the library of Timgad in Algeria: Located near the forum, the apse of this library encroaches on one of the streets of the grid. Therefore, it probably does not date to the first period of this Trajanic colony. From Pfeiffer, Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome *9 (1931), plate 16.*

situation and accessibility from the forum, as well as its rich decoration, this building belongs with the two best known libraries of the Roman world, that of Celsus at Ephesus in Turkey and that of Timgad in Algeria. The former is dated shortly after A.D. 114, the approximate date of Celsus' father's death, in whose honor it was built. The date of the latter is not known, but Timgad was a colony founded by Trajan (reigned A.D. 98-117), and this was not of its first period.

The library of Celsus is a rectangular hall with a rounded exedra opening on the principal axis. It is preceded by a two-story portico at the top of a flight of nine steps. The façade was embellished with statuary in niches. Three large doors, above which were similarly large windows, gave to the interior. The interior room was richly adorned with small columns raised on a high continuous plinth, between which opened rectangular niches that held wooden cupboards for the books. Ten of these in the lower story may have had others above, accessible by galleries. The axial exedra probably held a single statue.

The library of Timgad is almost entirely apse. The principal room is almost semicircular; only short, straight stretches extend the curve on either side. Again a row of columns on plinths lines the wall; eight niches for cupboards open between these, and there is a central niche with architectural emphasis for a statue. In front of the principal room was a court with colonnades on three sides from which one could reach six small rooms, perhaps for study in private. The whole was richly adorned with green and white marble.

To these we can now add the library of Pompeii. The features they share in common are the exedral character of the building as a whole that provided adequate natural light; the multiplication of niches for book cupboards, presumably to facilitate the filing and recovering of books; a central niche for an important statue; and lavish decoration in colored marble, perhaps partly protection against damp. The combination of all of these elements makes a fair set of requirements for a building type. When we meet such a building in the future we ought to be able to recognize it, even when, as in Pompeii, there is no inscription to identify it.