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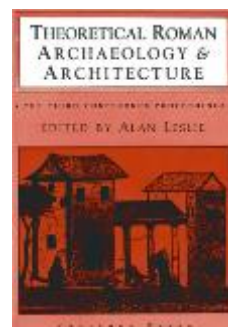
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G*reek households
under Roman hegemony:
the archaeological evidence*

Lisa Nevett

The region covered by this paper is the province of Achaia, which came under Roman political control during the second century BC. In comparison with provinces such as Britain, this is a part of the empire which is well served by written sources (literary texts, legal documents, and inscriptions), and was the home of a long-established urban culture, dating back beyond the classical period (fifth to fourth centuries) for which our literary evidence is particularly rich. These written sources, together with the surviving monumental public architecture and works of art, reveal a sophisticated culture based on largely autonomous city states. During the period prior to the Roman take-over, these states underwent political changes, in the course of which democratic ideals of equality between individual citizens, seen at Athens, were gradually abandoned in favour of a more overtly hierarchical political and social structure.

The culture of classical Greece appears to have been an object of

admiration for her Roman conquerors, who emulated Greek artistic achievements and shipped home classical sculptures. Rather less is known of the effects of the Roman conquest on Greece itself. Achaia has often been seen as run down and depopulated (Alcock 1993, 2), and indeed evidence from recent archaeological surveys in a number of regions does indicate shifts in settlement which must have corresponded with social and economic changes (*ibid.*, 48–49). Nevertheless, because of the inadequacy of available literary sources, the effect of Roman hegemony on individual households, and on domestic social relations in particular, is still obscure. In this paper the material evidence of domestic social relations, namely the remains of the houses themselves, are examined in order to shed some light on this question.

Early discussions of ancient housing sometimes fitted the dwellings of both Greece and Rome into a continuous evolutionary scheme, using as a guide the descriptions of Homer and Vitruvius, together with excavated remains from late-Bronze-Age Greek palace sites and from the houses of Pompeii and Herculaneum (Gardner 1882, 281; Gardner and Jevons 1898, 31–48; Rider 1916, *passim*; Fyffe 1936, 137–141). As seems to have been the case with the arts, it has been suggested that in its architecture the Roman house (epitomised by the exceptionally well-preserved examples excavated in Campania) was influenced by that of its Greek counterpart (Plommer 1956, 253). Conversely, the use of Latin terms such as *triclinium* and *impluvium* in descriptions of Roman houses excavated in Greece (for example, Papapostolou 1979, 144; Papakosta 1980, 191) implies some similarity with Roman houses in other areas of the empire. With a few notable exceptions (Hoepfner and Schwandner 1986; Wallace-Hadrill 1988) previous discussions of Greek and Roman houses have tended to concentrate on architecture and decoration. The present paper adopts a broader perspective which, as far as possible, takes account of the manner in which domestic space was used as well as its construction. As demonstrated in a range of other disciplines, the organisation of the household can be viewed as a response to the practical and cultural requirements of everyday life,¹ and the archaeological remains of households can therefore provide a powerful tool for the investigation of domestic social organisation. An examination of the changes taking place in the household from the classical through to the early Roman period should therefore offer an indication of the extent to which household organisation was changing, and the nature of any changes.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Before domestic social relations can be investigated, it is necessary to make some observations about the archaeological assemblages which must form the basic evidence for discussion of the Roman household, since the nature of this evidence has a profound effect on the kinds of questions which can be asked and on the way in which they must be framed.

The most serious difficulty currently to be faced in investigating Roman houses in Greece is a paucity of excavated examples (McKay 1975, 211). Furthermore, because the locations of modern cities often coincide with those of their ancient predecessors, many of the examples which have been excavated were uncovered during rescue projects. The most obvious problem which this causes is that the structures under excavation often disappear beneath the foundations of a neighbouring apartment building or office block, so that house plans are often incomplete. Furthermore, the remains which can be studied are often part of a complex matrix of constructions, resulting from two thousand years or more of occupation. This means that walls have frequently been re-used and damaged or obliterated, and it is sometimes difficult to locate the finds associated with an individual level which might be of help for dating purposes and in establishing the way in which particular structures were used. These problems mean that much of the available evidence consists either of partially excavated structures or of individual architectural elements which are often divorced from any coherent context.

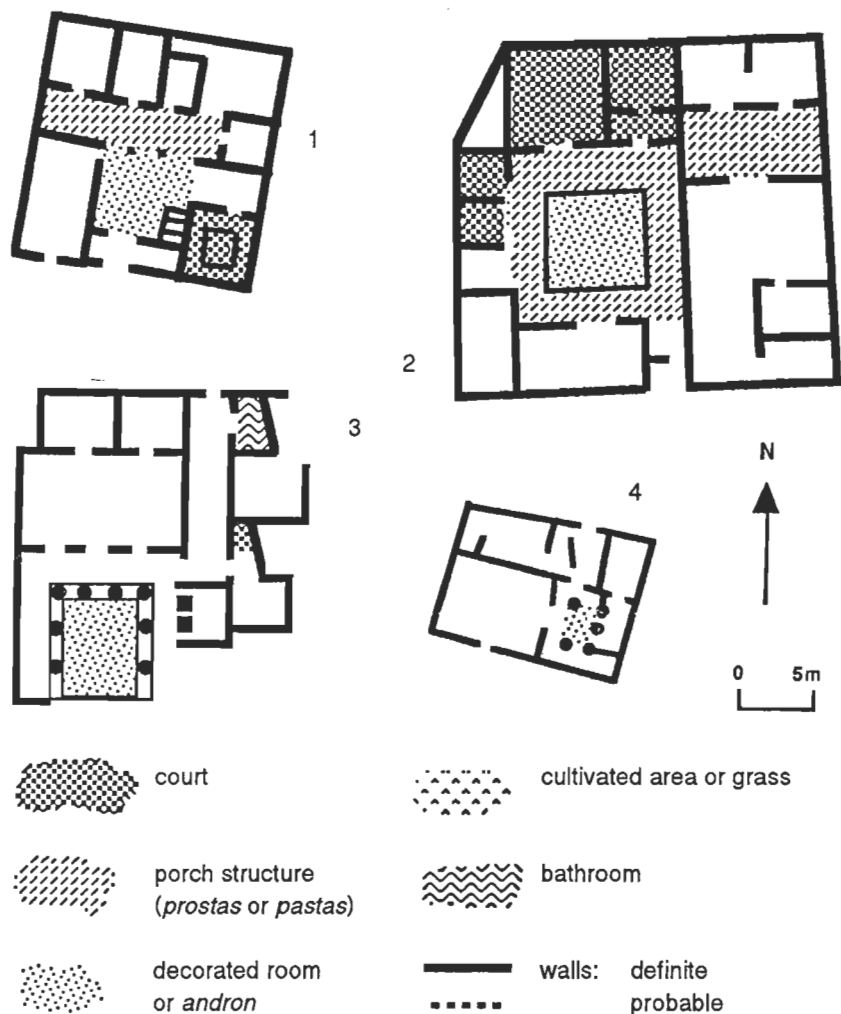
In sum, complete house plans of Roman date are rare, information on finds is often scant or absent, and our knowledge centres around those houses which have attracted attention because of their high level of decoration, and because they incorporate features such as *impluvia*, which are recognisable features from Roman houses elsewhere in the empire. This raises the obvious problem that our excavated sample is probably heavily biased towards the wealthier members of society. There may therefore be a range of houses, probably belonging to less well-off groups, which are not being excavated and/or recognised as Roman because they lack features which we have come to expect based on the appearance of Roman houses elsewhere and because, on a complex site, it is not always possible to link architecture with small finds. Conclusions drawn on the basis of the material currently available is therefore likely to represent only a limited range of the total population of the area.

THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT: A DIACHRONIC EXAMINATION

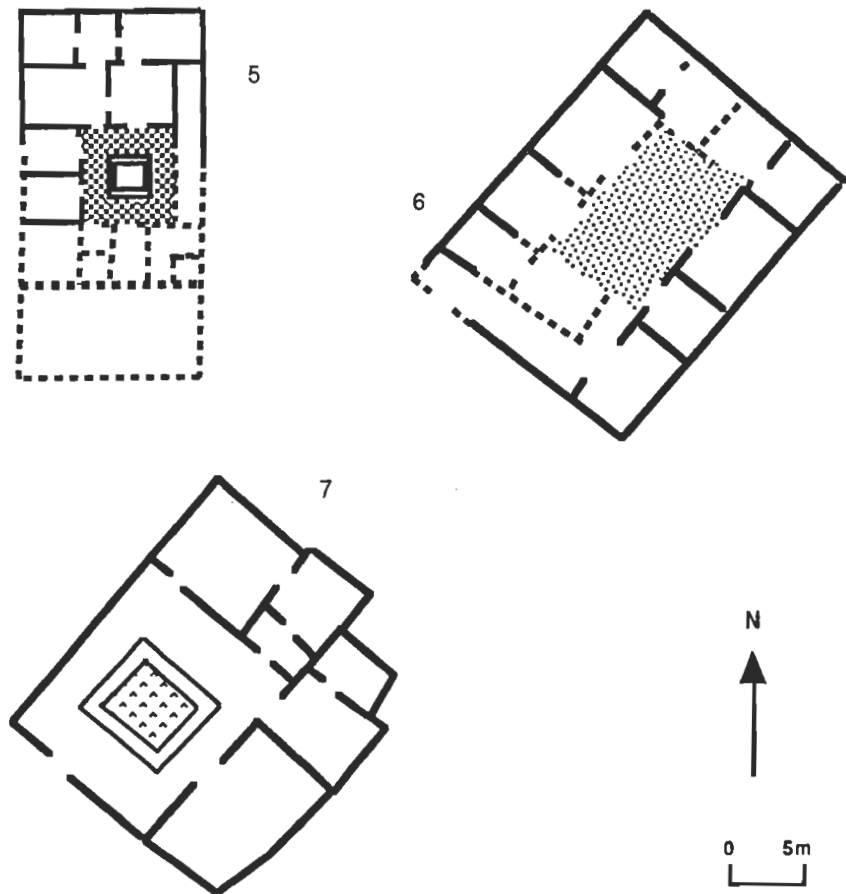
In comparison with the material from the Roman period, a substantial amount of evidence is available for the Greek house during the preceding classical and Hellenistic periods (the best-preserved examples are summarised by Hoepfner and Schwandner (1986)). This material yields a relatively coherent model for domestic social organisation (Nevett 1992; 1995; in press), and provides a starting point for the investigation of changes in social relations through time.

As is common in Mediterranean areas today, the classical Greek house was organised around an open central court (fig. 1), which often contained a well or cistern. Within this area shade was provided by a colonnade which could be anything from a simple structure along one wall to a full peristyle surrounding the court on all four sides. Where information is available, both court and portico have yielded a diverse range of objects, suggesting that they were the location for a variety of activities, including food preparation and cooking (Nevett 1992, 73, 82; Ault 1994). The courtyard arrangement meant that the outdoor space where this activity took place was shut off from the street, and this isolation is emphasised by the presence of only a single outside door. Although that door led from the street into the court, it was often placed so that even when it was open there was no direct line of sight into the house for passers-by. There is also one instance in which the walls are preserved to a sufficient height to reveal the windows, which are small and located high in the walls, also preventing the occupants of the house from being observed from the street outside.² This insulation of the household from the outside world is a common theme of Greek literature over an extended period and can plausibly be explained as being connected with a separation of female family members from male outsiders (Walker 1983 *passim*; Nevett 1992, 45–46; 1995; in press).

The division between the household and the outside world is continued inside the house, with the provision of a separate room for the entertainment of male guests, called the *andron*, and this is both mentioned in the literature and identifiable archaeologically. The *andron* embodies a tradition of hospitality which is deeply ingrained within Greek culture, and the drinking parties which took place there are depicted in literature and on vase paintings. Archaeologically, the room is usually characterised by decorated walls, a plaster or mosaic pavement, drainage facilities, and often by emplacements for couches on which diners reclined, arranged around the walls (Robinson and Graham 1938,



Figures 1–4. 1: Example of a courtyard house of the classical period; Olynthos, house AVII 4 (adapted from Robinson and Graham 1938, Plate 99). 2: Example of a Hellenistic house; Eretria, House of the Mosaics (adapted from Ducrey and Metzger 1979, Figure 2). 3: Example of a Delian house; the Hermes house (flooring generally unknown) (adapted from Delorme 1953, Plate 55). 4: Thera, house 6ii (adapted from Hiller von Gærtringen 1899, p 252).



Figures 5–7. 5: Eleusina, house by the city wall (adapted from Kourouniotis 1936). 6: Athens, house N II (after Thompson and Whycherley 1972, figure 45). 7: Athens, house from the north-west shoulder of the Areopagus (adapted from Thompson and Whycherley 1972). Key as above.

171–179). There is sometimes also a small anteroom, decorated in a similar manner, which provides additional spatial segregation for the occupants of the *andron* from the rest of the house.

A notable feature of this room is its position within the house, which often brings visitors through the central court where household activity took place. Bearing in mind the measures just described, which seem to have been designed to separate household members from outsiders, it

seems odd that such an awkward arrangement should have been used, especially since it could have been avoided by constructing an entrance to the *andron* directly from the street or from the entrance passage. The fact that this was not done may suggest that there was an intention to display the court to visitors, and this is also supported by the fact that this is one of the few areas of the house which was usually decorated. In passing through the court, visitors were shown important aspects of domestic life: signs of the productive activity vital to the life of the household, together with the entrances to most of the other rooms, which generally communicated via this area. Separation of visitors from particular household members could have been achieved through the temporary withdrawal of the latter group to inner rooms of the house.³

Starting in the mid-fourth century and continuing down to the end of the Hellenistic era a new type of house can be found alongside that just outlined. It covered a large area, and the domestic and public functions were separated by the creation of a second court (often a peristyle), around which a number of decorated rooms of different sizes were clustered. The productive activity of the household was centred on a second, undecorated area, away from the view of visitors (fig. 2). This increased the spatial segregation between "public" and "private" areas and removed the emphasis on displaying the household as a productive unit, replacing it with a greater direct stress on general wealth as represented by increasingly lavish and extensive mosaic and plaster decoration. The appearance of this type of arrangement implies a growth in the importance of the house as a setting for social interaction and as a location for the display of power and wealth. This is likely to be linked with a growth in the overt power exerted by the élite and an increase in the importance of social relations between individuals.

For the transition to the Roman period our best sources of evidence of domestic architecture are the extensive excavations on the island of Delos in the Cyclades, which during the second century BC gained the status of a free port and was settled by merchants from a variety of areas, including Greek mainland cities and Rome.⁴ The island provides a large sample of houses, which are very well preserved owing to their stone construction. A variety of sizes and designs are represented: the largest examples (see, for example, fig. 3) create an impression of considerable prosperity, with lavish decoration which includes mosaic floors, coloured wall plaster, and sculpted figures (summarised in Kreeb 1988).

Given such a high level of wealth it is surprising that these houses contrast with those of the Hellenistic period described above in that they

tend to lack the double courtyard arrangement which separated the public and private areas. Instead, a number of richly decorated rooms were often organised around a single, elaborate peristyle. Where the service rooms can be identified, these are either located alongside the major reception rooms and entered from the same court or occasionally are situated behind the main rooms and reached through the entrance passage. In either case, there is usually no separate court devoted to household activities. Furthermore, the presence of decorative elements such as statuary, and particularly of central pools in the courts of many of these houses, means that the rôle of this space is likely to have been a largely decorative rather than functional one, since the amount of space available would have been restricted severely.

Similar patterns of organisation are found in houses of a slightly later date from Thera (fig. 4). A well-documented example, house 6ii, consists of a few rooms arranged around a central space (Hiller von Gærtringen et al. 1899, 252–254; Hiller von Gærtringen 1904, 138–139). Through time the house underwent a series of modifications involving the insertion of a pool in the central space and the subsequent erection of partitions in that space in order to provide extra rooms. As at Delos the earlier type of courtyard was superseded, and there was a change in the use of space such that the court was no longer important as a location for productive household activity. Other less well-documented houses from the same site are also indicative of an abandonment of the traditional organisation of rooms in such a way as to lead off a central space, and involve instead a higher degree of intercommunication between individual rooms, and even the largest possess only a single court.

Indications of a comparable pattern of internal organisation can be seen in a single house excavated next to the city walls at Eleusina (Kourouniotis 1936) (fig. 5). As with the Delian houses, several rooms have lavish mosaic decoration and both these and the service rooms are reached via a single court, although the two areas are separated to a certain degree with the mosaic-paved rooms lying to the north and plainer rooms to the south.⁵

A further source for complete house plans of Roman date is the *agora* at Athens. Two published examples each follow a relatively simple arrangement around a single courtyard (Thompson and Whycherley 1972, 183–184) (figs 6 and 7). Their construction and decoration suggest that the occupants were relatively wealthy, but as in the examples already discussed, service rooms are located leading off a single court, alongside the more elaborate reception rooms. In one of the houses the court is a

decorated peristyle, which contains a pool to catch rain water, and also a garden, a phenomenon which is totally unknown in peristyles of the classical and Hellenistic periods (Carroll-Spillecke 1989, 19, 49; Carroll-Spillecke 1992, 156–157), and which further reduces the possibility of the space being used for household tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

The limited number of houses discussed here present a relatively coherent picture: there is a shift through time in the way in which activities were distributed around the house, and in particular a change in the rôle of the court, the decorative function of which seems to have been increased at the expense of its rôle as a location for domestic activity. Such alterations in the use of the court, and in the organisation of rooms in the house, suggest a corresponding change in the pattern of domestic social organisation in the household, and this is likely to have been associated with a change in the relationship between the house and the world outside. By the Roman era, when the area was part of a wider political and economic network, domestic tasks were no longer on display to visitors, as in the classical house, or segregated from the more public rooms, as in the wealthiest Hellenistic examples. In comparison with its predecessors, then, the Roman house is characterised by a reduction in the constraints on movement around the house, and this suggests a change in attitudes towards interaction between individuals within the domestic context and, in particular, between household members and outsiders. At the same time there seems to have been less importance attached to the provision of a comfortable working environment for the execution of household tasks, such activity apparently being carried out indoors all the year round rather than in the outdoor space provided by the court.

On the basis of this information a tentative hypothesis may be formulated, which can be investigated further as more material comes to light. If it is correct to interpret the tight control over spatial organisation exercised in the classical and Hellenistic periods as being linked to a desire to control access to the women of the house (as suggested above), then it may be that the new patterns of domestic organisation seen in the Roman material are connected to some degree with a different attitude towards women. The lack of features designed to ensure privacy suggests less restriction on interaction between female household members and guests entering the house, and the less careful provision of space for household tasks suggests that female family members (as opposed to servants or

slaves) may have been involved in household activities to a lesser extent. This idea is made more plausible given that such differences in the rôles of women in Greek and Roman society have been commented on by Roman authors (for example Cornelius Nepos *Lives* pr. 1.6.3).

A question that is difficult to answer is whether the marked difference between the Roman households and those of earlier period reveals changes amongst the existing Greek population, or whether, since the excavated sample generally seems to represent the upper end of the economic scale (with the possible exception of the small house from Thera), these structures would have belonged to élite Roman immigrants. Roman merchants are known, from epigraphic evidence, to have been present on Delos (Roussel 1931, *passim*), although the identities of the inhabitants of the majority of excavated houses are unknown. Elsewhere the picture is more uncertain, and, like many others, this question will have to await the excavation of more material before it can be resolved fully.

NOTES

I should like to thank Ross Samson for asking me to look at Roman houses in Greece, thereby stimulating me to expand my chronological horizons and investigate a body of material which was new to me. This paper has not been updated since it was originally submitted for publication in 1993.

1. This research is summarised in Lawrence and Low 1990.
2. These are the classical houses at Ammotopos, described by Hammond (Hammond 1953, *passim*). An example has subsequently been excavated (Dakaris et al. 1976; Dakaris 1984; 1986; Hoepfner and Schwandner 1986, 109–111).
3. For a full discussion of gender and domestic space in the classical world, see Nevett 1993; 1995.
4. Commentators have tended to emphasise the similarity between the houses at Delos and their predecessors elsewhere in the Greek world (for example, Lawrence 1983, 325; Plommer 1956, 252). In fact, however, the organisation of the Delian house gives it a strong resemblance to Roman houses found elsewhere in Greece, and makes it substantially different from its Hellenistic predecessors. The identification of the Delian house with earlier Greek examples seems to rest more on the fact that there are substantial differences between these and the houses of Roman Italy, rather than on perceived similarities with Hellenistic Greek examples.
5. A space to the south of the house proper has been identified by the excavators as a second court or garden (Kourouniotis 1936, 40). The latter seems a more probable suggestion given the lack of obvious paving or signs of an arcade or portico, although it should be noted that the organisation of this part of the house is represented only by robber trenches. The published

plan also suggests that there may have been further walls beyond this southernmost area, but these may indicate adjoining houses.

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