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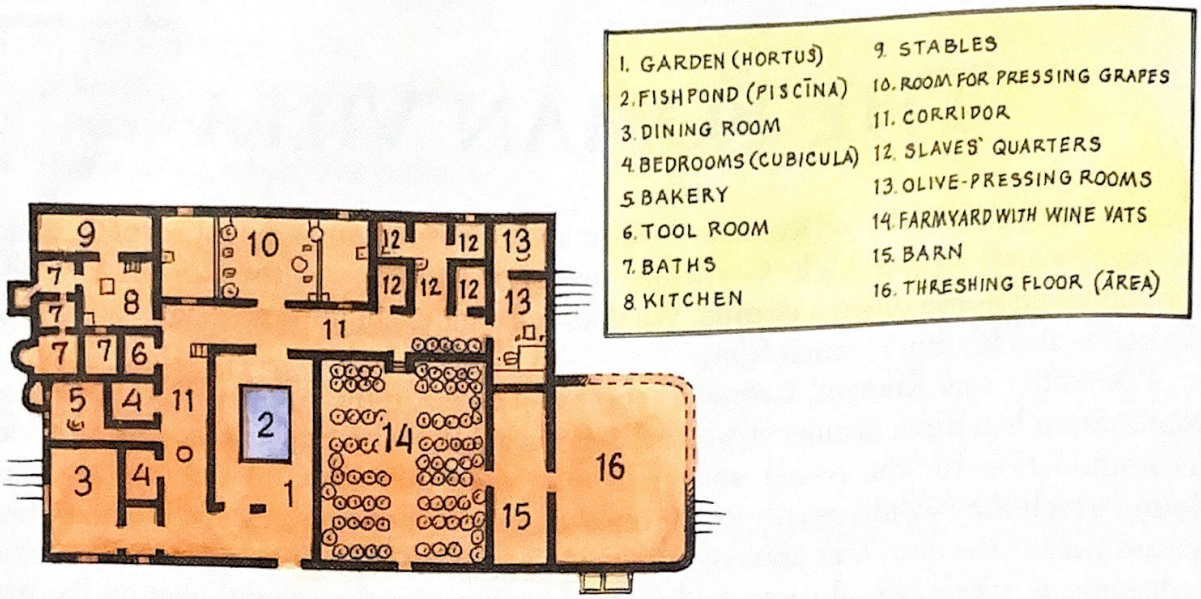
THE ROMAN VILLA

In cities, the majority of Romans lived in apartment buildings called **īnsulae**, which were several stories high. Cornelius, however, being a wealthy Roman, owned a self-contained house called a **domus**. We shall learn more about these town houses when Cornelius and his family reach Rome.

Like other rich Romans, Cornelius also had a house in the country. Roman country houses often had three distinct areas, each serving a different purpose. One area provided accommodation for the owner and his family when they came to the country from Rome, which they would usually do during the summer months to escape the noisy bustle and heat of the city. This area would include a garden with a fishpond, a dining room, bedrooms, a bakery, a tool room, baths, and a kitchen (see the ground plan on the next page, numbers 1–8). The second area housed the livestock and had quarters for the slaves, who lived on the estate year round and did the agricultural work (ground plan, numbers 9 and 12). The third area contained a room for pressing grapes, olive-pressing rooms, a farmyard with wine vats, a barn for storing grain, and an open space (**ārea**) for threshing grain (ground plan, numbers 10 and 13–16). All three areas taken together could be referred to as a **vīlla rūstica**.

When absent, Cornelius placed the day-to-day running of the **vīlla rūstica** in the capable hands of Davus, his overseer (**vīlicus**), but some landowners had tenant farmers. Roman writers on agriculture stress that the owner should take special care in the selection of his farm staff and in the working relationships between himself and his staff:

> The owner should conduct himself civilly with his tenants, and speak affably, not haughtily, to them; he should be more concerned about their work than their payments of rent, because this offends them less and in the long run is more profitable. For the position of **vīlicus,** a man should be chosen who has borne up under heavy work, one who has been tried by experience. He should be past young manhood and yet not be old, because older men think it beneath them to take orders from a young man, and an old man will break down under heavy labor. Let him be middle-aged, strong, skilled in farming or at least able to learn. As for the other slaves, I myself talk rather familiarly with them for it lightens their toil, and I even make jokes with them and allow them to make jokes. I also now make it my practice to consult them on any new work, as if they were experienced, so that I can come to know their abilities. Moreover, they are more willing to undertake a task on which they think their opinions have been asked and on which I have followed their advice.
>
> Columella, *On Agriculture* I. VII–VIII (extracts)



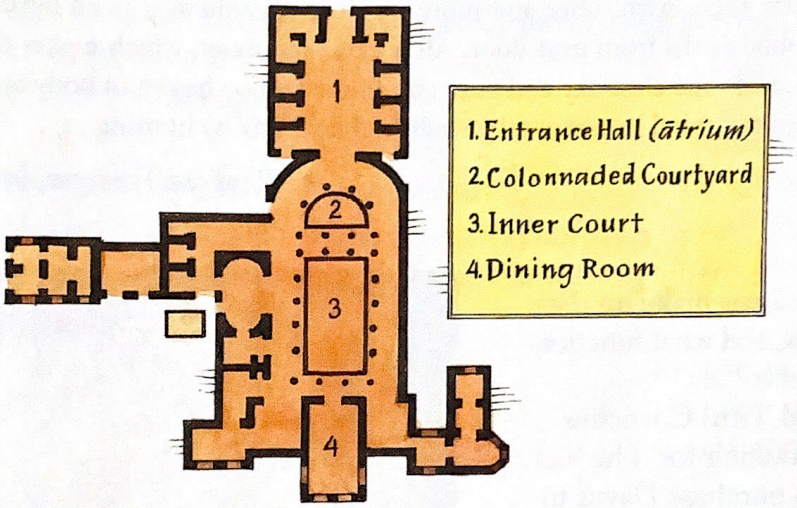
GROUND PLAN OF *Vīlla Rūstica* OF THE *Cornēliī*

Reconstructed View of the
Vīlla Rūstica of the *Cornēliī*

ADDITIONAL READING:

The Romans Speak for Themselves: Book I: "Pliny's Laurentine Villa," pages 18–26, and "A Pleasant Retreat," pages 27–32.

If Cornelius had been a very wealthy Roman, he might have had a **vīlla urbāna**, literally a "city villa," separate from the accommodations for the farm. Such a **vīlla urbāna** could be very luxurious and could take up almost the whole estate. It could have winter and summer apartments oriented to the seasonal sunlight, baths, and promenades, just like a house in the city. The Roman author Pliny the Younger describes his **vīlla urbāna** near Laurentum in a letter to a friend. Below is a ground plan of his country house. Such country houses by the sea (**mare**) were also called **vīllae maritimae**. These luxury houses offered their owners all the comforts of a city house in the beauty and quiet of the country.



PLAN OF PLINY THE YOUNGER'S
VĪLLA URBĀNA

The Romans loved natural beauty and artistic representations of it. They often had the walls of their houses (in both the city and the country) painted, as Pliny the Younger's uncle, Pliny the Elder, describes them, with pictures "of country houses and landscaped gardens, copses, woods, hills, fish ponds and canals, rivers, coasts, and any other scenery one could desire, and scenes of people strolling along or sailing in a boat, or traveling to the country in carriages, people fishing, fowling and hunting, or gathering grapes" (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.116).

Pliny the Younger had another **vīlla urbāna** in Etruria with luxurious fountains, pools, and baths, which he describes as follows:

> Opposite the dining room at the corner of the colonnade is a large bedroom. From some of its windows you look onto the terrace, from others onto the meadow, while the windows in front overlook an ornamental pool which is a pleasure both to see and hear. For the water, falling from a height, foams white

in the marble basin. The bedroom is very warm in winter, being so exposed to the sun, and on a cloudy day the hot air from the nearby furnace takes the place of the sun's heat. From here you pass through a spacious and pleasant changing-room into the "cold bath" room in which there is a large bath out of the full sunlight. But if you want more space to swim in and warmer water, there is a pool in the courtyard and near it a fountain in which you can cool yourself if you've had enough of the heat.

And later in the same letter he tells us why he liked this house so much:

> I can relax there with fuller and more carefree enjoyment. I need never wear a toga; nobody calls from next door. All is calm and quiet, which makes the place healthy, as do the clear sky and pure air. There I enjoy health of body and mind, for I keep my mind in training by study and my body by hunting.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* V.6

1. What three areas make up the **vīlla rūstica**, and what function does each serve?
2. What would Titus Cornelius have been looking for if he had intended to purchase Davus to serve as the **vīlicus** of his estate?
3. Do you find Columella's advice on the treatment of slaves sound? Why or why not?

Wall painting adorning a bedroom of the *vīlla rūstica* of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale near Pompeii. The painting shows an imaginary cityscape. The ground plan and a reconstruction of this villa are shown on page 46. We use this villa at Boscoreale as a model for the villa of the Cornelii at Baiae.
Boscoreale, Pompeii, first century A.D.