

HUTS AND HOUSES

During the winter of 1961–1962 I attended the course in archaeological air photography offered by the Italian Air Force to members of the Italian antiquities service and guests from the foreign schools in Rome at the airport of Guidonia just east of the city. Within a few hundred yards of the airfield and its Bell and Howell helicopters, from which we had an opportunity of surveying the lower Tiber Valley at the end of the course, there were the huts of shepherds from the mountains of the Abruzzi, who were wintering with their flocks in the Roman Campagna. Oval structures with walls of reed chinked with mud and roofs of the same material, they would have provided a welcome sight for the shade of Aeneas or Evander, whose Roman house would not have been substantially different. This simple shelter had a long history behind it, even in the early Latian Iron Age (fig. 4.1).

The hut urn of the Latian tombs of Period I and II is simply a model of the buildings of the time. The most completely documented such structure was excavated at Fidenae, located atop the Tiber's left bank on the outskirts of modern Rome (fig. 4.2). The Fidenae house, like all houses of the Iron Age known in Latium, belongs to the eighth century (Period III).¹ It is 6.2×5.2 m (20 × 17 ft), a good-sized room, but not a good-sized house. There was a doorway with a small porch on one of the short sides. The walls were made of pisé (compacted clay) pressed between wide boards. This method of construction has not been documented heretofore in Latium. Elsewhere the walling appears to have been made of interlaced branches covered with clay. Like the more common form of construction, however, the Fidenae structure was reinforced by uprights set in the wall line at irregular intervals. On two sides there was an artificial bench of loose tufa rocks set against the exterior. There was a further line of posts set 1.5 m (5 ft) out from the two long sides of the oval, evidently intended to carry the extension of the roof which would thus make a portico along the building. The roof, of which some traces could be identified in the collapse on the floor of the building, appears to have been sloped. It was made of branches and straw over a skeleton of rafters. Channels in the

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rock some 2.5 m (8 ft) away from the building to the south and east have been interpreted as drainage channels but may have been made at an earlier time.

Although post-reinforcing of walls and post-supported porches are typical of Latian architecture of the Iron Age, post holes in themselves do not make a house. They may belong to sheds or enclosures of all sizes. Sheds measuring 2–2.5 × 2.5–3 m (6.5–8 × 8–10 ft), their floors sunk about 0.5 m below ground level, have been documented among the early houses at Satricum (fig. 4.3). A number of these have now been convincingly interpreted as cook huts.² The huts in question contained many pieces of cooking stands, bowls, jars, trays, and casseroles. There were meat bones. Table wares were absent, as were the common spools, weights, and whorls used for spinning and weaving. The larger units were also sunk below ground level. The resulting house had advantages. It required less walling and provided some insulation. The village at Satricum grew up around a pond, which must have cult associations (like the Spring of Juturna in the Roman Forum) from an early time. Subsequently, when a temple was built on one side of the pond it exactly covered one of the huts. At Ardea, too, the temple at Colle della Noce was placed over preexisting huts.³ In both cases the earlier buildings must have had religious significance.

In Rome a group of huts is known on the Palatine Hill. The best-



Figure 4.1 Gabii, thatch huts in the crater of Lake Castiglione, photographed by Dr Esther Boise Van Deman ca 1900.

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documented was excavated in 1948 (fig. 4.4).⁴ It was an oblong building 4.9 × 3.6 m (16 × 11.8 ft) with slightly bulging sides. Like the hut at Fidenae, it had a porch and its walls were reinforced by posts. In photographs it appears set down into the bed rock, but this is true only on two sides, the cut probably having been made to level the floor. Two neighboring huts were uncovered in 1907. Channels are visible around all three, possibly for drainage, but not surely made for these houses. The hut excavated in 1948, and presumably its neighbors, belongs to Period III.

The Palatine Hill is in fact composed of two heights and a depression between them. The high ground to the west where the huts just described are located is called the Germalus. Traces of similar buildings have been found below the Imperial Palace on the Palatine proper.⁵ It is in the depression between the two groups of dwellings that the Period I tomb was found below the House of Livia.⁶ Clearly at the time the tomb was made this depression lay outside what was considered the settled area. Infant burials in jars were also associated with the huts.⁷

The most important group of these early buildings, now numbering some thirty, has been brought to light at Lavinium (fig. 4.5). The buildings are either oval or rectangular. Post-reinforcement is again evident. The oval

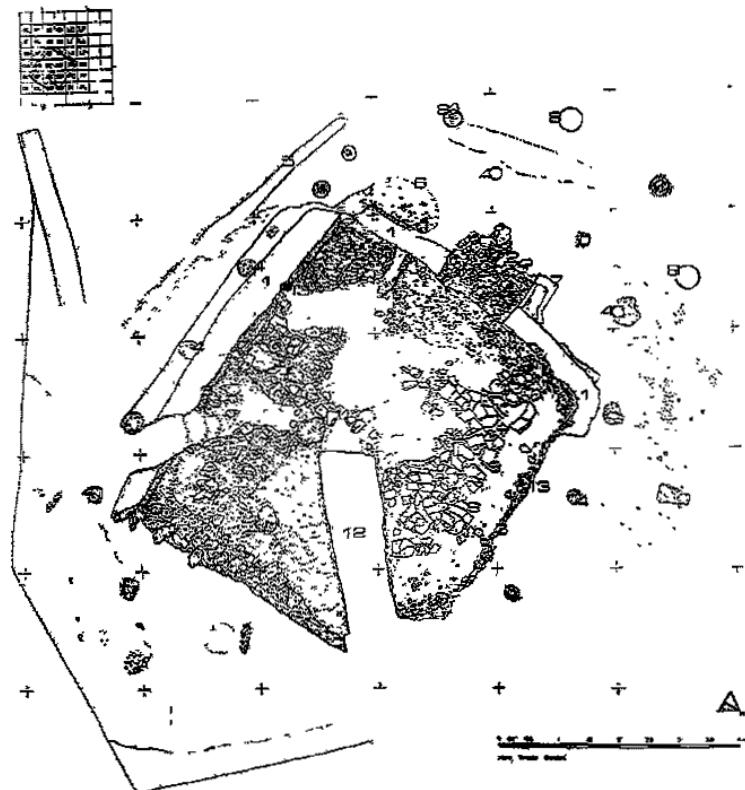


Figure 4.2 Fidenae, Iron Age house.

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buildings reach a diameter of 10 m (33 ft). Once again children's burials were made within the settlement.⁸ At Lavinium the rock-cut channels are for the emplacement of walls, not for drainage. Other groups of such buildings are known at Ficana (oval and rectangular) and Ardea.⁹

In the excavation of the Sepulcretum Boni identified small mounds of earth with carbonized wood and bits of wattle and daub in the stratum above the tombs as the remains of huts.¹⁰ However, there were no foundations or consistent series of post holes, and the *tumuli* remain an enigma. Post holes have been noted elsewhere in the Forum: in the stratigraphical excavations of Boni and Gjerstad beside the foundation formerly identified as that of the Equus Domitiani (Equestrian Statue of Domitian), in the excavations beside the Arch of Augustus (Temple of Divine Julius) and in the lowest strata of the excavations under the Regia.¹¹ In the first two cases the area excavated is too restricted to draw definite conclusions. In the third, the excavation has not been completed and published, although some remarks can be made.¹² Ten structures have been identified. In the stratum beneath them there is a child's burial of Period IIB/III.¹³ The structures are oval, measuring approximately 3.5×3 m (11.5×10 ft). There are traces of hearths within them. A road bordered the huts on the south.

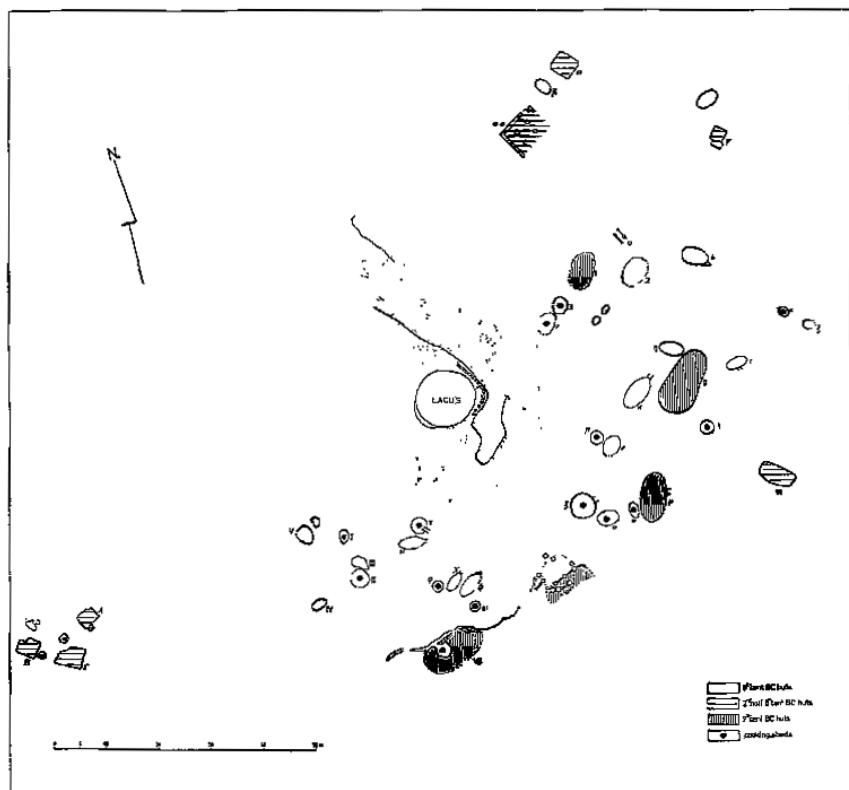


Figure 4.3 Satricum (Le Ferriere), huts of the eighth to sixth centuries.

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In these circumstances a succession of cooking huts on this site would not, perhaps, be unusual. Ten over a span of two centuries before the construction of the first permanent structure of the Regia would give each a life of twenty years or so, not overly short if one considers the ever present danger of fire in such structures of reeds and timber. The question whether the hearths of these huts are early manifestations of the cult of Vesta, whose temple later stood a few meters away, and in any way connected to the later Regia, cannot be considered until the final publication of the excavations appears.¹⁴

At the end of the seventh century a revolution occurred in building at Rome, a revolution not only in materials but also in scale. In the excavation of the Sepulcretum Boni already had discovered the remains of a building constructed, at least partially in its lower courses, of square-cut tufa blocks. The plan shows a rectangular structure 10 m (32.8 ft) wide (fig. 4.6).¹⁵ The most likely plan, on the basis of similar buildings reviewed below, would be that of a central block, possibly with three rooms side by side fronted by a courtyard across the full width.

In size the Forum building is not greatly enlarged compared to its predecessors. The block of rooms give ca 50 sq. m (538 sq. ft) interior space, about the size of the interior of the largest house at Lavinium (Hut D). The Fidenae house, by contrast, had 32 sq. m (344 sq. ft). Nevertheless, the new material, squared stone blocks used almost certainly with heavy terracotta roof tiles and the timber to support them, represents an enormous change.

It was at the end of the seventh century that the original gully between the Palatine and the Velia was filled in. The street leading from the Forum up to the ridge at the Arch of Titus could not have existed before that time.¹⁶ But as soon as the gully was closed and the street opened the area was occupied by large houses that gave the noble character to this district that it maintained throughout the Republic. Two of these patrician *domus* have now been excavated and we shall return to them below.

Until very recently there was little to compare with the Forum house. But within the last decade it has become apparent that the seventh century in central Italy witnessed the building of great country houses and city mansions. The first evidence of these structures came from the excavations at Murlo near Siena. Here a very large rectangular complex (approximately 60 m, 197 ft square) has been unearthed consisting of four blocks of rooms surrounding a central courtyard (fig. 4.7). An interior colonnade ran around three sides of the court, and at one side of the courtyard there was a small structure, framed by the interior colonnade, which might be a shrine. The building as one sees it today belongs to about 575, but it had a predecessor of the seventh century. Together the two illustrate the importance and architectural character of the place. From the lower building there is a wealth of fine pottery, ornaments of various sorts and ivory. After the fire which destroyed the first structure, its successor made a



Figure 4.4 Rome, Palatine, hut foundations.

brilliant architectural display. Common terracotta roof tiles, the flat pan tiles and the curved cover tiles that seal the joint between them, may seem humble objects, but they deserve attention. Such roofing requires investment in the kilns and fuel to produce it. It is heavy and requires costly support. The Murlo building had some 3,000 sq. m (32,800 sq. ft) of roof tiles, representing something like ten times the roof area of a large temple in central Italy of the sixth or fifth centuries. Along the border of the roof there were terracotta friezes: (1) a banqueting scene, (2) a horse race, (3) a marriage procession, the bride and companion seated on a cart under an umbrella and followed by serving girls carrying gifts, and (4) an assembly of seated and standing figures. This last frieze is generally interpreted as an assembly of gods, as pictured in Greek art, but there is no reason why the figures (holding a budding branch, an ax and a *lituus* – the crooked staff of augury) could not be interpreted as mortals. The iconography of the decoration would thus be wholly secular.

Along the apex of the roof of the Murlo building in its second phase there was placed a series of large terracotta statues. This is an Etruscan practice well known from the Portonaccio temple at Veii built some half century or more after the Murlo structure. The statues at Murlo are both human and

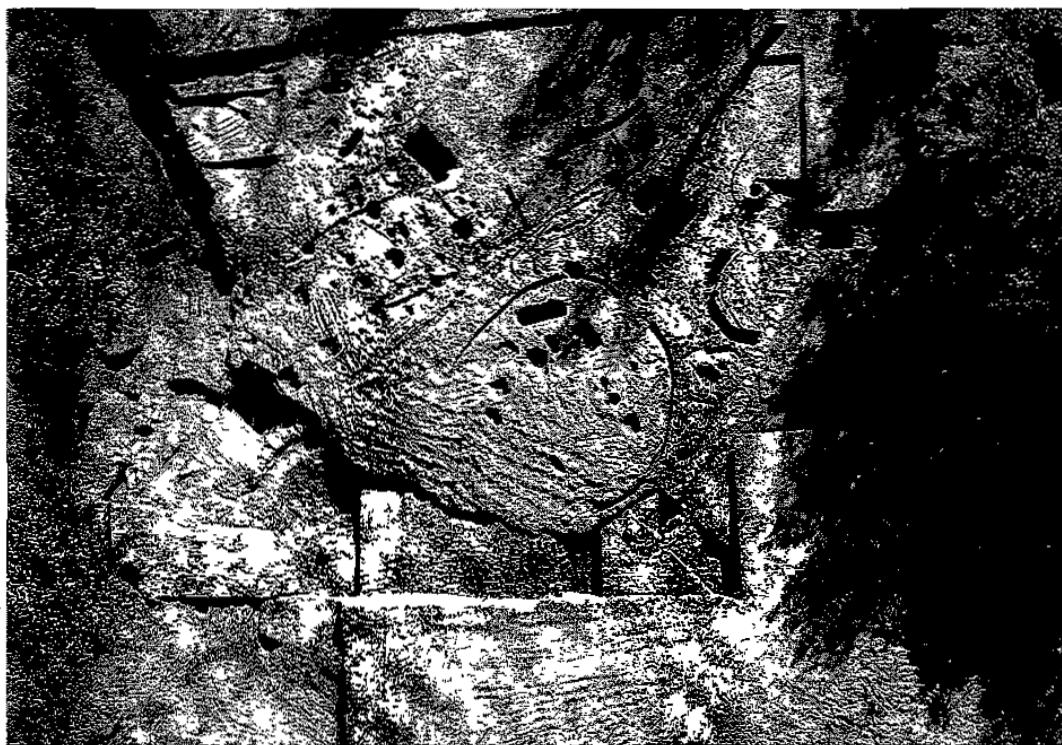


Figure 4.5 Lavinium, foundations of early oval and rectangular buildings.

animal (real and imaginary). To the latter category there belong sphinxes, horses, lions, a wild boar, a goat, and a seahorse. Beside them were stiffly seated human figures, both men and women, accompanied by standing attendants. The building was thus protected both by the bestial troop, also known in Greek architecture of the period (and marshaled for protection against various unseen dangers), and by grander versions of the dignitaries of the assembly frieze below. These must be divinities, but among them there may well be heroized ancestors – and the building over which they presided no other than the hall of the clan and the clan chief. The origin of such clans, the Roman *gens* and its Etruscan counterparts, is a subject of debate.¹⁷ But whether the *gens*, with its single family name borne by all the members of its various family branches, had deep roots in prehistoric Italy or whether, as is more likely, it was a phenomenon of the social changes of the ninth and eighth centuries, it was in full flower by the time the Murlo building was erected.¹⁸ This consideration clarifies much about Murlo, but not everything. The building seems to have sported towers suggesting a residence and the need for defense. Initially the debate over the building turned on the roof terracottas. These, it was supposed, could only have been for a “temple.” No private house had decorated roof terracottas – not in Greece at least or in

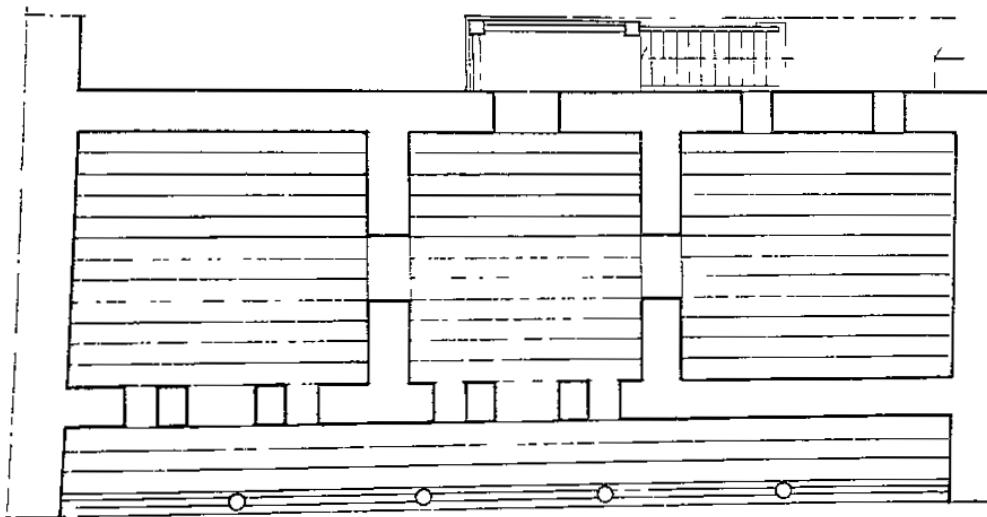


Figure 4.6 Rome, Forum, reconstructed ground plan of building over the Sepulcretum.

Italy as far as it was known.¹⁹ But soon it became clear that Italian houses were so decorated. This was due to discoveries at Acquarossa in southern Etruria near Viterbo.²⁰

In the sixth century Acquarossa was a developing community very much like an American village of the eighteenth century with plenty of room for buildings and open space. The most conspicuous house now excavated at Acquarossa has similarities with the great complex at Murlo. There is a courtyard with colonnades and blocks of rooms beyond facing inward to the court. However, the size is more modest, the plan is irregular, and the building possibly not all of a piece. This is clearly a town house. But it had roof terracottas, friezes of the type found at Murlo and elsewhere. The subjects are unlike the Murlo friezes. One set has a banquet, the other comes in two parts, the first a stylish couple in a light chariot drawn by winged horses and then behind them Hercules struggling with the Cretan bull. Had I been a visitor to Acquarossa when this house was new I would have been inclined to see both scenes as Hercules stories, first the struggle with the Cretan bull and then the hero at the house of Eurytos in the company of the fair Iole, the scene from a fine Corinthian *crater* that had been imported to

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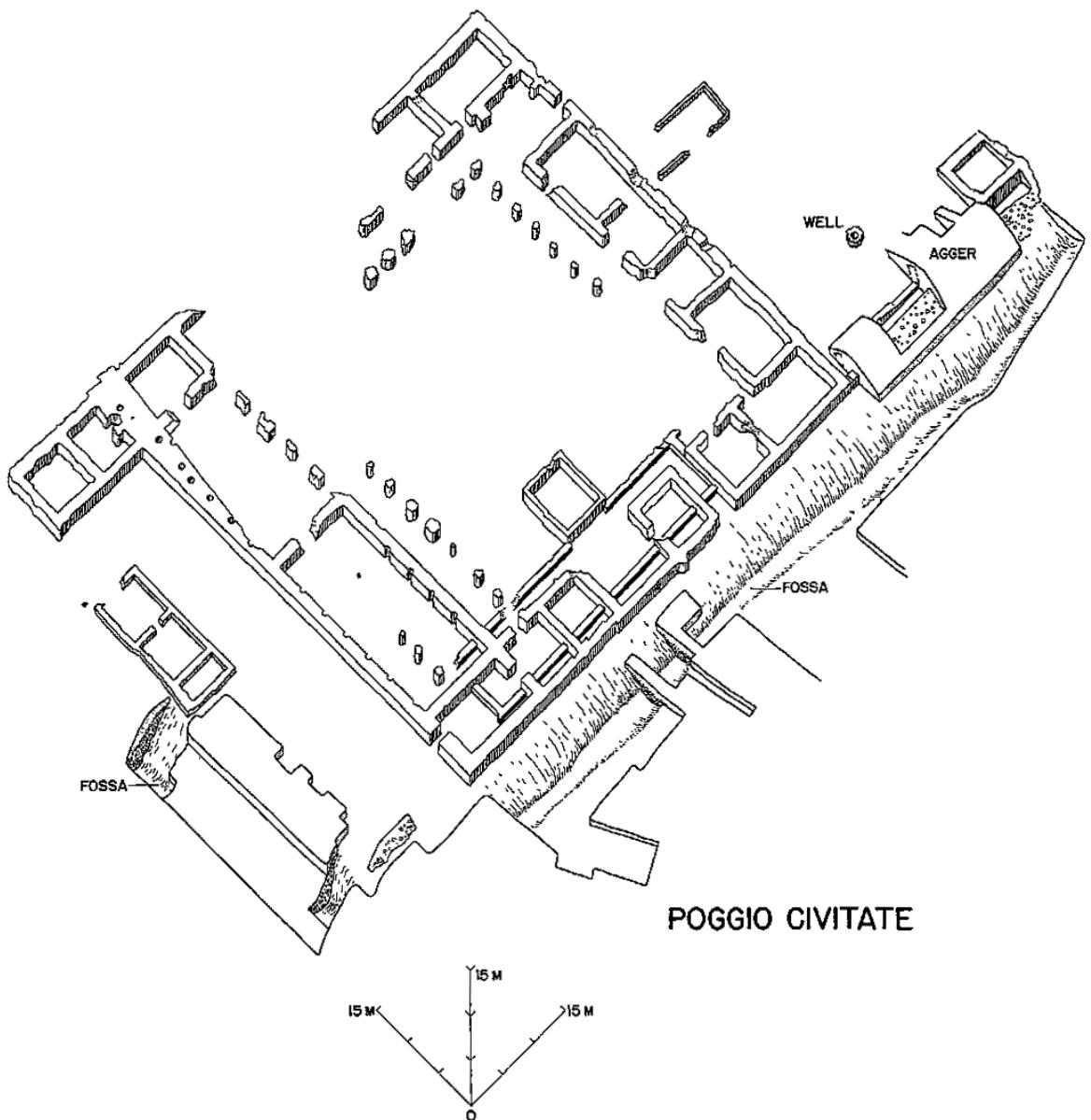


Figure 4.7 Murlo, plan of the archaic courtyard building.

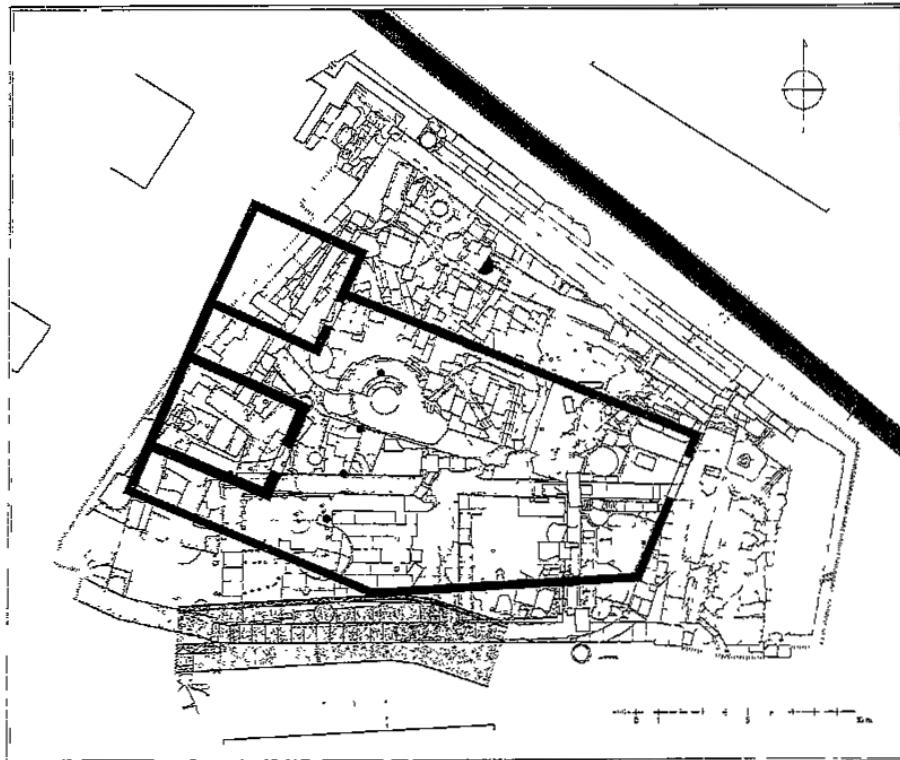


Figure 4.8 Rome, Forum, plan of the Regia, first phase.

Etruria from Corinth somewhat earlier and which, together with other Greek decorative arts, provided the iconography from which these banquet scenes were taken (the adaptor remembering to include the ladies in the party after Etruscan custom).²¹ The building at Acquarossa may no more have been exclusively a “private” house in our sense of the word than the Murlo complex was only the headquarters of a clan. In a world in which the head of every family was a priest the line between private and sacred is hard to draw.

The excavations at Acquarossa illustrated the development of Etruscan architectural decoration in another way. Finds from a second location on the site showed that there was a period at the beginning of the use of architectural terracottas in the seventh century when the idea of such covering for buildings had been introduced and the technique of production as well but when the decoration, including open-work finials on the roofs, was strikingly central Italian. And these open-work finials take us once again to Rome.

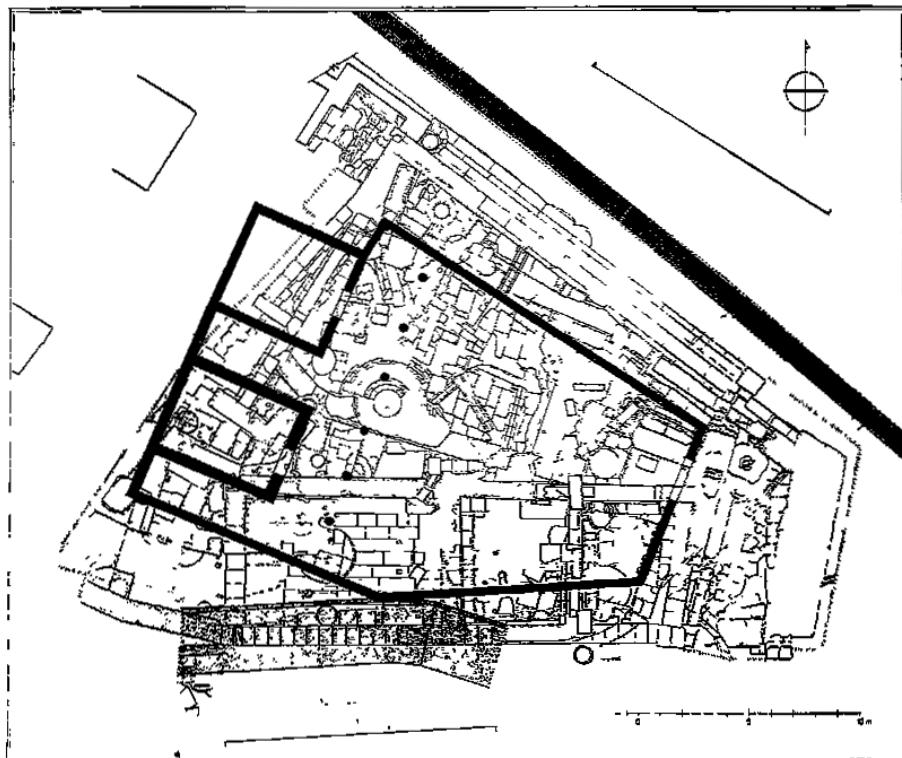


Figure 4.9 Rome, Forum, plan of the Regia, second phase.

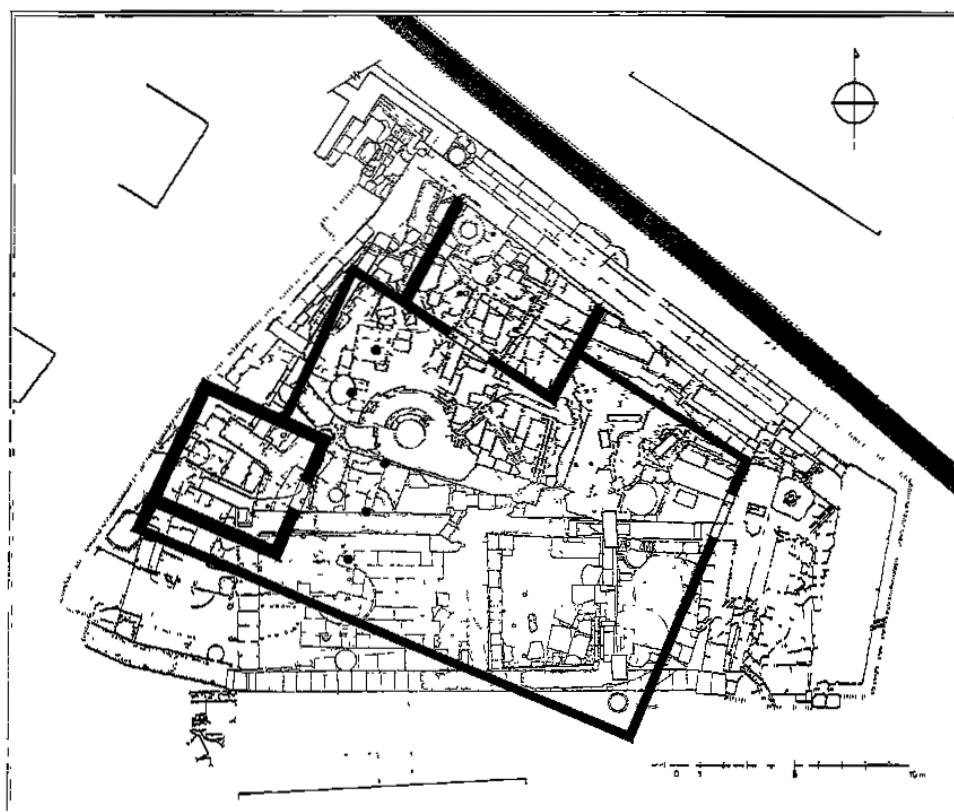


Figure 4.10 Rome, Forum, plan of the Regia, third phase.

Recent excavations in the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum led to the reconsideration of architectural terracottas from work by Boni in the same area. Among the fragments from Boni's excavation was a similar open-work roof ornament of the seventh century.²² Roof terracottas, which we may now recognize as typical of the Acquarossa type, were thus in use at Rome well before the erection of the house near the Sepulcretum and well before the building of the single most significant house-like structure in the Forum, the Regia.

The Regia bore the name of the office belonging in tradition to the seven kings of Rome and subsequently to their priestly successor, the *rex sacrorum*. From the Regia there has been preserved the floor of a *bucchero* cup of the last quarter of the sixth century with the graffito REX, a vessel thus reserved for the use of the political or priestly king.²³ In the Regia, moreover, were kept the *sacra* of Ops Consiva and Mars, including the shield fallen by miracle from heaven and the copies created to conceal it among so many facsimiles.

The Regia had a complicated history.²⁴ The first moment after the end of the period of small huts on the site saw the erection of a marker, and presumably more than the one surviving marker, indicating that the area had been isolated for some purpose. Soon afterward the first Regia came into being (fig. 4.8). The plan consists of a courtyard and behind a portico at one end two chambers with a space intervening between. One thinks immediately of the shrines of Ops and Mars. In its second phase the Regia changes little, merely extending the courtyard to include fully both rooms behind the portico (fig. 4.9). In the third phase, of the mid-sixth century, one of the rooms was eliminated and its place taken by a hall reached by a door in the north wall of the courtyard (fig. 4.10). Architectural terracottas are attributed to this phase of the building: the unusual frieze plaques with lions, panthers, birds, and minotaurs, disc *acroteria* to crown the gable peak and possibly terracotta sculpture for display at the corners of the roof (fig. 4.11).²⁵ Antefixes of gorgons and female heads may have decorated the roof of the new hall.

Following a fire which destroyed the third Regia about 540–530 (the date is based on Attic black figured pottery from the destruction layer) a new Regia was built with a new orientation (fig. 4.12). The portico and chambers behind it were transferred to the east side of the building from the west. There were again two chambers separated by a vestibule giving both onto the courtyard and onto the exterior. A new set of architectural terracottas is attributed to the building. They form a *sima* (the cresting of the gutter along the eaves) strigilated with ribbing along its exterior and further decorated with feline and female heads, whose mouths were open to serve as rainwater spouts.

At the very end of the sixth century the building once again was subjected to radical transformation (fig. 4.13). The group of rooms was placed on the

south side of the complex. (The portico now ran along the opposite side of the courtyard.) The entrance to the complex remained in much the same location as in the preceding period. This plan was scrupulously maintained for the remainder of the history of the building, one replacement in the third century, the other by Cn. Domitius Calvinus in 36.

The architectural vicissitudes of the Regia are one of the great puzzles of the archaeology of Rome. In the light of the discoveries at Murlo and Acquarossa, however, one can appreciate how closely the essential elements of house design, courtyard, portico, and chambers behind it are repeated in each phase of the building. Despite the graffito REX, which testifies to the king's presence, the Regia tells us very little about the Roman kingship or the king's functions, political or sacred.²⁶

The courtyard and *porticus* house is now widely documented in Latium at Ficana, Torrino, and most clearly at Satricum.²⁷ The *porticus* house is not the end-point of house development in archaic Rome. Recent discoveries along the Sacra Via in the direction of the Arch of Titus suggest that the next stage of development of the well-to-do town house, the *atrium* house, was introduced into Rome at this time. The *atrium* plan remained dominant for town houses throughout the Republic. From an entrance hall, the *fauces* or jaws, one passed into a central room, the *atrium*, which, however, must often have given the effect of a court because it was open to the sky, an arrangement which brought light and air into the house while rainwater from the roof was conducted into a cistern below the floor.²⁸ At the rear of the *atrium* there was originally the master bed chamber, the *tablinum*, with wings, or *alae*, to the right and left. During the morning the master of the house received his clients and visitors in the *tablinum*, which also contained the memorabilia of the family, including, in the case of old and successful lineages, the collection of portraits of illustrious ancestors. Cooking was banished to the rear. On the sides of the *atrium* there opened secondary chambers.

The plan of the buildings uncovered beside the Sacra Via in excavations, where the extraordinary depth of fill has given great hope of further important discoveries, is slightly more ample than the basic *atrium* house (fig. 4.14). Shops open off the facade, there is a vestibule leading to the *atrium* proper, the *tablinum* has been extended in depth, and a dining room (*triclinium*) has been added off the *tablinum*. As restored, the buildings have two floors. Like the Regia, these houses were long-lived, remaining in use until the end of the Republic. The Sacra Via was a fashionable neighborhood. Tarquin the First was supposed to have lived here, as did Publicola, according to tradition consul during the first year of the Republic.

The *atrium* house is only the end result of the adaptation of the courtyard house to increasing urban congestion. When there is little feeling of crowding not even courtyards are necessary. The Acquarossa house is the first

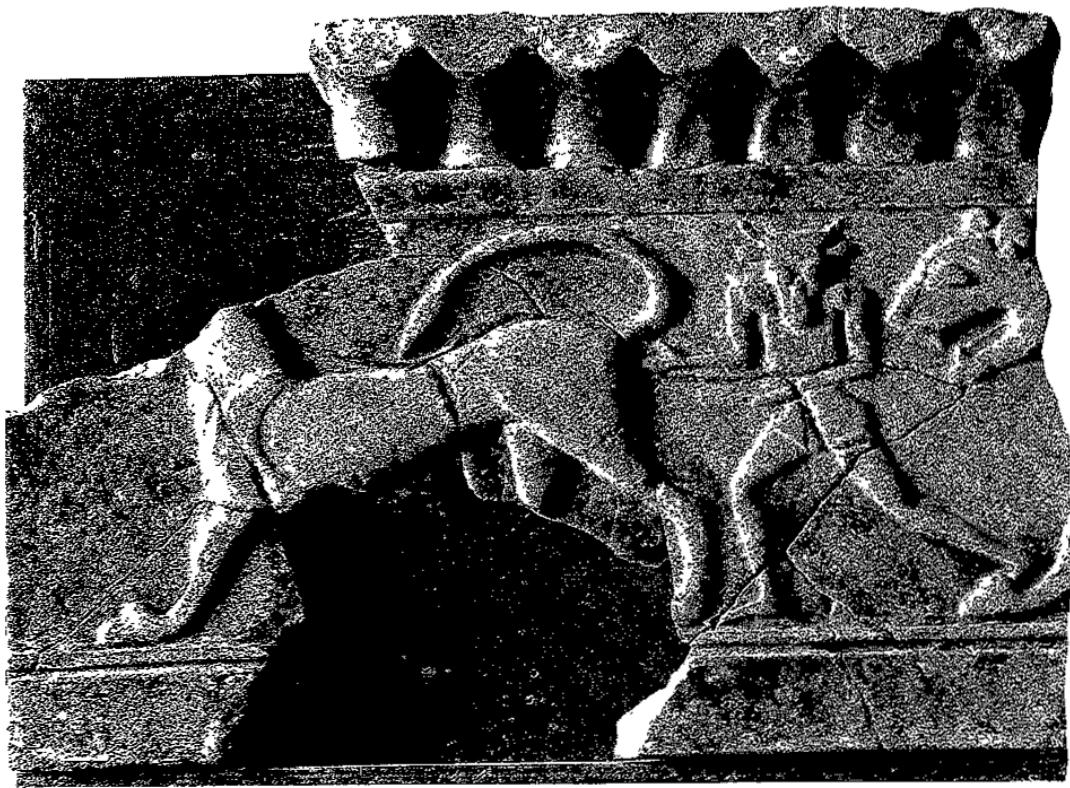


Figure 4.11 Rome, Forum, terracotta frieze attributed to the Regia, third phase.
Antiquario Forense.

stage of adaptation to urban conditions, as are the courtyard houses of Greek Megara Hyblaea in Sicily. The *atrium* house shows compression advancing to the point that the courtyard, which has lost whatever agricultural functions it may have served earlier, has become vestigial, no more than a light well.²⁹ There are traces of houses of the archaic period on the Palatine Hill.³⁰

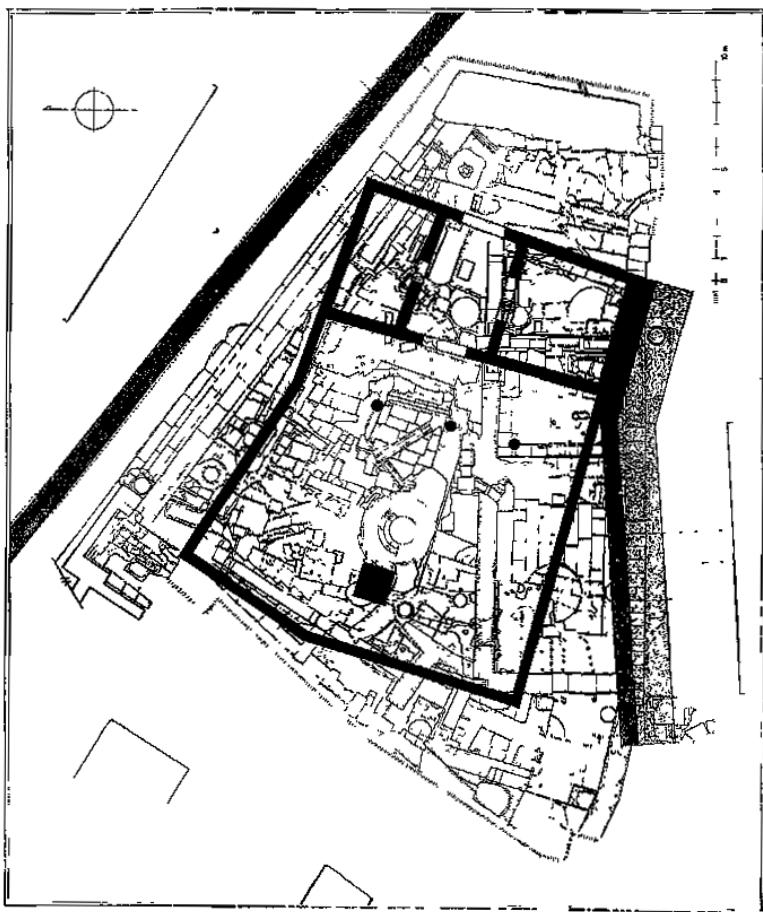


Figure 4.12 Rome, Forum, plan of the Regia, fourth phase.

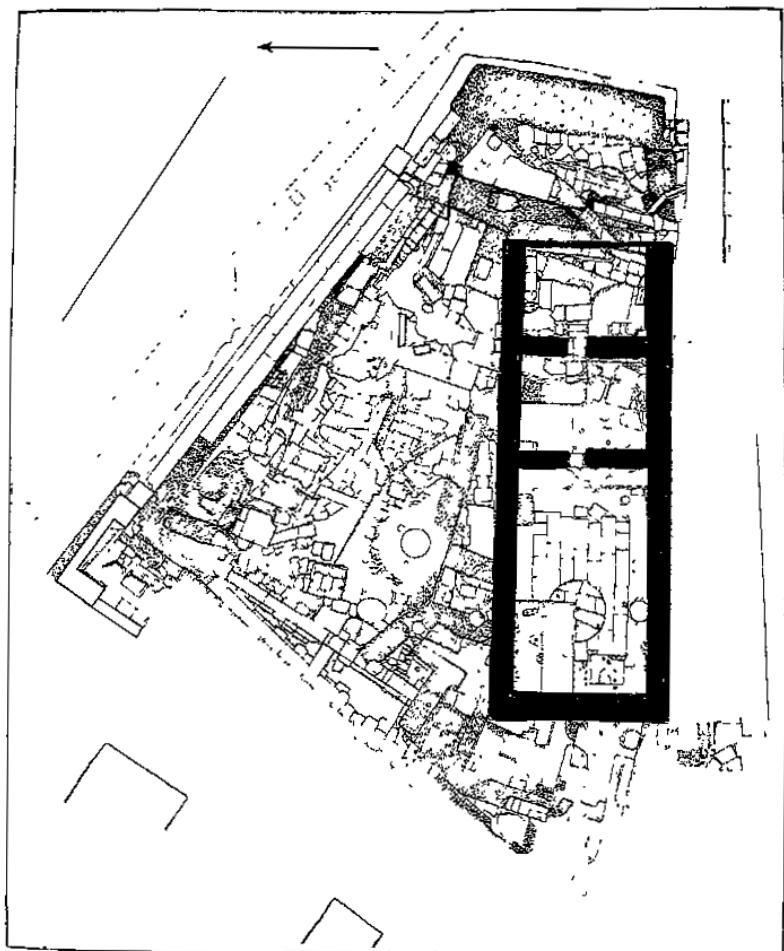


Figure 4.13 Rome, Forum, plan of the Regia, fifth phase.

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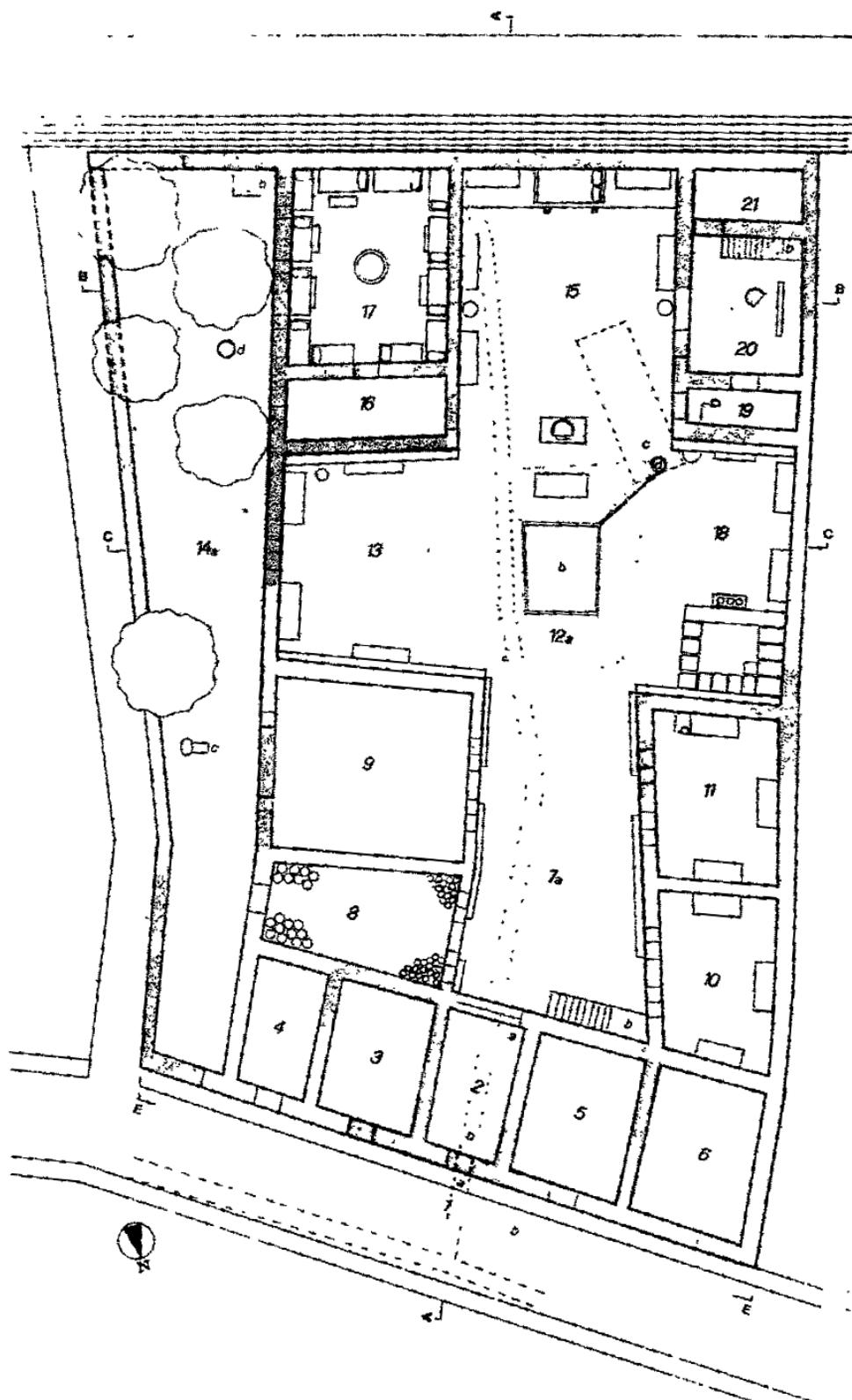


Figure 4.14 Rome, atrium house of the Sacra Via.