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Fine Roman Dining at Affordable Pompeian Prices: Reevaluating the Commercial Gardens of Pompeii

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Abstract

Previous scholarship has designated Roman gardens into binary *otium* or *negotium* designations; however, this research on Roman gardens suggests that these concepts often exist in spaces simultaneously. The reevaluation of commercial gardens in Pompeii presented in this article allows for an integrative analysis of garden spaces, which reveals that commercial gardens have coinciding qualities and functions with private elite gardens and that various trades were actively integrating these features into commercial settings to promote and financially supplement their businesses. This research challenges the assumption that non-domestic, commercial gardens only have qualities indicative of *negotium* and that garden spaces were not multifunctional. My research reflects that these gardens were combining elements of *otium* and *negotium*. This evidence suggests non-elite Romans used non-domestic, commercial gardens for pleasure just as elite members of society did in their own private gardens or simulated garden rooms. My work highlights that a new, inclusive, and multifunctional approach to commercial gardens is needed in order to consider the role they had in shaping the urban experiences of the non-elite class during the early Roman Empire. This reevaluation contributes to a more holistic understanding of the urban experience in Roman society by focusing on how the businesses used and democratized commercial gardens in Pompeii during the 1st c CE.

Keywords: Pompeii, Commercial Gardens, *Otium*, *Negotium*, *Triclinium*

Profiles of the Authors



Claire Campbell received her BA in Classical Studies with a minor in Jewish studies at the University of Arkansas in Spring 2021. She currently working towards her master's degree at Yale Divinity School, focusing on Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Period Judaism. This manuscript is revised from a chapter of her undergraduate honors thesis on the analysis of non-domestic garden spaces in Pompeii. She is continuing to incorporate this research into her study of ancient agriculture and economics as reflected in the literary and material evidence during the Second Temple period in the Ancient Mediterranean and Ancient Near East.



Dr. Rhodora G. Vennarucci received a BA in Classical Archaeology at the University of Michigan and an MA and PhD in Roman Archaeology from the University at Buffalo, SUNY. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Arkansas, where she teaches on a variety of topics, including Greek and Roman art and archaeology, Roman urbanism, virtual archaeology, and Latin epigraphy, and leads study abroad programs to Italy. She received the Fulbright College Master Teaching award in 2021. Her research focuses on the socio-economic history of the Roman world with published and forthcoming works investigating both ends of the distributive system in Italy: rural multi-craft production and urban commercial landscapes. She co-directs the Marzuolo Archaeological Project in Southern Tuscany and the Virtual Pompeii Project. Her most recent project, Virtual Roman Retail, uses immersive VR technology as a multisensory tool for exploring consumer experience and behavior in Roman shops.

Introduction

“*Non arboribus consita Italia, ut tota pomarium videatur?*” “Isn’t Italy covered with trees that the whole land seems to be an orchard?” (Varro *Rerum Rusticarum*, 1.2.6). The Italian peninsula was remarkably prosperous during the Roman empire; even the environment reflected the wealth of Rome through luscious verdure. Gardens were a means of expression in the ancient world, just as they are today. The literary and art historical evidence depict famous gardens owned by influential political figures in Rome. However, these “physical remains” of ancient gardens are limited to the authors and artists who portrayed them in their works. While these types of evidence are significant for research in Roman gardens, the result is that scholars have tended only to study Roman gardens associated with elite society. Roman garden scholarship has not yet systematically analyzed gardens connected to commercial settings. Previous scholarship has encouraged an approach to the study of Roman urban horticulture by placing the gardens in binary categories, such as pleasure or productivity (Grimal, 1969). Recent scholarship has shown that these categories are not always static. However, the focus in scholarship remains on private gardens like those found in the peristyles of elite houses and villas, thus perpetuating the identification of *otium* (leisure) with the lives of the elite (Simelius, 2018; Wickham, 2012).

The unique preservation of Pompeii by Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE provides us with the material evidence of horticulture development and practices during early Rome Empire, making this site invaluable to Roman garden scholarship. After reviewing the archaeological evidence found in the market-gardens in Regio I of Pompeii, it became evident to me that features associated with elite society were also incorporated into cultivated commercial gardens. Because there is no clear consensus in scholarship as to what constitutes a commercial garden, I have defined it as a garden linked to a business whose facilities would have been accessible to the public for a price. The resulting reevaluation of commercial gardens in Pompeii challenges the assumption that Roman gardens were only used for *otium* or *negotium* (work).

I primarily analyzed evidence pulled from the work of W. Jashemski, who pioneered research on Roman gardens through the excavation and analysis of the preserved gardens found in Pompeii (Jashemski, 1979, 1993). Volume two of her work compiled all identified gardens in Pompeii and organized them by region, *insula* (city block), and entrance number. She provided the excavation history, art and architectural evidence, and palaeobotanical evidence for each garden. My research has focused primarily on the commercial garden spaces in Regio I and Regio VI that have archaeological evidence of masonry *triclinia* (a three-sided couch, used for reclining and eating; also used to describe dining rooms) (Fig. I). I analyzed the archaeological evidence of nine commercial gardens from Regio I and Regio VI. I then organized these gardens into five categories: *taberna* (tavern), *caupona* (restaurant), *hospitium* (inn), *lupanar* (brothel), and market-garden. These terms have encouraged monofunctional interpretations where the archaeological record indicates a commercial space was multifunctional (Ellis, 2018, p. 25). These terms are often applied to Pompeian structures by modern excavators uncritically. For the purpose of this research, I have retained these labels to maintain structure in this reevaluation. Owners of commercial premises in Pompeii marketed *otium* by integrating dining facilities within cultivated garden spaces. I believe they were doing this to promote their business among the general public and thus increase potential revenue.



Figure 1: Masonry triclinium from the Inn of the Gladiator, Pompeii (pompeiiinpictures.com).

Survey of Commercial Gardens

Market-Oriented Gardens in Regio 1

Market-gardens have been identified in traditional scholarship as gardens with the sole function of the cultivating of produce to sell (Jashemski 1973).

[The Orchard of Felix \(I.22\)](#): This large orchard has been associated with the fruit-seller Felix, whose *taberna* was only four blocks north of the orchard on the *Via dell'Abbondanza*, the busiest thoroughfare in Pompeii (I.8.1-2) (Bergmann, 2018, p. 291). The orchard is approximately 1,852 square meters in size. Jashemski only excavated half the plot, but she concluded the garden may have maintained 300 trees. The palaeobotanical analysis and the complex irrigation system found in this site suggest most of these were fruit trees. This garden has evidence of a masonry *triclinium*, altar, and a decorated table with an ornate marble plaque. The *triclinium* was placed beneath large olive trees to take advantage of the shade (Jashemski, 1993, p. 73).

[The Garden of the Fugitives \(I.21.6\)](#): This market-garden was connected to a *caupona* (I.21.2). The garden is approximately 1,872 square meters. There is evidence of a large masonry *triclinium* and a pergola in the middle of the garden positioned closer to the west wall. There is a base near the *triclinium*, on which would have been placed a table or a statue. The condition of the garden did not permit an extensive palaeobotanical excavation, but the evidence indicates the garden may have maintained trees. (Fig. II). Around the *triclinium* were large vines, which likely covered the pergola. Because the garden included fruit trees, vines, and decorative shrubbery, Jashemski referred to it as “mixed cultivated” (Jashemski, 1993, p. 69-70).



Figure II: Market-garden and triclinium foundation in the Garden of the Fugitives, Pompeii (PIP).

[Inn of the Gladiator \(I.20.1\)](#): This market-garden, also connected to a *caupona*, has a plot about 1,213 square meters in size. Jashemski believed this garden once held a vineyard, although the garden was poorly preserved (Jashemski, 1993, p. 67). There is also evidence that some trees, likely fruit trees, were grown on this site. The multiple *dolia* (storage vessels) and the pressing room discovered in the garden indicate wine may have been made as well as served here. In the east part of the garden, excavators found an altar behind the pressing room. Frescoes were in the garden, but they were not well preserved. There is evidence of a table and *triclinium*. Near the *triclinium* was placed a statue of a gladiator (Fig. III). It has been suggested that the two decorative pools behind the *triclinium* may have held eels or fish (Jashemski, 1993, p. 67).



Figure III: Vineyard with statue of gladiator and dolia in the Inn of the Gladiator, Pompeii (PIP).

It seems likely that the market-gardens, the largest gardens in Regio I of Pompeii, had supplied produce to the shops and businesses to which they were associated. However, unaddressed by scholars is the choice to incorporate dining facilities into market-gardens. Why did they build these dining facilities? This decision certainly did not improve or enhance the production of fruit in these spaces. Perhaps the proprietors

used these facilities themselves, but the *triclinium* found in the orchard possibly associated with the shopkeeper Felix (I.22) appears too grand for the sole use of a shopkeeper and his family (Jashemski, 1979, p. 411). It seems reasonable to suggest these dining spaces were rented out to customers, who did not have their own gardens or dining spaces at home; as well as visitors to Pompeii, such as those who came to town for the gladiatorial spectacles in the nearby amphitheater. I would suggest that proprietors of the other large market-gardens also made their dining facilities accessible to customers for a price.

Perhaps the owners of the market-gardens used the aesthetic value of productive plants and garden dining to promote and financially supplement their business. The palaeobotanical evidence confirms these market-gardens had grown the same fruit trees identified in garden frescoes decorating elite spaces. This evidence emphasizes the elite association between gardens and dining activities. (Kellum, 1994; Caneva, 2003; Bergmann, 2018). Instead of a simulated reality produced by high-status garden décor in exclusive elite dining rooms, the market-gardens offered customers the opportunity to dine in semi-seclusion in an actual orchard that would have been the original inspiration for the elites' simulated gardens. Businesses willingly incorporated *triclinia* that decreased the space for cultivation in the garden; the likely tradeoff was that these dining facilities increased potential revenue and consumer traffic. The introduction of large ornate *triclinia* in the middle of cultivated spaces was a measured response to customers' desire to dine in gardens.

Gardens in Cauponae in Regio I and Regio VI

A *caupona* was a business that provided food and sleeping accommodations (Ellis, 2018, p. 26).

[Caupona I.13.16](#): The *caupona* at I.13.16 has evidence of a *triclinium* under a shaded structure as opposed to being in the middle of the garden space, as was the case in the market-gardens discussed above. The structure was built into the northwest corner of the garden (Fig. IV). The garden is approximately 88 square meters. Jashemski identified this garden as a small-scale vineyard (Jashemski, 1993, p. 58). The cistern head in the middle of *triclinium* served as a table base. The walls of the *triclinium* were decorated in fresco with portraits of the goddess Venus, the patron of Pompeii; and the god Priapus, the patron of commerce and protector of fortunes. Both figures were recognizable across society, but perhaps the owner revered these gods and wanted them expressed in the decoration.



Figure IV: Shaded masonry triclinium in I.13.16, Pompeii (PIP).

[Caupona VI.1.1](#): The garden associated with this *caupona* is only 53 square meters in size. There is evidence of a *triclinium* and a pergola. The *triclinium* takes up most of the space in the northeast corner. There are no altars or decorations, but there are a gutter and a cistern, which indicate the potential for cultivation (Jashemski, 1993, p. 119).

[Caupona VI.2.3-5](#): This *caupona* has three garden spaces. The large garden is approximately 91 square meters; the intermediate garden is 50.5 square meters; the small garden is 35.5 square meters (Fig. V). A *triclinium* and a pergola were built into the northern portion of the large garden. In the middle of the *triclinium* was placed a small pool and table base. Excavators discovered a masonry altar with no decorative elements in front of the *triclinium*. The two smaller gardens in this *caupona* have no evidence of dining or worship (Jashemski, 1993, p. 121). None of the gardens have any palaeobotanical evidence, but the access to water resources through gutters and cisterns suggests that these gardens may have provided the *caupona* with small produce, such as herbs and vegetables.

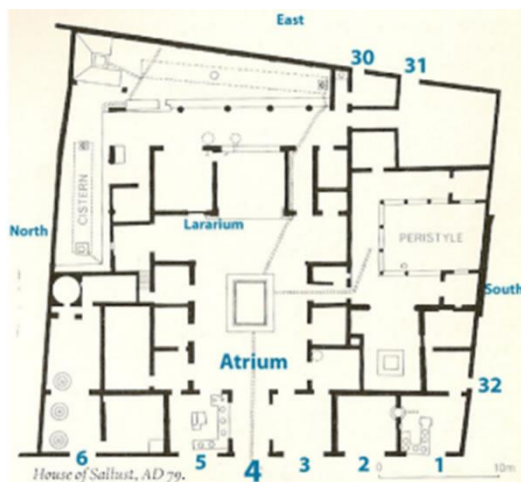


Figure V: Plan of VI.2.5-3, Pompeii (PIP).

The gardens inside these *cauponae* are smaller than the market-gardens attached to the *cauponae* analyzed above. However, the *cauponae* integrated the garden dining experience into their business despite not having access to a large garden space. By installing *triclinia* in innovative ways, business owners provided the elite experience and also maintained the productive potential of the garden. The *caupona* I.13.16 shows a unique *triclinium* that was built into the side of the garden wall. If the *triclinium* had been placed in the middle of the garden, it would have occupied much of the 88 square meters. This installation would all but eliminate the cultivation of produce. Therefore the business strategically placed the structure to the side. Market-gardens were large enough for owners to incorporate dining structures in the middle of the spaces. Businesses with much smaller gardens had to think of innovative ways to include *otium* into their available space and still maintain adequate room for the cultivation of their crops.

A similar type of shaded dining structure is seen in the literary and art historical evidence of Rome. Pliny the Younger described a marble pergola to the side of his garden with large open walls or windows that permitted a full view of the garden and yet protected him and his guests from the elements (Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 5.6.39). The frescoes of the House of the Fruit Orchards (1.9.5-7), a private residence in Pompeii, also depicted pergola structures into the frescoes to make the viewers feel as if they were looking out onto a garden through a pergola. These shaded structures would provide a relaxed and comfortable garden dining experience in a hot Mediterranean climate (Fig. VI).



Figure VI: Fresco from the House of the Fruit Orchards, Pompeii (PIP).

The *caupona*e of Regio VI did not build the *triclinia* under shaded structures; however, the position of the *triclinia* would suggest that businesses with smaller gardens willingly sacrificed cultivation space to provide the garden dining experience to their customers. The *triclinium* in VI.2.3-5 separates two gardens at the east and the north side of the establishment, decreasing the potential for cultivation. The *triclinium* and pergola in VI.1.1 occupy more than half of the 53 square meters of garden space, leaving very little open green space for plant life. The restricted garden spaces would only allow for smaller trees, shrubbery, or flora to be maintained. It would again seem that businesses were choosing to provide dining facilities in their gardens even if they decreased the garden spaces. Presumably, the revenue potential that garden dining had for these business owners more than made up for the loss of income that owners would have received from additional crops.

Hospitia in Regio I and Regio VI

Hospitia, also associated with lodging and sometimes dining, were smaller establishments than *caupona*e (Ellis, 2018, p. 30-34). Regio I has three gardens with *triclinia* associated with *hospitia*. Smaller businesses do not have access to large garden spaces like the Orchard of Felix (I.22), but the gardens have enough space to prioritize activities such as dining. *Triclinia* found in these commercial settings take up most of the green spaces. This evidence would suggest that business owners considered it more important to provide an outdoor dining venue than to maintain a full garden. As noted earlier, this was also true of the *caupona*e gardens of Regio VI.

[Hospitium of Saturninus \(I.11.16\)](#): The *Hospitium* of Saturninus did not have a physical garden space but does have evidence of a simulated garden room inside the establishment. The faux garden room was not common in commercial settings and has been primarily associated with elite society. Therefore, this evidence offers a unique opportunity to analyze the rationale of the investment of the garden-inspired fresco in relationship to the business.

The *triclinium* in the courtyard at the rear of the *hospitium* had garden frescoes on the north and east walls (Fig. VII). The poor preservation of the fresco does not allow for the plant and wildlife to be identified. It appears to depict a dense garden with minimal decorative elements (Fig. VII) (Jashemski, 1993, p. 53, 325). Although a garden fresco would not permit customers to dine in a garden, the painting would not require the maintenance that a physical garden would and was therefore even more strongly associated with *otium*.



Figure VII: Fresco from the Hospitium of Saturninus triclinium (PIP).

The *Hospitium* of Saturninus invested in the outfitting of a garden room inside the inn, emulating a real garden experience with simulated images of flora and fauna that guests could admire while dining inside. Private residences would have access to private gardens but were also able to expand their gardens through decoration inside the house. Businesses were practicing this as well, also seen in the garden rooms in the *lupanar* I.11.10-11 examined below. The owner of this *hospitium* had invested in his business by providing an enhanced elite experience in a faux garden room, similar to the style of the simulated garden room found in the Villa of Livia (Prima Porta, 1st c BCE). This famous garden room provided the Imperial family with a garden dining experience inside their villa (Fig. VIII). The garden room is an early example of the garden fresco style and is considered a coveted elite trend during the early empire. Based on the evidence in Pompeii, private and public settings also invested in this style by the 1st c CE, supporting the idea that the relationship between the garden and dining was a significant concept in Roman society.



Figure VIII: Fresco from the Villa of Livia, Prima Porta (1st c BCE) (milestonerome.com).

Gardens in Lupanaria in Regio I and Regio VI

Lupanaria were brothels, but they were also associated with the retail of food and drink (Ellis, 2018, p. 7).

[Lupanar of Euxinus and Iustus \(I.11.10-11\)](#): The size of this garden is approximately 270 square meters. Jashemski identified this establishment as a *lupanar* (Jashemski, 1979, p. 175). Two small structures that open out towards the garden were built onto the south and east walls (Fig. IX).



Figure IX: Shaded triclinium structure from I.10.11 (PIP).

These rooms likely served as *triclinia*, where guests could eat in the shade and enjoy the view of the garden. The walls of the rooms have evidence of frescoes that depict a small fence with plants behind it. This establishment invested in garden-inspired frescoes painted onto structures already built in the garden, enhancing the experience of *otium* for customers. The frescoes are too poorly preserved to determine if they are in the same style found in the *Hospitium* of Saturninus and the Villa of Livia. The palaeobotanical evidence suggests that the garden maintained grapevines. The *dolia* found on this site may have been used to make and store wine (Jashemski, 1993, p. 51).

[Lupanar of Aphrodite, Secunda, Nymphe, Spendusa, Veneria, Restituta, Timele \(VI.11.5, 15-16\)](#): This establishment has been identified as a *lupanar* based on erotic graffiti that lists prices for certain services (McGinn, 2004, p. 275). The garden is approximately 201 square meters in size. There is evidence of a masonry *triclinium* in the northwest corner of the garden (Jashemski, 1993, p. 143). There is no palaeobotanical evidence to indicate the type of plants grown in this garden, but the size would have allowed a decent-sized garden to grow vines, fruit trees, flora, etc.

The *lupanaria* in Pompeii are far from luxurious; rather, they are often dingy and cramped. The gardens provided a spacious aesthetic environment for customers to dine and relax. A *lupanar* may not seem very appealing to customers from the inside, but the access to a flourishing garden where one could dine with other customers and prostitutes would have made the business more appealing.

There is also evidence that prostitutes took strategic advantage of gardens in Rome during the 1st c BCE. The gardens in the portico of Pompey the Great were accessible to the public. They also reflected the success and extent of the Roman Empire through the presence of exotic plants and trees. Famously, the gardens were also the haunt of local prostitutes (McGinn, 2004, p. 153). Prostitutes would use the sensual setting to attract customers, just as the gardens in the brothels at Pompeii would have brought a competitive edge to the business. A *lupanar* with a large garden would entice customers to return for the elite experience in a setting that was not usually considered *otium*.

These *lupanaria* incorporate different types of structures used for dining. The brothel at I.11.10-11 provided garden rooms, similar to the shaded structure seen in the garden of *caupona* I.13.16. Although scholars debate the extent of prostitution practiced in *cauponae*, it is likely that women, enslaved and freed, would have served and entertained the guests dining in the gardens (Laurence, 1994, p. 79). Perhaps the prostitutes in these *lupanaria* dined with and entertained customers in the gardens for an extra cost. In addition to their primary commercial function, these brothels may have used the gardens to cultivate produce, making these commercial gardens multi-functional.

Conclusion

Dining in gardens has been traditionally considered an exclusive luxurious experience and has not often been viewed as accessible or even affordable to most members of Roman society. My research on Pompeii commercial gardens suggests that gardens were accessible and enjoyed across the socioeconomic spectrum. The construction of public gardens attested at Rome starting in the late republic and continuing under Augustus helped democratize garden access to a larger part of the population in and outside of Rome. Large gardens in crowded urban settings would also have been beneficial to the environment. The commercial gardens in Pompeii could have offered benefits beyond the value of their produce, such as shade, space to relax and socialize, decrease in noise and air pollution, and other aesthetic qualities. Ancient authors also believed urban gardens were valuable for improving the health of local inhabitants (Vitruvius *De Architectura*, 4.9.5). We can see this trend in our own urban settings. Cities and neighborhoods intentionally incorporate green spaces into their landscape that benefit the residents and the environment (Wolf, 2017). My research argues that this shift was also visible in the commercial gardens of Pompeii.

Based on my analysis of the commercial gardens in Regio I and Regio VI of Pompeii, the evidence indicates various trades may have been marketing *otium* through their gardens to benefit their business. This new insight forces a reconsideration of public accessibility to elite experiences. The accessibility of public garden spaces to the general populace reflects a trend of inclusiveness in Roman retail that challenges the central elite focus in Roman garden scholarship. This reevaluation of commercial gardens in Pompeii suggests that establishments involved in the service industry had a significant role in democratizing garden access to a larger part of the population by the early Imperial period. As more of the population participated in what had previously been exclusive elite activities, the concept of *otium* in the garden was commodified and more broadly became a part of the Roman urban experience. With this new insight in mind, we can start to consider what social and cultural meaning dining in the garden may have had for the non-elite customers willing to pay for the experience.

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