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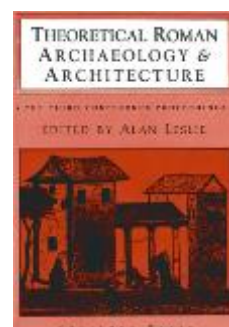
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## **T***heories of circulation in Roman houses*

Simon P. Ellis

*This paper is an attempt* to characterise the key elements of Roman housing as first developed in republican Italy and particularly as spread, or distributed, through the provinces of the empire – the area under their political control from the first century to the fifth century AD. The main instrument of this movement of architecture and culture was the élite of Italy and the provinces and so this paper will tend to concentrate attention on the richest houses in each settlement. Nevertheless in some areas the number of people who adopted “Roman housing” was larger than in others and we will be studying housing of what in modern times would be termed the middle class of tradesmen or landowners.

In another paper in this volume Nevett characterises the housing and society of the ancient Greeks, which together with Italic and Etruscan cultures helped to form the social views and provided the architectural vocabulary of Rome. The house with central courtyard and surrounding porticoes, which later became the preferred house of the Roman aristocracy, developed in the Hellenistic world of the central and eastern Mediterranean. The central courtyard provided a convenient place for

cooking and for collecting water in a large underground cistern. The various aspects of the surrounding rooms enabled them to catch a breeze in summer and give shelter in winter. Greek society tended to restrict the public rôle of women both in public and at home (Nevett below; Walker 1983). To maintain this cultural tradition the Greeks devised a reception room, the *ανδρον*, to which access was limited. The Greeks also invented the art of mosaic which was used to form the floor of the richest Hellenistic houses. Many houses with these characteristics can be found at the sites of Priene, Olynthos, and Delos.

Roman domestic society differed from the Greek in two fundamental respects. Firstly women, particularly the woman in charge of an important family or household, had more of a public rôle (Treggiari 1991). The Roman house therefore did not need a reception room with access restricted to men. Secondly the Romans had institutional slavery. Although the Greeks had slaves, slave-owning never reached the scale it would in the Roman world. The Roman aristocrat had to cope with a large household that included people with a wide range of social positions.

Whether because of earlier Roman traditions or because of local Greek and Campanian influences the houses of Pompeii retained a reception suite near the front entrance to the building. This took the form of the *atrium*, a covered court with central pool and the *tablinium* which opened off it (Dwyer 1991). Pompeian houses also adopted the peristyle of the Greeks, setting it further back in the house beyond the *atrium/tablinium* suite. The additional depth to the house, resulting from the peristyle, allowed the owner to make some distinctions between access arrangements. Entrance to the peristyle could be restricted to the immediate family but usually access to the peristyle and to the main reception room that lay beyond (here termed the *triclinium* for convenience – see Rebuffat 1970) was open to some guests as a mark of privilege.

The *atrium*, with some notable exceptions, is not found in provincial Roman housing. The reason why the room was not adopted in the provinces is a matter of some dispute. It is possible that by the mid-first century AD Italians regarded it as old fashioned, or provincials may have felt it inappropriate. Thébert (1987, 325–326) has argued that there were no *atria* in the Roman houses of North Africa because they followed local architectural traditions. The lack of *atria* in provincial houses reduced the number of reception suites available and thus made it harder to control access to the house.

Provincial Roman houses, where there was a reasonable unencumb-

ered space in which to build, were organised around a peristyle of varying size. Grahame demonstrates in this volume, using the model of Hillier and Hanson, how the peristyle was central to circulation within Pompeian houses. In provincial houses without *atrium* or *tablinium* the peristyle had an even more central rôle in the circulation of visitors.

The centrality of the peristyle meant it was very difficult to restrict members of the household to one particular area in the house. If the household was to have any privacy then there had to be some way to restrict access to rooms in which private activity was taking place. This point applies equally to visitors, the owners' family, and servants. In the case of family and servants, familiarity with the house and the habits of its occupants would soon solve this problem. It was more difficult in the case of visitors.

I shall argue that the decor and architecture of the house was used by the owner to prevent visitors from entering inappropriate rooms. If visitors strayed the atmosphere created by the room would immediately tell them they had taken a wrong turn.

## THEORIES OF CIRCULATION

In the last decade an increasing number of theoretical approaches have been applied to the study of the Roman house. A fundamental part of each theory has been some assessment of the pattern of circulation through the house.

Circulation has mainly been assessed on the basis of the distinction between the public and the private. For this we should read visitors and the owners' household, though this definition in itself is often loosely defined. Analysis has also been undertaken on the distinction between servant and owner, though work in this area is less common than one might suppose.

We shall begin by examining two major theories of recent years: those of Carandini and Wallace-Hadrill.

Carandini (1985) published his theory in his report on the excavation of the villa of Sette Finestre. The starting point is his adoption of the architectural division of the house into a *pars urbana* and a *pars rustica* (Columella *De re rustica* 1.6.1). From this he assumes that the former is the domain of the owner and the latter the domain of the servants. This translates into the architecture by identifying all rooms which had an agricultural or artisanal function as the domain of the servants, and all rooms that were used for receptions – dining rooms, bedrooms, and others with

fine mosaics – as the domain of the owners, family, and friends.

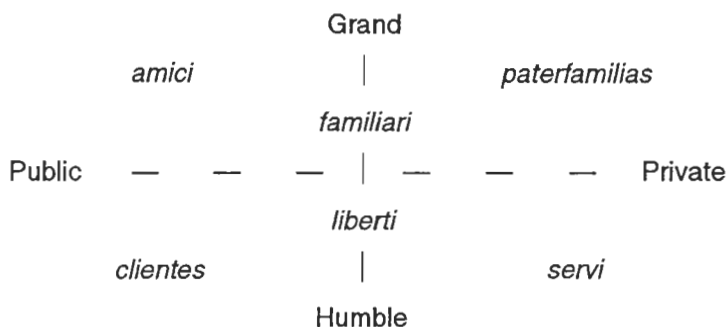
The circulation of the owner through the villa is marked by a blue line and the progress of the servants is marked on the plans by a red line. Occasionally they appear to meet in a room, and here Carandini accepts that there was some interplay between the two classes. Thus servants would enter the dining room to present food, but fundamentally the room was in the domain of the owner. Likewise the owner would of necessity have to visit the presses to see how the vintage was progressing, but fundamentally the press rooms were the domain of the servants who worked there. In some ways the model is attractive. It presents a tangible expression of how intrusive a servant must have felt at a grand dinner party. Clearly there were parts of the Roman house which were very much the home of the owner, and others which were very much the "servants' quarters".

The major problem with the model is the assumptions it makes of the archaeology. We have no reason to assume that every richly decorated room belonged to the owner or that only servants worked in rooms such as the kitchen and the workshops. For example a Greek pedagogue might well have a richly decorated bedroom in the house of an aristocrat, while the gentleman farmer might well have his own private workshop for making a variety of implements or fermenting a favourite brew.

Equally the evidence for assigning a room to a particular class may be lacking. A reserve bedroom might be poorly painted. A servant might live in a room whose decoration was relatively rich, but unfashionable. The Laurentine house of the Younger Pliny contained a suite of rooms which he says were suitable either for servants and freedmen or for receiving guests (*Letter* 2.17.9–10). This suite moreover is close to his personal library, which contained all the books he read most frequently, and which we would expect to be one of the most intimate rooms in the house. It is not important here to question Carandini's particular interpretation of *Sette Finestre*. It is enough to have demonstrated that it is not possible to identify the functions of rooms sufficiently to divide them into the two classes he suggested, and that there is considerable reason to doubt that some rooms could be assigned to one or other social class.

Wallace-Hadrill's theory of circulation is much more subtle than that of Carandini. He immediately points out the wide-ranging nature of the Roman household and clientele. He dismisses the idea of separate public and private parts of the house. Instead he proposes a rather amorphous schema in which particular rooms are more suitable for certain ranks of guests or household. He illustrates this with a diagram (1988, 55):





Though this is an excellent study of social history it is difficult to see how this diagram translates into the archaeological record. The impression given by Wallace-Hadrill is that there was a greater distinction between the circulation patterns of servant and household than there was between the circulation patterns of household and visitor.

In examining the distinction between servants and household he identifies groups of secluded, poorly decorated rooms as servants' quarters in some Pompeian houses (the House of the Vetii and the House of the Lovers – Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 79 and 82). Without disputing these particular interpretations there are reasons to question such a clear distinction. As we have seen, such secluded rooms were used by Pliny for servants or guests. Servants slept in many ill-defined parts of the house, often right outside the rooms of their masters (Veyne 1987, 73; Treggiari 1991, 416).

When discussing the relationship between household and visitors Wallace-Hadrill makes the important point that Roman aristocrats would receive honoured guests in their bedrooms for a Louis XIV style *levée*. This is developed into an argument concerning a broad progression from the more public areas of important paths of circulation, through open reception areas, to more private areas such as the bedroom (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 59 and 85). None of these rooms are exclusively public or private, but they represent a continuum – the horizontal axis of his model. The distinction between the levels of access given to various visitors of different social standing is well drawn out. Unfortunately, it is not clear how these distinctions between visitors would be worked out on the ground. As a result Wallace-Hadrill's theory is one about the function of houses in general within Roman society rather than a theory about circulation and access between various rooms.

## THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF HILLIER AND HANSON

Hillier and Hanson (1984) use a model of geometrical structure to analyse the plans of both houses and settlements. Grahame has applied their approach to Pompeian houses elsewhere in this volume. Because Hillier and Hanson's theory assesses the articulation of spaces within the house, and their links with each other, it is in many ways the only theory that we have considered that can genuinely be called a theory of circulation.

Hillier and Hanson elaborate their theory along two principal dimensions, which they describe as "relative asymmetry" (1984, 108–109, 151–152) and "relative ringiness" (1984, 102, 154). Relative asymmetry relates the depth of a room from the street to the number of rooms in the house. In other words relative asymmetry takes the size of the house into account when assessing the "depth" of a room. If for example the position of the main reception room is assessed, a smaller figure indicates a house whose reception room lies in a relatively shallow setting in proportion to the size of the house, while a larger figure indicates a reception room that is set back further in the building and is preceded by a more elaborate set of suites.

Relative ringiness assesses the extent to which circulation within a house is constrained by limiting access to certain rooms. It is calculated by counting the number of ways of passing through a room – rings – and comparing this with the maximum possible number of rings for the number of rooms in a house. The results for Roman houses suggest that overall circulation literally revolved around the central peristyle, while circulation between other rooms was rather limited. It is interesting to note that town houses have a greater relative asymmetry and are more "ringy" than villas. I presume this is because the courts of villas are often large yards rather than "rings", and because the larger space available for villa building allows rooms to be strung out along the porticoes rather than communicating directly with one another.

The Hillier and Hanson formula can only be used where the house plan is complete and the functions of the main rooms are known. It is easier to use in places such as Pompeii where the preservation of wall paintings and other furnishings helps in the identification of room functions. The theory is much harder to apply on provincial houses. When representing movement, or links between rooms, no account is taken for a potential locked door, or the curtains and partitions that commonly divided Roman reception rooms (see discussion of the letters of Pliny and Sidonius below, and Thébert 1987, 388–389). Because of its somewhat

mechanistic nature the Hillier and Hanson model provides a broad brush for comparing very different types of house, but the results then need to be overlaid with a considerable degree of social interpretation.

Conventional studies of Roman houses concentrate on activities that took place in the major rooms, especially the *cubiculum*, and the *oecus*, or *triclinium*. Most of the time they run up against the impossibility of identifying the functions of all the rooms in a Roman house. Many rooms may have had more than one function. Pliny mentions one room in his Laurentine house that could be used as either a bedroom or a dining room "*vel cubiculum grande vel modica cenatio*" (Pliny Letter 2.17.10). This is a clear statement of the difficulty of identifying room functions on archaeological sites.

Many of our interpretations of room function, as with other ideas of Roman domestic architecture, originate from Pompeii. I have often had a nightmare in which I see the citizens of Pompeii on the night of the eruption. They are saying "It's such a lovely red sky! Let's have dinner in the bedroom tonight!" No one would suggest this as a serious interpretation, but it serves to illustrate the danger of accepting too wholeheartedly the permanence of Roman furnishings. If at all possible we must try to move away from explanations of Roman houses that depend on dubious identifications of room function towards theories that assess patterns of circulation in different parts of the house, and which depend on the more permanent aspects of the architecture and decor.

Carandini's theory of circulation within Roman houses suffers from too great a degree of segregation between areas devoted to servants and areas devoted to the owner's family. Wallace-Hadrill's theory does not provide enough clues on the precise limits of circulation of the social categories that he identifies. Hillier and Hanson's theory avoids all the difficulties of identifying room function by abstracting the house to the level where it becomes a series of chain links with few social meanings. A more pragmatic approach to studying the monuments and drawing value from all these ideas is necessary.

### *Architecture, decor, and the reception of visitors*

The decor and architecture of the house was used by the owner to prevent the visitor from entering inappropriate rooms. If the visitor strayed the atmosphere created by the room would immediately tell him or her that a wrong turn had been taken.

The lowliest visitor was the *cliens*. He was often of significantly lower social status than his patron. Outside high society in Rome itself he was



often impoverished. The architecture and decor used to receive him was therefore rich. It usually incorporated stucco decorations in a lofty reception room. The visitor of similar status, or higher status, to the owner received better treatment. The aim was to impress with superiority in the case of the former, or devotion in the case of the latter. Such a visitor was normally treated to dinner in the main reception room. The atmosphere here spoke of the achievements of the host. These could be expressed through liberality in the banquet (Ellis 1991; Slater 1991), by honorific inscriptions on the walls or the floor (e.g. Apamea; Balty 1969), in the rich style of the architecture, or by artefacts reflecting the host's learning, such as a painting of a rare myth.

This idea was considered by Wallace-Hadrill (1988), but it has been more fully developed by a collection of articles edited by Gazda (1991). In particular Bettina Bergman (1991, 49–70) studies Statius's *Silvae* 2.2, which describes a visit to a first-century BC Neapolitan villa. The reader is taken on a walk through the villa during which attention is drawn to various landscapes that are seen from the windows and a variety of painted landscapes on the walls of the room. As the visitor moves through the building the paintings in the rooms help to establish their atmosphere with views of peaceful harbours (Bergman 1991, 65) or grand porticoes. The Roman house was clearly designed so that on walking through it the eye would be led to an impressive view or painting. These provided clues to the observer as to what, or who, was appropriate in any particular room.

An important example of how painting, architecture, and reality combined to provoke an impression on the visitor is the use of the view from the main reception room. Pliny (*Letter* 2.17.5) especially prided himself on his dining room from which he could look out on one of three seas by rearranging the partitions. In every Roman house considerable attention was devoted to the view from the main reception room. Conventionally the reception room had a triple entrance with the largest central door framing the view. The use of water was important. A villa might overlook the sea or a river. If the reception room faced a peristyle, there would usually be a fountain in the court (see both South Shields and Neapolis discussed below). Subtle adjustments would sometimes be made to the architecture to ensure that these conditions were met (Thébert 1987, 350–351).

### *A literary tour around Roman villas*

The view from the *triclinium* is one element that is stressed by ancient authors. Literary descriptions of villas also provide a good idea of the ele-

ments of the house that an owner singled out to impress visitors, and to some extent the patterns of circulation within houses.

Early theories of Roman housing made much of Pliny's *Letters* 2.17 and 5.6 in which he describes his houses in great detail. They have been used unsuccessfully to reconstruct the physical layout of the buildings. But looking at them from the point of view of circulation allows us to see them and other texts in a new light. The following discussion will also include a poem by Statius on the Sorrentan villa of Pollius Felix (*Silvae* 2.2). In the early fifth century AD Sidonius Apollinaris wrote a poem about the villa of Pontius Leontius (*Carmen* 22) and a letter describing his own house (*Letter* 2.2). To some extent Sidonius may be copying the earlier authors, but there are sufficient details about the houses he describes to show that they represent contemporary buildings rather than literary allusions. Sidonius's work will also be considered.

Two points indicate that these literary works are concerned with circulation. The purpose of all four works is to emphasise the marvellous nature of the houses concerned, so the authors pick out the rooms that would most impress visitors. Secondly the four works are organised as a visitor's itinerary. An imaginary visitor is lead up the driveway through the front door, into the house, culminating in the most intimate rooms that a guest is allowed to see.

Many of the points picked out by the three ancient authors are ones that have already been mentioned above. Throughout the works the nature of the decor is mentioned, especially rich marbles. As the guests arrive they are greeted by magnificent scenery and by the roof of the villa. In particular the attention of the guest is first drawn to the private bath house. The baths are singled out because of their distinctive roofs outside the villa, and again because of their magnificent architecture once the guests have entered them. Pliny leaves the description of the baths until late in his narrative. But even here the emphasis is enough to demonstrate that the baths were public rooms.

After leaving the baths the visitors pass a number of utilitarian rooms, the "*atrium etiam ex more veterum*" of Pliny's Tuscan house (*Letter* 5.6.16), storeroom "*cella penaria*" (Sidonius *Letter* 2.2.9), and *horrea* (Sidonius *Carmen* 22.169). In both Pliny's Laurentine villa (*Letter* 2.17.4) and the villa of Pontius Leontius (Sidonius *Carmen* 22.150–155) these rooms are reached across a semi-circular peristyle. At this level of penetration into the building the first reception rooms are encountered. In Pliny's villas (*Letters* 2.17.5, 5.6.19) it is the main *triclinium*, while in Sidonius's villa it is the *triclinium matronalis* (*Letter* 2.2.9). These rooms contain movable

partitions "*valvis*", which can be adjusted to give views across the surrounding area. The views of the countryside from outside the building are now matched by vistas opening up through windows.

From this reception area the visitors proceed to the more intimate rooms. It is in this section that Pliny mentions the bedrooms, library, and servants'/guests' quarters of his Laurentine villa (*Letter* 2.17.7–10). In his Tuscan villa there is the *triclinium* where he receives his personal friends "*cotidiana amicorumque cenatio*" (*Letter* 5.6.21) presumably for his private recitations. Sidonius's poem is more oblique at this point, talking about the winter quarters of the owner "*dominis hiberna domus*", warm hearths, and rich decor (*Carmen* 22.187–193).

Finally the culmination of the visit is always the most splendid reception room in the house. In Pliny's Laurentine villa it is his *heliocaminus*, a sun room with folding partitions disclosing views over the sea or the woods (*Letter* 2.17.20–21). Adjacent are two bedrooms from which Pliny explicitly states that the noise of his household cannot be heard (*Letter* 2.17.22–25). In Pliny's Tuscan villa there is an open dining area and *cubiculum*. They are built in marble "*marmore splendet*" (*Letter* 5.6.38), with a *stibadium* couch and again folding partitions with views over the garden. In Sidonius's villa there is his *cenatiunculam* with dining couch and shining (i.e. marble) dinner table "*stibadium et nitens abacus*" (*Letters* 2.2.11). From here you look across the adjacent lake with your drink in your hand. At the top "*alta volubilibus*" of the villa of Pontius Leontius it is a "*cenatio*" whose folding partitions disclose mountainside views (Sidonius *Carmen* 22. 207–216). Similarly at the top of the villa of Pollius Felix is the most richly decorated room in the house with a view overlooking Naples (Stattius *Silvae* 2.2.83–97).

Though I have not discussed every room in each villa the general pattern is clear. The owners emphasise the setting of the house in its landscape and the views from its rooms. At each house there is an entrance with more functional reception rooms – the "old-fashioned" *atrium* of Pliny and the women's *triclinium* of Sidonius. This area also includes the first porticoes. The visitor then passes to more intimate rooms. The culmination of the visit is a special intimate reception room with views over the whole area. This room has an atmosphere of intimacy and tranquility. The views over the domain, which the visitors and owners share, are the hosts' way of saying to the guests – all this is mine.

It is noteworthy that Pliny stresses that he built the marble garden suite of the Laurentine villa (*Letter* 2.17.20). Sidonius also mentions a founda-

tion stone at the entrance of the villa of Pontius Leontius which names the owner (*Carmen* 22.142–144). Such pride often led the owners of villas to place inscriptions at the entrance to their main reception rooms (Balty 1969; Ellis 1991).

### THEORY INTO PRACTICE: EXAMPLES OF ROMAN HOUSE CIRCULATION

We have now examined most of the theoretical approaches to circulation in Roman housing, and some of the key literary sources. I think that the above critique has demonstrated that the most appropriate theory to describe circulation patterns in Roman houses will be one that combines the sensitivity to social distinction of Wallace-Hadrill with the more structured approach of Hillier and Hanson. I would suggest that this may be achieved by relating the circulation patterns within the house to the decor of the rooms.

The Roman house, provincial or Italian, was not generally the kind of house that relied on long dark corridors for circulation between rooms. There are only two exceptions. One was the *cenaculum*, the metropolitan apartment known from Ostia and Rome, where constraints on space led to high rise blocks that sometimes had no central court (Frier 1980). Village housing in the eastern provinces from Syria to Egypt, where houses were often two to three storeys high, had no central court and were served (as in the *cenaculum*) by a dark stairwell (Ellis 1992).

Most Roman house designs made strenuous efforts to overcome restrictions of space and provide a central court. In the case of rural housing where there is no central courtyard the rooms often front a single portico. Circulation directly between one room and another was rare. Even though the Roman house made extensive use of porticoes and courtyards it would have been possible for the rooms to have secondary doors linking adjacent rooms together. However, it is common to find a long line of rooms all opening off a portico, but with no doors between each other. These two observations have important consequences for patterns of circulation within the house. Despite the fact that the Roman house was turned in on itself, facing its central court rather than the street, it was an open house. As has been mentioned the Romans liked a view, either through a portico over the countryside or across a court. In either case people in the portico, or outside it, could be seen, be they family, servants, or visitors. Each of these groups could not be completely isolated from the other. Servants and visitors would be conspicuous as they moved around the house.



The lack of direct connection between rooms also encouraged openness. People could not pass from one room to another without passing through the area of general circulation, usually the portico. There was thus a strong chance that in crossing the portico between rooms one would meet another member of the household, or a visitor. We have already mentioned the passage of Pliny's letters in which he says rooms near his favourite library were suitable for servants or guests. This seems to indicate that the adjacent porticoes could be peopled by family, guests, or servants.

Variations upon this normal pattern of circulation within Roman houses indicate that measures were sometimes taken to moderate this intermingling of people within a house.

There are a number of houses in which there are rear entrances or even corridors behind the *triclinium* or *oecus*. It is most likely that this was a device to allow servants to bring food into the room, or to prepare the table, without being seen. Four houses at Volubilis have corridors which enter the *triclinium* from the rear (The "Palace of Gordion", the House of the Cistern, the House of the Golden Coin, and the House of the Sundial – Rebuffat 1969, 667–668). The House of the Hunt at Hippo (Rebuffat 1969, 674) has a long corridor behind the *triclinium*. It serves several other rooms and has apses at each end. This corridor thus seems rather more than a simple service access. At his Tuscan villa Pliny mentions (*Letter* 5.6.30) a staircase which was used for a secret entrance during dinners, presumably by servants: "*scalae convivio utilia secretiore ambitu suggerunt*".

At this juncture it may be well to examine some of the physical remains of Roman housing. The examples will bring out many of the lines of enquiry suggested above. They will demonstrate how the owner used the decor of the main reception suite to control his social encounters. They will also show how the articulation of the rooms and their decor indicated to a visitor the pattern of circulation within the house. I wish to take two town houses as examples, one from third-century North Africa (House of the Nymphs, Nabeul), and one from fourth-century Asia Minor (House above the theatre, Ephesus).

The third century was probably the main *floruit* of Roman Africa, and the House of the Nymphs (fig. 1) at Neapolis (modern Nabeul in Tunisia) represents a typical middle-range house of that period (Darmon 1980). At first sight the peristyle seems quite close to the street, but in fact on Hillier and Hanson's model it lies deep within the house five rooms away from the street. From the front porch (level 1) the visitor turns left into an anteroom (2) and then right into a first reception room (3). The latter



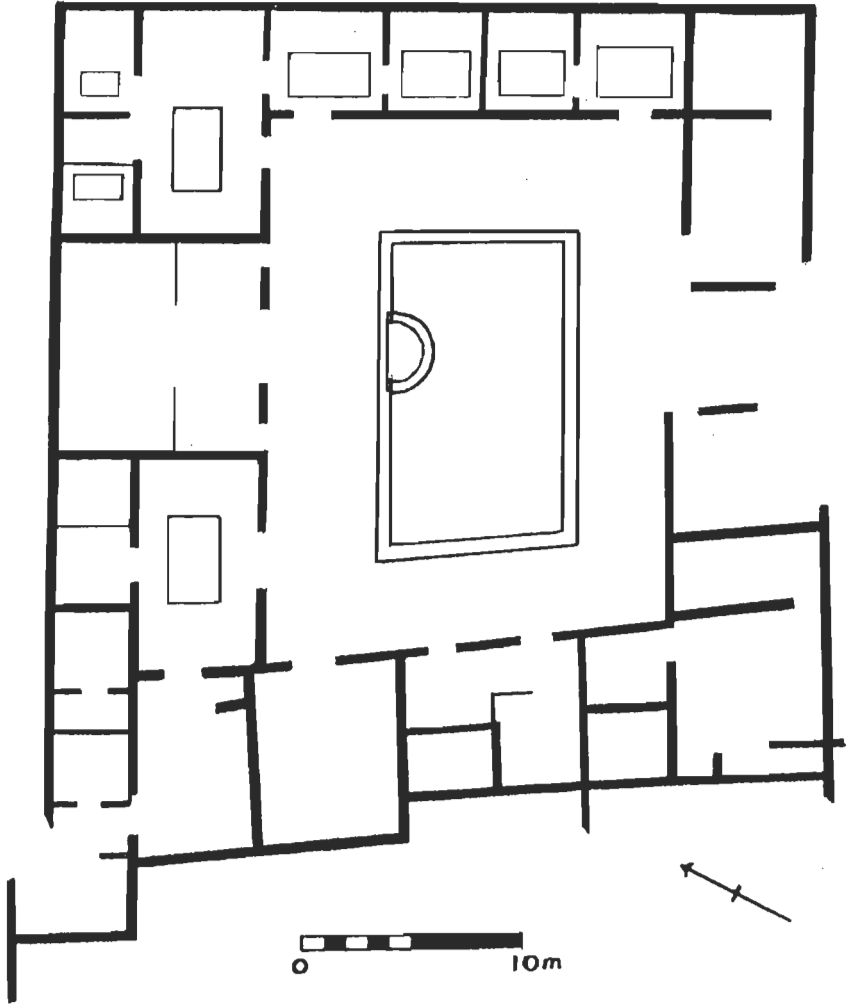


Figure 1: House of the Nymphs, Nabeul, Tunisia.

opens onto an *atrium* (4) on the left, after which one enters the main peristyle (5). The ambience of the first reception room was developed by its view on to the *atrium* and two pilasters at the middle of the room. The view through the *atrium* provided glimpses of the peristyle, suggesting the grandeur of the house. The pilasters added to the architectural standing of the room and formed a frame to separate one half of the room

from the other. They may have been used to separate the clients from the patron during the morning greeting ceremony, the *salutatio*.

But once the peristyle was entered, the articulation of the surrounding rooms left little distinction between servants, owners, and guests. Four *cubicula* can be identified on the east side of the peristyle. They all have the characteristic plain mosaic panel that was the setting for the couch. The presence of the panel presumably indicates that the rooms were in relatively permanent use for this function. Anyone sleeping in these rooms would not have much privacy from the rest of the household since to pass to any other location they would have to go through the peristyle. It may be presumed that the owner himself slept in a separate apartment in the north corner of the house. Here two similar *cubicula* either side of a vestibule are isolated from the main house by an *atrium* symmetrical to that at the main entrance.

An alternative design can be seen at Acholla in the House of Neptune (Rebuffat 1974, 454). Here three *cubicula*, identified on the basis of the mosaic panels, lay off the south-western corner of the peristyle and were served by a 4m-long corridor. It is most probable that *cubicula* that were segregated in this way were used by the immediate family of the owner.

It is possible that the two *atria* of the House of the Nymphs, which lay to either side of the main *triclinium* (identified by the U-shaped plain mosaic panel for three couches), had symmetrical functions as well as a symmetrical location. The *atrium* near the front entrance had a central rôle in the reception of poorer clients. The other *atrium*, next to the owners' bedroom, could then have played a part in the reception of visitors at their morning *levée*.

The peristyle itself appears to be unremarkable, but in fact it is the most subtly designed of all the rooms of the house (Darmon 1980, 74–75). The overall plan of the house was determined by its urban setting, and presumably by the remains of earlier structures on the site. The architect discovered that he could not design the canonical perfect rectangular peristyle. The court instead had to be trapezoidal. However, by creating a subtle curve in the southern portico he was able to make the south-eastern and south-western corners of the court into right angles. This gave the occupants the illusion of a rectangular area. The architect was abetted by the mosaicist who subtly varied the proportion and lines of the mosaic, bending them towards the ideal of a rectangular form.

Ideally, the main reception room should be in the middle of one side of the peristyle facing the centre of the opposite portico. The trapezoidal peristyle made this impossible. However, the curve of the south portico

and the slight convergence of the southern ends of porticoes to the east and west created the illusion of the centrality of the *triclinium* when seen from inside the room. Moreover, the doors of the rooms on each side of the *triclinium* almost fall on the lines of the eastern and western porticoes, again suggesting its centrality. It would only be obvious that the *triclinium* was not at the centre of the northern portico if the visitor was viewing the room from the southern portico. However, the principal entrance to the house was in the north-west, and visitors would not often have reason to view the room from the south.

The design of the peristyle of the House of the Nymphs illustrates how important this part of the house was for circulation. The architect and mosaicist went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that its design matched the accepted standard. The arrangement they achieved also ensured that an appropriately symmetric view would be obtained from the *triclinium*.

The house above the theatre at Ephesus (fig. 2) is a much grander building than the house at Nabeul. It represents the town house of a fourth-century nobleman of imperial rank (Ellis 1983, 1988). At this time centralisation of the empire and increased taxes had devalued the political rôle of the provincial aristocracy. When a provincial needed to obtain the help of the administration he tended to go to a local rich patron whose position as a senator of Rome or Constantinople would give him considerable influence. This was a private visit to the patron's home. Because of their increasing political rôle such patrons required extensive reception facilities for clients. In material terms this resulted in a number of houses that have an apsidal audience chamber close to the main entrance (Ellis 1988, 1991). The use of an apsidal room as an audience chamber is of course well attested in Roman times. The best-preserved example is the Constantinian basilica in Trier.

The function of the domestic room can be demonstrated from the fact that it is close to the street, and preceded by a vestibule. The vestibule of the Palace of the Dux at Apollonia was lined by benches on which clients awaiting admittance might rest (Ellis 1983). The function of the decor of the audience chamber is not so much to impress guests as to overawe the lowly client. A location near the street ensured that the more humble client did not disturb the privacy of the main house. Whereas in apsidal *triclinia* the entrance is from the opposite end of the room to the apse, in the audience chamber there is a second door near the apse from which the *dominus* could make a grand entrance.

In the house at Ephesus the audience chamber was really on a grand scale and was the public front to a large town house. A secluded private

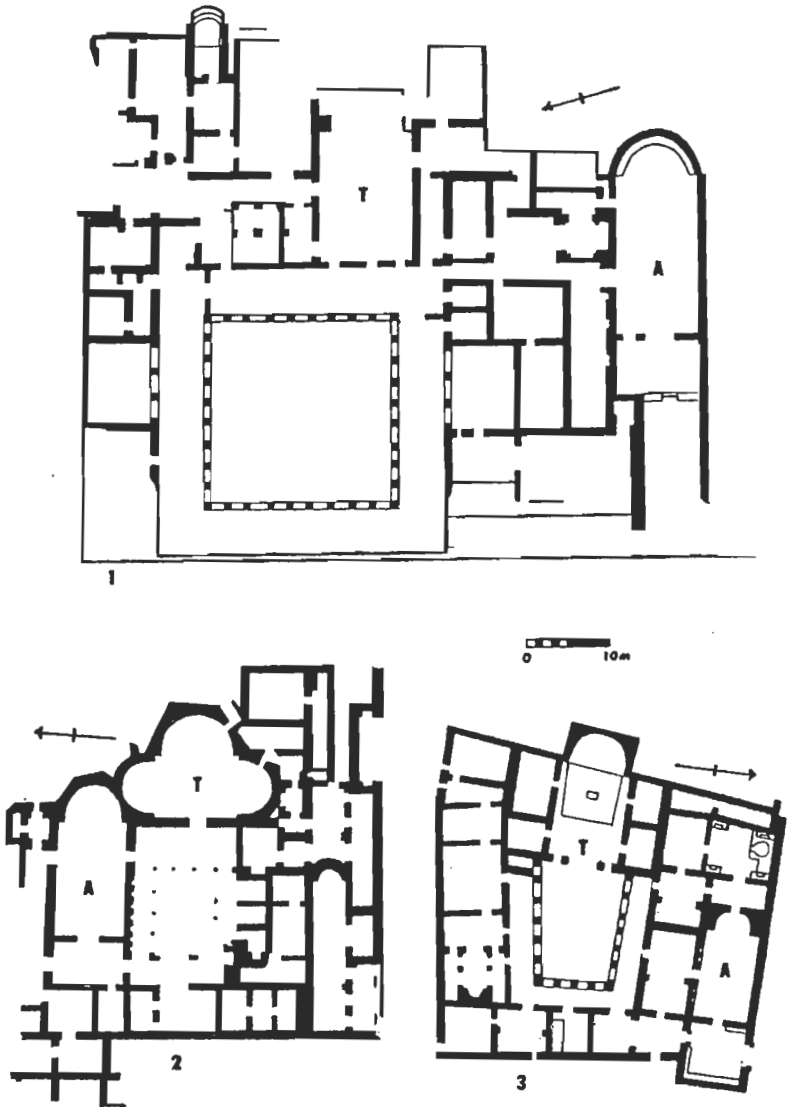


Figure 2: Houses with audience chambers: (1) the villa above the theatre, Ephesus; (2) the "Governor's Palace", Aphrodisias; (3) the "Palace of the Dux", Apollonia. A = audience hall, T = triclinium.

apartment with its own small peristyle is identifiable in the north-eastern corner of the building, as at Nabeul. This apartment lay at a minimum of eleven rooms away from the street, in Hillier and Hanson's terms this makes the house one of the "deepest" Roman houses known.

Discussion of the houses at Neapolis and Ephesus has demonstrated the mechanisms used to control access and create an atmosphere with architecture and decor. Sometimes the overall architecture such as the "basilican" form could be used, at other times the dimensions of the room might be altered to emphasise a particular axis of the house. The use of columns to frame the end of a room and the view from the reception room door has been illustrated, and the use of appropriate floor mosaics has been discussed. Circulation within the Roman house was of course also controlled by locked doors and servants. However, as archaeologists looking at the material evidence, we should direct our attention to three particular areas: the overall form of a room, the way in which the decor expresses this form, and the uses of decorative themes that reflect liberality and education.

### DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE AND DECOR IN ROMAN BRITAIN

The above arguments prove that there was a symbolic link between the architecture of Roman houses, the circulation patterns within them, the decor of the rooms, and Roman customs for the reception of guests. This structure has been shown in many provinces and at many periods.

In the context of the debate about Romanisation in Britain the existence of the structure I have outlined would prove that the British élite

were able to use complex symbolic structure employed by the provincial élites elsewhere in the Roman world;

had a detailed knowledge of Roman cultural symbols and behaviour; and

willingly adopted social practices of high Roman society (they could not have been compelled to adopt such a complex symbolic model, and it is unlikely that they would have based their housing on such a complex model if they did not understand it).

Scott (1997) has already laid the ground for this interpretation in her work. She has demonstrated the use of complex architecture and decor in the reception rooms of fourth-century villas in south-west Britain. I would only like to develop her argument by examining the case for two more houses.



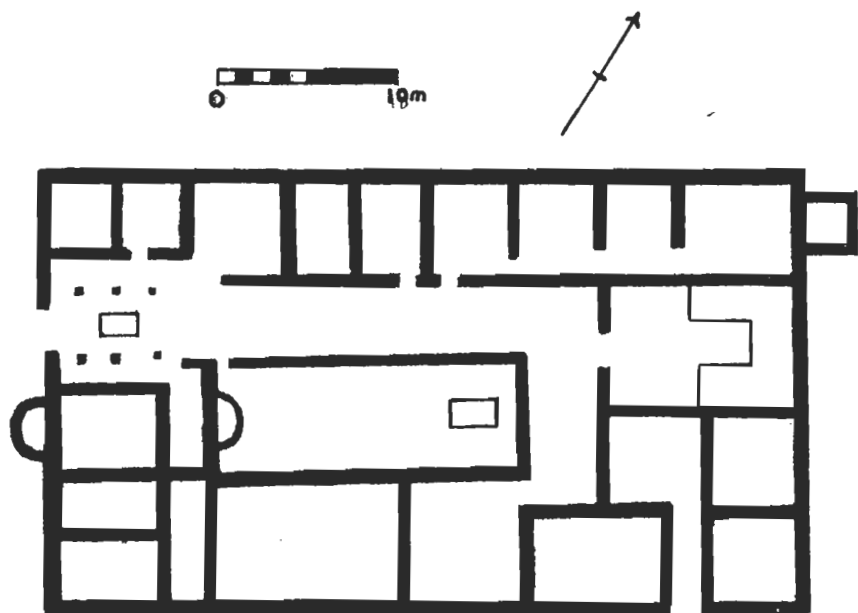


Figure 3: Praetorium, South Shields.

The first house (fig. 3) lies outside the more "Romanised" southern area of Britain. It is the recently excavated *praetorium* at South Shields (Frere 1992, 267–269). Here the design was constrained by the surrounding buildings (as indeed at Neapolis). The visitor entered a vestibule with six columns or posts. This can be seen as a classical *atrium* or as a derivative of Romano-British architecture. It may indeed have echoed both, making visitors from the Mediterranean, and locals, feel at home. Whatever its architectural derivation it clearly served as a reception area.

Another typical reception room – the "private" baths – was neatly tucked into the adjoining corner of the house to the right. For the Romans bathing had always been a social institution, for conducting business and meeting friends. Thébert (1987, 380–381) has suggested that the development of private baths in late Roman urban housing may reflect the desire of the increasingly autocratic aristocrat to avoid showing himself naked to his more lowly clients. The preferred setting for the lesser client was the audience chamber, such as that at the Ephesus house. In this context the South Shields baths may have been used with fellow officers or VIP civilians. Two rooms to the left of the vestibule could have been a porter's

lodge. From the vestibule one entered a portico leading to the main *triclinium* at the far end of the house, but there was no portico along the south-east range of the house, and thus no peristyle. Constraints of space had prevented this. Nevertheless, in the open centre of the court onto which the portico fronted there were a large rectangular tank and a semi-circular fountain. Both these elements are typical ornaments of a classical peristyle.

At South Shields the absence of a true peristyle was countered by decorative elements suggestive of one. As at Neapolis, the view from the reception room was important in creating this impression. The semi-circular fountain was placed so as to be seen through the columns in front of the main *triclinium*. The main portico in the house was that entered on leaving the main vestibule. It may be no coincidence that figured wall plaster was found in the portico, where it would have formed a rich decor to impress guests. I would also suggest that the blank wall on the south-east side of the court would have been painted with a *trompe l'oeil* colonnade. Between the columns would have been painted garden or countryside scenes. This design would fit the ambience of the court, it would conform to what we know of classical wall painting, and it would represent the traditional "rural" view from the reception room.

The *praetorium* of an officer on the north-west frontier may not seem the appropriate place for such Mediterranean allusions, but by any interpretation it is an unusual house. Whether it had the desired effect on visitors or not I would consider it is another example of the way in which the architecture and decor of Roman houses was used to create ambience and to indicate where a visitor was permitted and where he was out of place. To pass from the vestibule to the portico at South Shields was to pass away from the *mores* of the frontier to the *mores* of the Mediterranean. A visitor in the vestibule might expect to be treated in a strict military manner. A visitor who entered the "peristyle" had been warned to act in a more élitist cultural vein.

The second house that I wish to examine is the fourth-century Roman villa at Keynsham (fig. 4) (Bulleid and Horne 1926). The house was not well preserved when it was excavated. An extremely large central courtyard was discovered, together with some fourteen rooms in the north-west of the site. Other than this there was only a small complex of three rooms preserved in the south-west corner of the site.

The main room in this south-west complex was a hexagonal room (W) with three rectangular niches, and two semi-circular niches near to the entrance from the adjacent west portico of the courtyard. At the opposite

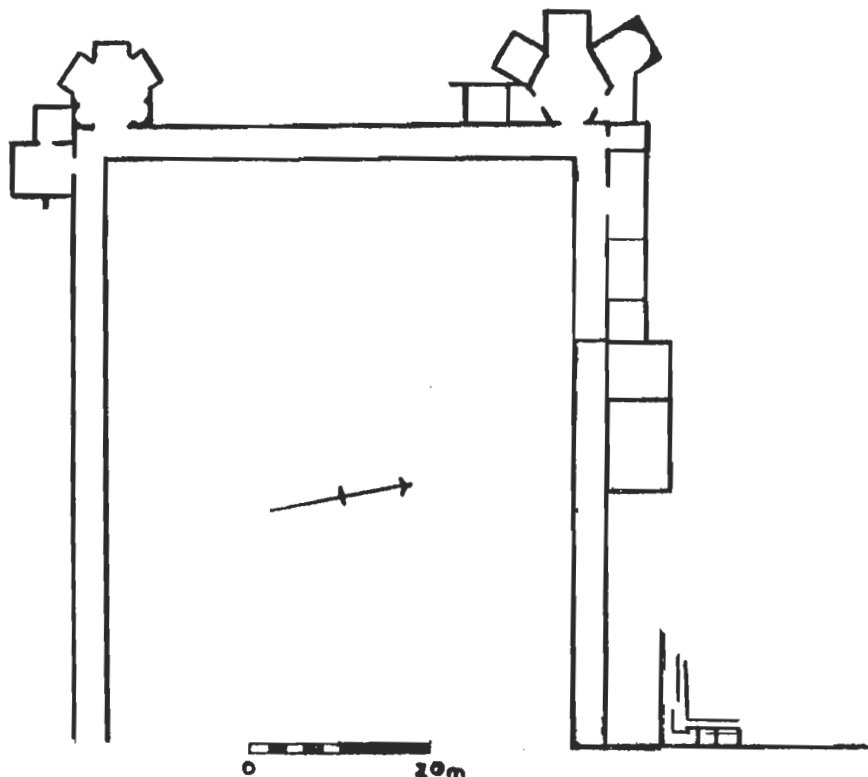


Figure 4: House at Keynsham.

end of the west portico was a baths complex that also centred around a hexagonal room (J). The architecture of the baths was thus quite elaborate by British standards and one can imagine that it was one of the talking points of an aristocratic owner.

The southern hexagonal room is a formal dining room. It was common to place a very elaborate apsed dining room off one corner of the peristyle in late Roman houses. Examples (fig. 5) can be found in the Mediterranean area at Ravenna in Italy, Mediana in Serbia, and Djemila in Algeria (Ellis 1991). Another example from Roman Britain is afforded by Littlecote, consisting of a triapsidal room set off the corner of the peristyle, in the normal Mediterranean manner. Semi-circular dining couches (the *stibadium* of Sidonius cited above) were placed in each apse. Literary accounts of such halls, and dinners served in them, exist from Rome and

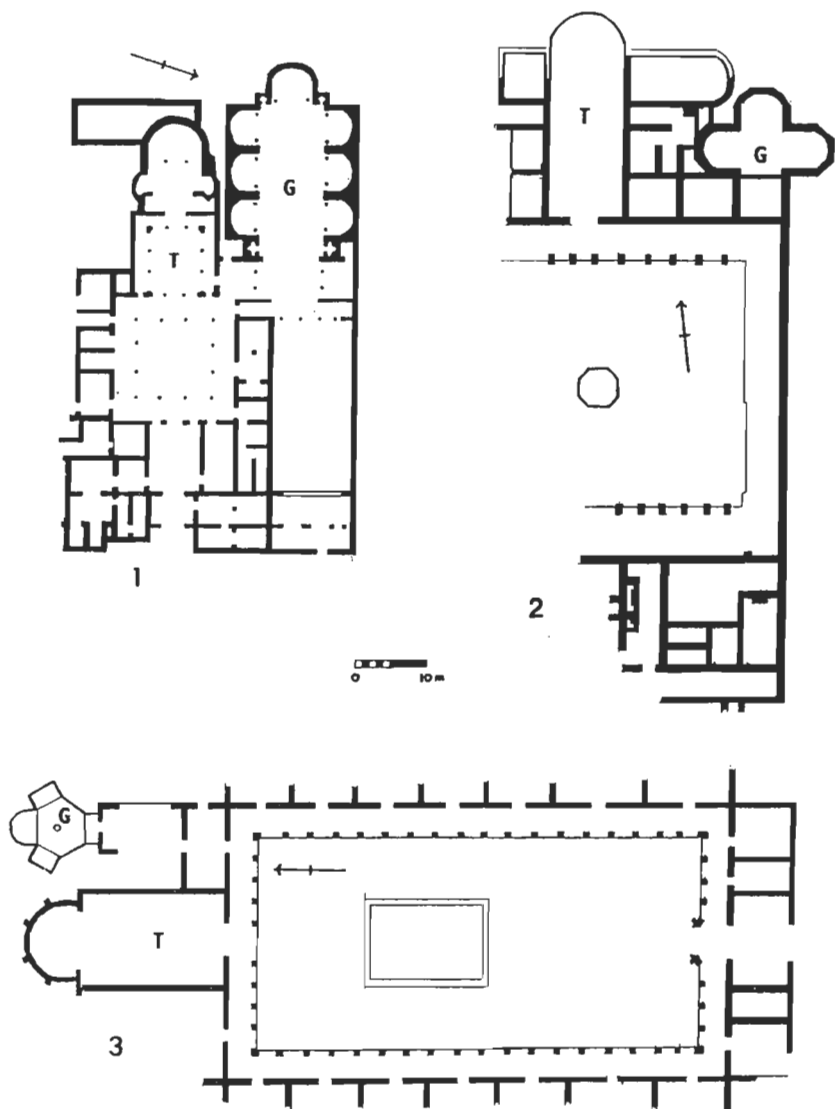


Figure 5: Houses with multi-apsed grand dining halls: (1) House of Bacchus, Djemila; (2) the "Palace of Theodoric", Ravenna; (3) villa at Mediana, near Niš. G = grand dining hall, T = triclinium.

Constantinople. The Keynsham example is closest to that from Mediana (Drca et al. 1979), which has a similar hexagonal central room and three apses. The two small niches at the entrance to the Keynsham room are also found at Djemila and Constantinople (Krautheimer 1966). They probably held statues.

In the context of the present discussion the important point is the architectural parallelism of two hexagonal suites of major public rooms at each end of the main portico of the villa. The whole west wing of the villa was available for clients and friends sometimes passing no doubt direct from the baths to the dining suite. In between the two suites one would not be surprised to find a large reception hall, like that at Woodchester, which could be used for larger receptions.

The sophistication of the dining suite is matched by that of its mosaic. It was damaged but contained panels showing Europa and the bull and a scene considered to be from the story of Marsyas (Stupperich 1980, 293–296). Whatever interpretation is adopted it is clear that the mosaic depicts scenes that none but the most educated would appreciate. The architecture and the decor both seem to indicate that the owner of the Keynsham villa had a large number of very important friends. He was thus happy to devote a large proportion of his house to major public entertainment rooms.

The houses discussed by Scott (1997) and the discussion of Keynsham indicate a considerable degree of interest in Mediterranean fashion shown by the aristocracy of Roman Britain. The house at South Shields indicates that the army was one channel for purveying the latest Mediterranean domestic style and shows that a high-ranking officer was determined to keep up appearances even on the northern limit of the Roman world.

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