

The Economic Centre of Pompeii Revealed by Roman Cash Keeping

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Ancient economies in general relied strongly on their accessibility to currency. The distribution of cash resources within the urban topography of Roman cities is therefore a topic that deserves attention.

A group of archaeological monuments hardly ever discussed in this context is Roman money chests, or *casseforti*, specially made to contain coins and valuables.¹ These money chests are striking items of furniture (fig. 1). However, the following investigation does not focus on the chests themselves, but rather on the pattern in which they occur in the urban landscape.



Fig. 1: Cassaforte preserved in situ, Casa di M. Obellius Firmus (IX 14. 4). Photo Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.

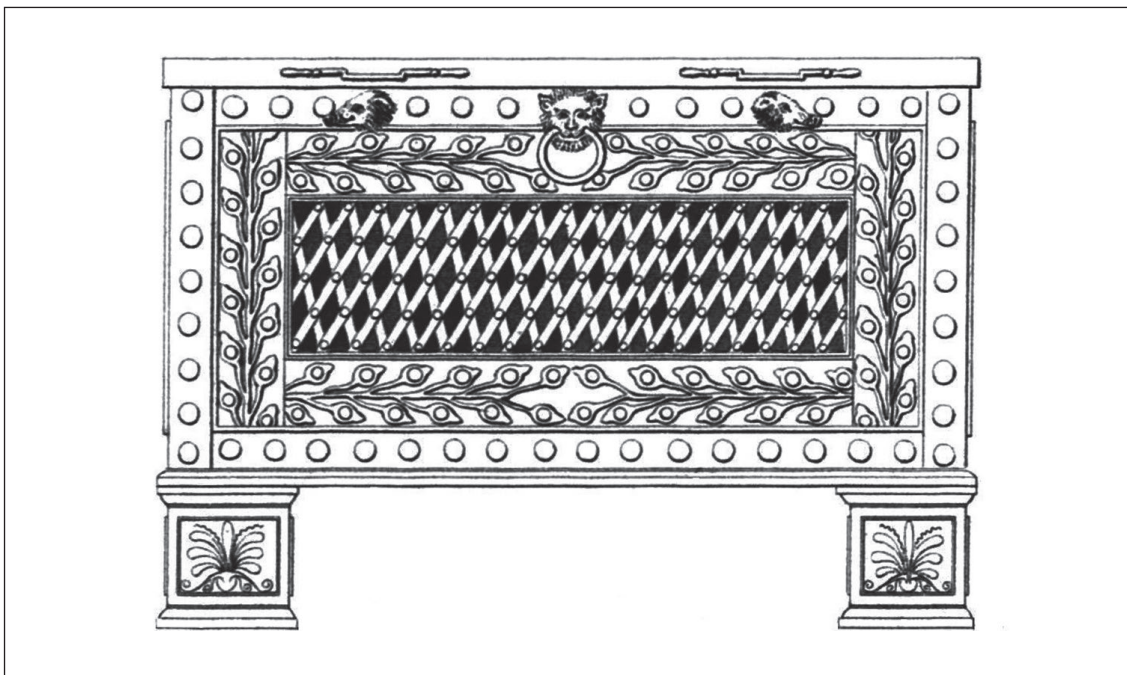


Fig. 2: One of two casseforti in Casa dei Dioscuri (VI 9. 6).

Surprisingly, research has never been conducted on whether the casseforti *in situ* could offer knowledge of where the core areas of economic activity in Pompeii were situated.

At the start of the horrific disaster that struck the Campanian cities in AD 79, money chests were emptied in panic, but the chests themselves remained in their habitual places. Strongboxes were heavy and installed with the intention of not being easy to move (fig. 2). Unlike other furniture, casseforti were firmly secured to a platform of stone or concrete by an iron bolt in the centre of their underside (fig. 3).²

The archaeological evidence is most commonly divided into two parts: There are a number of preserved money chests and there are the platforms that the chests stood on.

Not all the money chests have proved possible to save during excavations. On the other hand, nearly all of the carrying platforms/bases made of stone or Roman concrete have survived,³ which is something of a gift for this investigation.

Despite this fortunate situation, the evidence concerning the positions of the money chests in the urban structure has earlier been left untouched by research.

One fact established through centuries of archaeological research is that the money chests had no physical connection to the storage of wax tablets, which were used as receipts for economic transactions. Although heaps of money are depicted above wax tablets on the legendary wallpainting (fig. 4) from the property of Julia Felix (II 4.1–12), archeologically speaking, money has never been found near wax tablets.



Fig. 3: Platform with central iron bolt for cassaforte in Casa dei Dioscuri (VI 9. 6).



Fig. 4: Wallpainting from Praedica di Julia Felix (II 4). Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

In Casa di L. Caecilius Iucundus (V 1, 26), for instance, the famous wax tablets were found on the north side of the peristyle, belonging to a room on the first floor.⁴

The money chest, on the other hand, was found in the atrium a good distance away.

Updated Figures of Money Chest Findings

A new count of the remains of casseforti found through centuries of excavation determines that the casseforti, or their platforms, stem from 30 locations. This increases the known number of casseforti threefold, since the most commonly quoted estimate is about 10.

The money chests' stone platforms are regarded as belonging to the Samnite Pompeii, while concrete platforms are considered Roman. If this dating of stone platforms is correct, the considerable number of such platforms indicates that Samnite Pompeii was a society in control of great financial resources. When we put this information into the historical context, it may provide an additional reason for the military conquest of the city in the 1st century B.C.

It is natural to expect that the temples in the city have had at least one cassaforte each for storing valuables, particularly votive gifts of gold. Such chests located in temples must have been rescued shortly after the eruption since none of them have emerged during the excavations. Although the details about the temple chests remain unknown, there was supposedly little difference in both type and use between the public money chests and the most lavish private money chests.

Campania as an area was possibly a production centre for elaborate Roman casseforti, which is indicated by the important find of one comparable money chest as far away as in Turiaso (Tarazona), Spain.⁵

Money Chests in the Public Sphere

Only one money chest in the city of Pompeii has been discovered in a public context. This cassaforte was located in the Macellum (VII 9. 7–8),⁶ inside the meat market at the Forum (fig. 5).⁷

During the excavation in May 1822, the early archaeologists must have experienced a double surprise. The money chest remained untouched, yet the intact coins it contained were of a lesser value than one should expect. There were more than eleven hundred bronze coins,⁸ but only 35 small silver coins. Uncharacteristic was the total absence of gold coins.

In sum, the coins in the Macellum chest had a monetary value of 577 *sestertii*⁹, an amount that in comparison is less than what has been found in an ordinary Caupona in the city (see below). Most likely, the quantity and variety of bronze coins indicates a

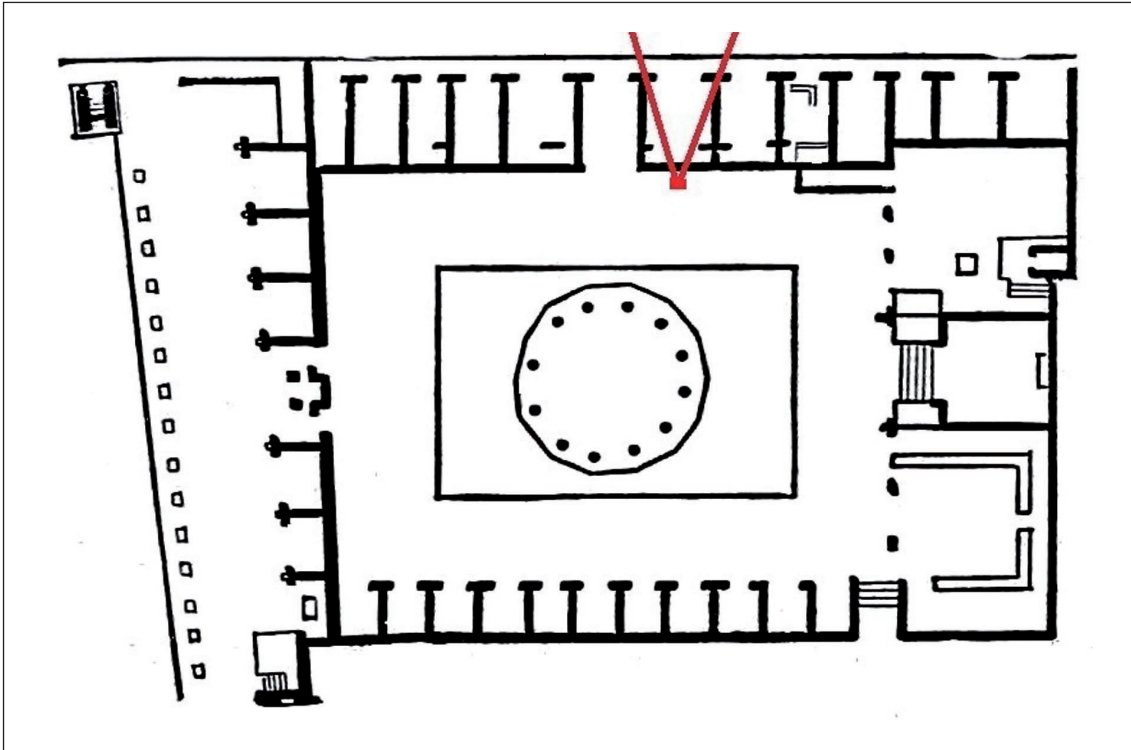


Fig. 5: Reconstructed find-spot of the cassaforte in the Macellum, Forum.

money chest that was used to keep the daily income and change necessary for trade in the Macellum.

Money Chests Used in Trade or Commerce: the Evidence from Casa del Fauno

As regards cash keeping in private houses, Casa del Fauno (VI 12.5) demonstrates some unparalleled features connected to one of its two casseforti. In the last years of the city, this vast house was in the hands of a wine grocer, a fact that, at the time of excavation, was proven by large groups of different wine amphorae stored all over the property.¹⁰

The house contained two casseforti, both of which were found in the domestic part of the house. What is astonishing here is the unique arrangement pertaining to one of the chests, which stood in the northeast corner of the tetrastyle atrium (fig. 6 and fig. 7).¹¹

What was observed here in Casa del Fauno, and never seen anywhere else, was an unexpected hole in the wall of a side-room (no. 45), leading directly to the inside of the money chest (no. 42). Coins could therefore be dropped into a channel running into the cassaforte from room no. 45.

The cassaforte in this domestic setting seemingly received money from local sale of wine in the city.¹² There was no need to unlock the chest to feed it with the incoming

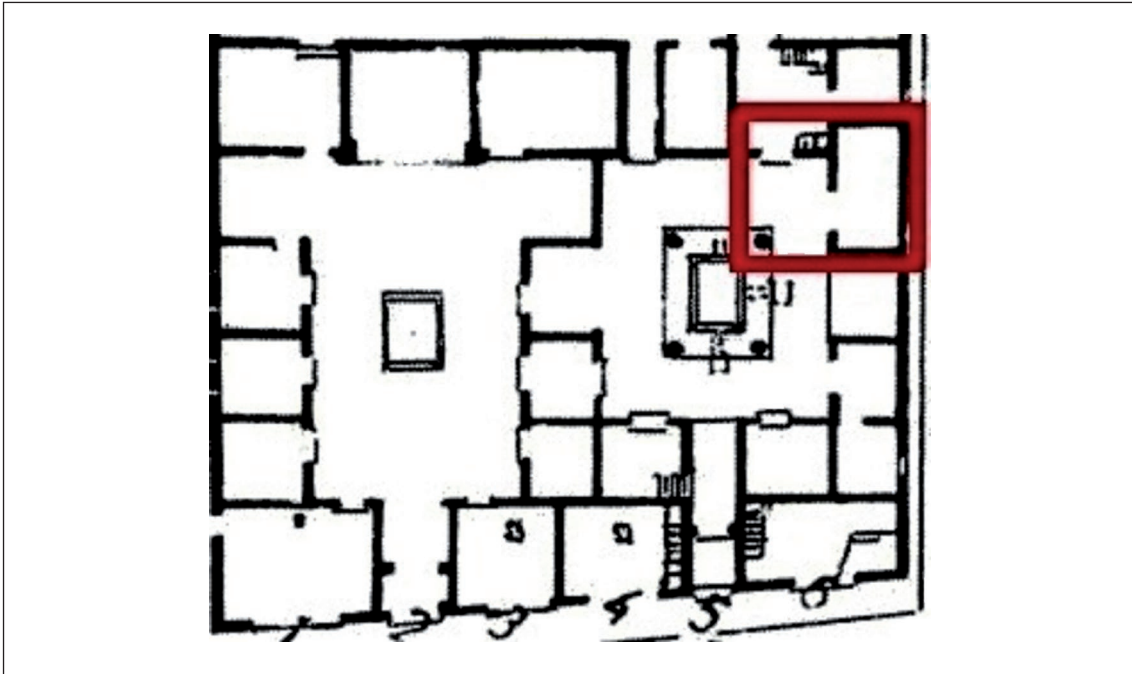


Fig. 6: Plan of atria in Casa del Fauno (VI 12.5) with marked northeast corner of tetra-style atrium.

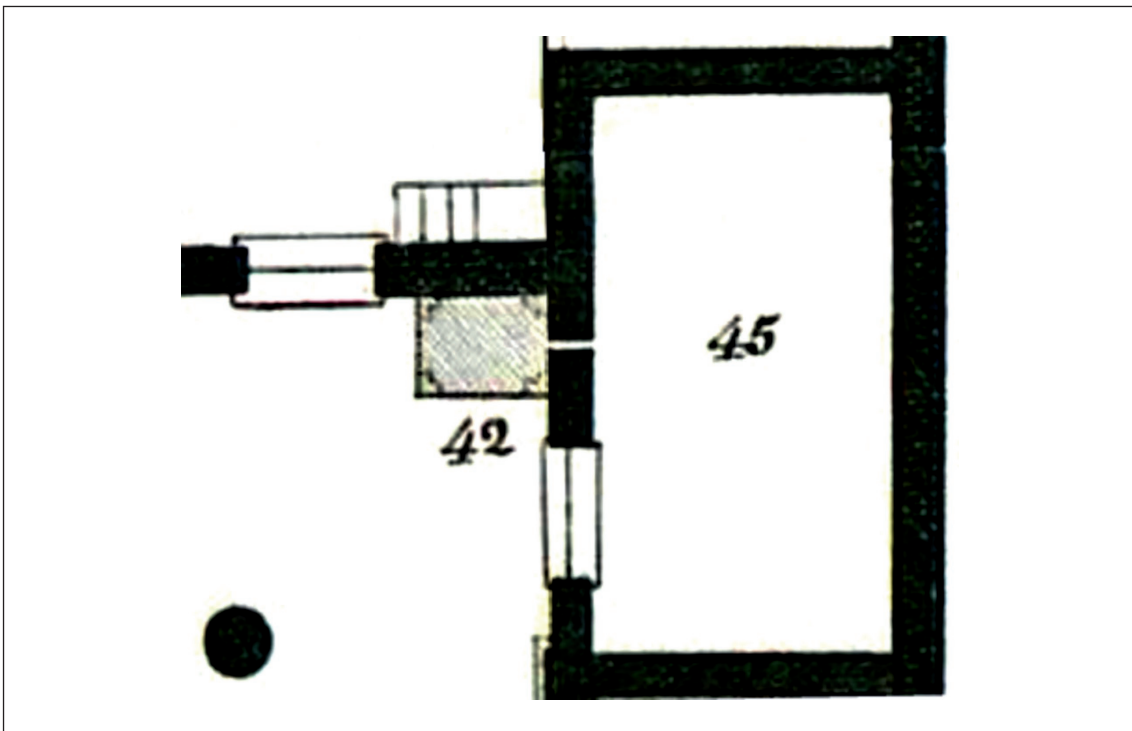


Fig. 7: Hole in the wall between cassaforte no. 42 and room no. 45, Casa del Fauno.

cash. Another detail concerning the construction of the cassaforte was that anybody standing in the atrium could hear when coins were thrown into it since the chest was lined with iron.¹³

It is conceivable that the cassaforte was either fed money after each transaction, or that it functioned as something similar to a night safe. The side-room to the right of the cassaforte, no. 45, where the channel started, must have been the accounts room. This room was simple and demonstrated one very crucial feature: its walls had no decoration.¹⁴ The bare walls clearly indicate that slaves took care of the coins and monetary exchange for their master, as well as keeping the accounts. The whole process may actually have been in their hands.

In 1831, at the time of excavation, the hole in the wall into the cassaforte was documented¹⁵ and commented on.¹⁶ Later, research has forgotten these features, and the hole seems to have been camouflaged by restoration work.

The Matter of Money Chests in Shops

As regards trade, an interesting question is whether any money chests were recovered in shops. Hypothetically, one could expect numerous finds of simpler money chests in the context of shops. However, this appears to be a concept belonging to more modern periods rather than describing the general use of money chests in antiquity.

When it comes to the usual kinds of street-level shops, it appears that ancient shopkeepers kept their cash in more informal or secret spaces. This was observed in the shop of the Caupona (I 8. 8). Here, the money was found hidden in the bottom of a dolium in the sales counter. The bronze coins amounted to 683 *sestertii*.¹⁷ Compared to the coins in the cassaforte of the Macellum at the Forum, this represented a hundred *sestertii* more in value.

The public trade of the Macellum required a cassaforte, but in most ordinary shops, it appears that they were not a necessity. After examining the excavation reports, with particular focus on chests in shops, the only money chest to be found was located in the so-called Shop of Ceratus (VII 1. 26) situated on the Strada Stabiana. This cassaforte was described as an iron chest of not very large dimensions.¹⁸

Iron chest supposedly means that it was a wooden chest covered with iron. The chest itself was found empty. Disappointingly, published archaeological data does not go further, and the remains of the chest are not preserved. What was sold from this shop is unknown, and nor were any signs of production activity recorded.

Interpretation of the Urban Distribution of Money Chests

An examination of a map of the city with the find-spots of the cassaforte marked shows that 24 of the 29 private money chests are situated in a well-defined central segment crossing the city, running in a north to south direction.¹⁹ Interestingly enough, this long, stretched segment does not point towards the Forum.

The Probability of Two Economic Centres in one City

What can be deduced on the basis of where the money chests appear on the map is that Pompeii as an urban structure seems to have had two economic centres. The long segment appears to divide itself into two sectors.

There is one sector at the top between Via del Mercurio in the west and Via Vesuvio in the east. The other sector is along the Strada Stabiana following the city's falling landscape to the south (fig. 8).

The Centre of the Lower Area

Through the discoveries of casseforti in lower parts of the city, one becomes aware of the importance of Strada Stabiana in relation to money circulation, in terms of both the street and the *insulae* adjoining it.

Using the perspective of Roman city planning, Strada Stabiana is above doubt the *cardo maximus*, running north to south. The fact that the *cardo maximus* represented the core of urban life is a characteristic shared by many Roman cities.

In this context, Strada Stabiana had several important public buildings along its course, including two baths, both of the city's two theatres, and two temples; the Temple of Aesculapius and the Temple of Isis. Outside the Forum, no other area had a similar density of public buildings.

This street is also unique in its diversity. Here, ceremonial religious activities meet with pure entertainment and personal spending. Along the street of Strada Stabiana, at least 115 shops, 7 bakeries and 23 *thermopolia* can be counted, in addition with a variety of other activities.

A considerable number of citizens must have spent substantial amounts of their money in this area. Strada Stabiana formed the urban heart²⁰ of the populations' needs and day-to-day consumption. The conclusion is that Strada Stabiana was the main street of Pompeii, and in addition to the adjoining *insulae*, was characterised by continuous economic activity.



Fig. 8: Map and topographical catalogue of casseforti and platforms.

The Centre Furthest North in the Topography

The distribution of casseforti clearly points to another economic centre, which is very dissimilar to the first. In this sector towards the north, a square drawn on the map will encompass the highest density of casseforti in the entire urban landscape. Many of the houses belong to the insula VI.

A group of four houses owning two casseforti each reveals the ultimate prosperity.

How much capital the casseforti in these wealthy houses may have contained is demonstrated by one noble house, Casa dei Dioscuri (VI 9, 6). On excavation, gold coins worth 4,520 *sestertii* remained in one of the house's two money chests, even though it had been looted in antiquity.²¹ It is reasonable to estimate that the original content could easily have been the double, about 9,000 *sestertii*.²² In addition, the second cassa-forte in the house would also have contributed further value.

Why have casseforti in City Houses?

It is difficult to agree with the traditional interpretation that derives from Giuseppe Fiorelli, suggesting that money chests were needed for the "*domestico peculio*".²³ This may be seen as a misunderstanding based on a more modern perspective. The money chests contained far greater resources than were needed for running a household.

The answer must be as detached from modern projections as possible. In Roman society, where bankers and lenders existed, but not banks, the protection of capital resources in cash, whether great or small, had to be undertaken by individuals.²⁴

The casseforti of a city tell us about capital and its urban distribution. They can, however, only tell us how the money was earned in very few cases. It must be assumed that the majority of the wealth in the upper part of the city came from profit from land and property, some of which could be far from Pompeii. As an extension of this interpretation, the last owner of Casa del Fauno (VI 12. 5), situated in the same economical centre, seems to have been part of a more extensive Mediterranean wine commerce, not only a local wine trade.²⁵

Larger Sums of Money near Volcano Victims likely Stemming from Money Chests

One could also consider the great sums of money kept by the fleeing volcano victims in order to get an indication of what the casseforti may have contained. Of particular interest are four different victims that are recorded as carrying from 4,700 and up to 7,380 *sestertii*, all in gold coins.

In one single discovery made outside Regio III, near Porta di Sarno, a victim was carrying 6,296 *sestertii*.²⁶ I am personally convinced, after considering a possible flight route, that this is the content of the cassaforte in Casa di M. Obellius Firmus (IX 14.4), shown in Figure 1.

Wealthy Citizens with no Money Chest

I would like to conclude with another interesting question; who were the rich individuals who had similar amounts of money, but did not display their wealth by having a cassaforte in their atrium? Pompeii also provides examples here.

It is possible, for instance, to refer to Casa del Bracciale d'oro (VI 17, 42) where 4,696 *sestertii* were found in a box.²⁷ Another example is Casa di Marcus Lucretius (IX 3.5), which did not have a cassaforte either. However, just outside on the street victims carrying coins with a total (minimum) value of 3,550 *sestertii* were found.²⁸ Both houses were huge and well equipped with dwelling luxury; they possessed fountain structures for cooling, and had newly finished wall decorations of impressive scale.²⁹

In the matter of who among the wealthy had a cassaforte and who did not, one factor to consider is the relation to private clients, and another is whether the house owner kept a public office or not. Individuals who kept a public office had to run most of the activity from their own house. In such case, it is not certain that all the money inside the chests needed to be private. Furthermore, there are many factors that we do not know, such as family traditions and personal aspirations, whatever these may have been.

In any case, Pompeii gives us the most detailed material on which we can base our research. Traditionally, the economy is one approach, and the display of wealth and status is another. However, in this case they may unite. Casseforti contained hard cash resources and, at the same time, this gleaming item of furniture positioned its owner in a hierarchy of status.

Notes

¹ The first money chest recorded in Pompeii was excavated on 13 May 1822 in the Macellum, Forum. No chests have come to light recently and the last one was discovered in IX 14.4 Casa di Obellius Firmus on 11 June 1911; Della Corte 1911, 271, fig. 2).

² Lead was used to fasten iron bolts to platforms. First researcher to observe the value of iron bolts as a precaution against moving chests was de Longpérier 1868, 59, Pl. XX.

³ Pernice 1932, 72–76.

⁴ Camodece 2009, 18.

- ⁵ Beltrán Lloris 2004, 143–186. Note especially the conclusion, 186.
- ⁶ Excavated on 13 May 1822, Amicone 1822, 31.
- ⁷ Nissen 1877, 283: “Es verdient endlich Erwähnung, dass unmittelbar l. neben dem Eingang von der Augustalen-strasse eine grosse Geldkiste (...) gefunden ward; man sieht noch im Boden Spuren des Eisens.”
- ⁸ Amicone 1822, 32, and Fiorelli 1875, 264 under “Augusteum”.
- ⁹ In addition to the 35 silver coins; 354 asses, 188 sestertii and 586 quadrants were discovered, see, Breglia 1950, Tabella B, no. 7.
- ¹⁰ Bechi 1832, 15.
- ¹¹ The other money chest was placed in a sort of tablinum, a short distance from the atrium, Bonucci 1832, 7. This chest was likely in a better state of preservation than the one in the atrium. Avellino 1837, 47f., mentions a chest in Casa del Fauno, which after excavation was possible to keep and preserve in the place it was found.
- ¹² It is natural to believe that even a wine grocer would sell wine amphorae in retail from his property. The market for quality wine was surely of some scale, taken into account not only the city but also the needs of many suburban villas.
- ¹³ “(...) foderata di ferro”, Bonucci 1832, 7.
- ¹⁴ There were other rooms in this section of the house without any decoration. Bare walls, with no colour at all, demonstrate the extreme contrast between the different parts of Casa del Fauno.
- ¹⁵ Bechi 1832, Tav. A.B.
- ¹⁶ Bechi 1832, 14. In the first report by G. Bechi, the cassaforte with the hole in the wall was thought to be a machine for improving the taste of wine.
- ¹⁷ Unpublished, but listed by Breglia 1950, Tabella B, no. 59.
- ¹⁸ Strada Stabiana No. 53. Bull. Arch. Nap. 1853, 60: “(...) presso sopra un piccolo rialto di fabbrica vedonsi i residui di una cassa di ferro di non molto grandi dimensioni, ove forse il padrone della bottega serbava il danaro ritratto dalla sua industria.” This shop is mentioned by Fiorelli 1875, 170 as “26 Bottega”.
- ¹⁹ A small number of chests do not follow this rule. For instance, close to Porta Marina, there is a cluster of three money chests in two houses, which may have a connection with Pompeii as harbour, or be related to maritime activities.
- ²⁰ Today’s overestimation of Via dell’Abbondanza ought to be shifted to investigation of the richer, and more complex, Strada Stabiana as the main street of the city.
- ²¹ Bechi 1829, 7.
- ²² The sum that was actually found (4,520 sestertii) were only coins that had slipped through the bottom of the cassaforte and escaped the looting in antiquity, Gell 1832 II, 31
- ²³ This always seems to be Fiorelli’s idea when a cassaforte appears. As proven by Fiorelli 1875, 242: “(...) la cassa di ferro pel domestico peculio”, which is his remark on the discovery of the cassaforte in Casa di Trittolemo (VII 7.5) on 29 October 1864.
- ²⁴ For public capital, the situation was different, where sanctuaries, offered a secure place to deposit money under normal circumstances.
- ²⁵ There were wine amphorae with both Greek and Roman inscriptions, likely indicating a wider commerce in the Mediterranean. Bechi 1832, 15, promised that these inscriptions would be published later, but disappointingly, this does not seem to be the case.

²⁶ Cantilena 2005, 678.

²⁷ “(...) in una cassetta”, Cantilena 2005, 678.

²⁸ Breglia 1950, Tabella A, no. 18, with further reference.

²⁹ On the rich embellishment of Casa di Marcus Lucretius (IX 3.5), see Tammisto/Kuivalainen 2008.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Courtesy by Parco Archeologico di Pompei. – Fig. 2: Drawing by Sir William Gell. After Gell 1832 II, 14. – Fig. 3: Photo by T. Warscher DAI-ROM-WAR-00790. – Fig. 4: Photo by Wolfgang Rieger [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. – Fig. 5: Drawing by the author. – Fig. 6: Detail of map, H. Eschbach, revised Müller-Trollius. – Fig. 7: Detail of plan, G. Bechi 1832, Tav. A.B. – Fig. 8: Map base of H. Eschbach, revised Müller-Trollius.

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