LIVING LIKE THE ROMANS?
SOME REMARKS ON DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE
IN NORTH AFRICA AND BRITAIN*

By
N. DE HAAN

Introduction

“In order that a population scattered and uncivilised, and proportionately ready for war, might be habituated by comfort to peace and quiet, he would exhort individuals, assist communities, to erect temples, market-places, houses (...).”¹ This famous passage is taken from Tacitus’ biography of his father-in-law Agricola. Obviously, this is a highly tendentious and biased passage, written by a member of the Roman upper class. It goes without saying that the Britons had houses before the Roman conquest, but in this passage Tacitus is referring to domestic architecture which, in his view, was intended only for elite members of society. It is interesting to look at Tacitus’s choice of ‘*domus*’ – a word which conveys a concept much broader than the simple translation ‘house’. A *domus* was not only the house where an extended family, including slaves, lived, but it also played an important role in the social life of the owner. Part of the owners public life took place in its large reception areas such as the *vestibula*, *atria*, peristyles, dining rooms and bathsuites. Hence, *domus* signifies an elite house. I here recall another well-known author, Cicero, who writes in his *De officiis*:

And, as in everything else a man must have regard not for himself alone but for others also, so in the home of a distinguished man, in which numerous guests must be entertained and crowds of every sort of people received, care must be taken to have it spacious.²

* I thank Eric M. Moormann (University of Nijmegen) for reading and commenting upon an early draft. Lorraine Anderson (University of Oxford) kindly edited my English.

¹ Tacitus, Agricola 21: *namque ut homines dispersi ac rudes eoque in bella faciles quieti et otio per voluptates adsuescerent, hortari privatim, adiuuare publice, ut templa, fora, domos exstruerent, (...)*. Translation: M. Hutton, revised by R.M. Ogilvie (ed. Loeb 1992).

² Cicero, *De officiis* 1.139: (...) *et, ut in ceteris habenda ratio non sua solum, sed etiam aliorum, sic in domo clari hominis, in quam et hospites multi recipiendi et admittenda hominum cuiusque modi multitudo, adhibenda cura est laxitatis*. Translation: W. Miller (ed. Loeb 1968).

In the previous chapter Cicero states:

I must discuss also what sort of house a man of rank and station should, in my opinion, have. Its prime object is functionality (*usus*). To this the plan of the building should be adapted; and yet careful attention should be paid to its convenience (*commoditas*) and distinction (*dignitas*).³

The keywords are functionality (*usus*), convenience (*commoditas*) and distinction (*dignitas*). By being both functional and convenient, a *domus* simultaneously shapes and reflects its owner's *dignitas*. This was true for the senators of the city of Rome, as well as elites elsewhere in the Empire, as has been demonstrated by many scholars studying the domestic architecture in the Roman Empire.⁴

In this sense, it is often stated that houses reflect the degree of Romanization of the various regions of the Roman Empire.⁵ Some scholars, like Thomas Blagg, argue that town houses and villas, even more than public buildings, reflect the *romanitas* of the commissioners.⁶ At the same time, other scholars have put forward the idea that local traditions persisted, and were used deliberately as an act of resistance against Roman Rule.⁷

The aim of this contribution is to offer a closer examination of these two opposing positions using archaeological evidence from North Africa and England. Some statements and caveats must be made at the outset.

³ Cicero, *De officiis* 1.138: *Et quoniam omnia persequimur, volumus quidem certe, dicendum est etiam, qualem hominis honorati et principis domum placeat esse, cuius finis est usus, ad quem accommodanda est aedificandi descriptio et tamen adhibenda commoditatis dignitatisque diligentia*. Translation: W. Miller (ed. Loeb 1968).

⁴ For recent general overviews on Roman houses see W. Hoepfner, ed., *Geschichte des Wohnens, Band 1. 5000 v.Chr. – 500 n.Chr. Vorgeschichte, Frühgeschichte, Antike* (Stuttgart 1999); S.P. Ellis, *Roman Housing* (London 2000); P. Gros, *L'architecture romaine. 2. Maisons, palais, villas et tombeaux* (Paris 2001), 136 ff.

⁵ E.g. Gros 2001, op. cit. (n. 4), 148: "(...) le phénomène de la diffusion de la grande *domus* comme l'un des « marqueurs » les plus éloquents de la romanisation."

⁶ Th. Blagg, 'First-century Roman houses in Gaul and Spain', in Th. Blagg and M. Millett, *The Early Roman Empire in the West* (Oxford 1990), 194 ff.

⁷ For North Africa see the still influential study of M. Bénabou, *La résistance africaine à la romanisation* (Paris 1976). For Britain see R. Hingley, *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (London 1989), 159 ff.; R. Hingley, 'Resistance and domination: social change in Roman Britain', in D.J. Mattingly, ed., *Dialogues in Roman imperialism. Power, Discourse, and Discrepant Experience in the Roman Empire*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl.* 23 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island 1997), 81 ff.

Firstly, this paper deals with elite culture and elite housing. In a way this is inevitable, since most well preserved houses and villas are usually those with architectural and decorative pretensions. For the aim of this paper, though, it is exactly what we need – a clear distinction between elite housing and the dwellings of lower classes is necessary.

Secondly, we should not forget that town houses are part of a city. In some ways this was an advantage – for example, houses could tap into the urban water system. On the other hand, the cityscape imposed constraints on the layout of houses. For instance, assigned lots within a grid-plan of streets impeded the expansion of domestic dwellings. In planned cities like Timgad this was a serious problem. It is no wonder that some of the large and lavishly decorated houses of this town were situated outside the city's grid.⁸

Thirdly, we have to take into consideration who owned and inhabited the elite houses in the towns of the Roman Empire. There are basically two possibilities: (1) Members of local elite, involved in the administration of the *civitates* and *municipia* of their native region, (2) Wealthy Roman officials. Given the structure of the Roman administration at the local level, the first group probably formed the majority. Members of this local elite were the *patroni* of *clientes* of their native region. Simultaneously, they themselves were often clients of higher ranking Romans. This social position had implications for the layout of houses.

Finally, despite the impressive remains, the archaeological record is still incomplete. In many cases, only the portions of the cities that contained elite houses were excavated. Furthermore, stratigraphical data is missing simply because it has not been collected. Most North African sites were partly excavated at the end of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, before stratigraphical methods were practised in this part of the world. This means that we have little information on the building sequences of most sites.

Romanization

I will now examine the issue of Romanization since it is of particular concern to this article's central question: can houses be seen as a barometer for discerning trends of Romanization or local resistance? Romanization is a complicated concept that has elicited significant debate in the last three

⁸ On Timgad see A. Ballu, *Guide illustré de Timgad (antique Thamugadi)* (Paris 1910²); *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Antica*, Vol. VII (Rome 1966) s.v. Thamugadi (P. Romanelli); Gros 2001, op. cit. (n. 4), 165.

decades.⁹ For a long time, written sources like Tacitus, cited above, were taken at face value. Rome was the superpower that first conquered and then civilized what would become the North-West region of the Roman Empire. And indeed, Agricola educating the savage Britons is a classic example of this civilizing process. Although this view is no longer widely accepted among scholars, it still wields a striking influence upon historical and archaeological research. We will see an example of this phenomenon later on. Nowadays, acculturation processes like Hellenization and Romanization are understood as forms of mutual cultural exchange in which both groups are influenced. There is still a great deal of research to be carried out on the impact such acculturation processes had on the construction of both native and Roman identities. Identity is, at least in part, a malleable concept that can differ from situation to situation. Since houses were, and still are, expressions of identity, I think it is an important issue to reflect upon.¹⁰

My starting point is the non-interventionist model proposed by Martin Millett. I find this model convincing especially when it comes to material culture in general and elite housing in particular.¹¹ The outline of Millett's model is the following. Basically, Rome governed its empire through native elites. After conquest, the Roman army would withdraw – except, of course, in border regions – and an administration would be established in urban settlements. This administration followed the Roman constitution, and consisted of members of the particular region's local elite. Once involved in the administrative system, the elite desired to become Romanized because their social position within their native society was reinforced by identification

⁹ There is a vast body of literature on the subject of Romanization, of which I will mention just a few titles: K. Lomas, 'Urban elites and cultural definition: Romanization in southern Italy', in T.J. Cornell and K. Lomas, eds., *Urban Society in Roman Italy* (London 1995), 107 ff.; J. Webster and N. Cooper, eds., *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives. Proceedings of a Symposium Held at Leicester University in November 1994* (Leicester 1996); Mattingly 1997, op. cit. (n. 7); G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: the Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge 1998); E. Fentress, ed., *Romanization and the City. Creation, Transformations, and Failures. Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy in Rome to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Excavations at Cosa, 14-16 May, 1998*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl.* 38 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island 2000); S. Keay and N. Terrenato, eds., *Italy and the West. Comparative Issues in Romanization* (Oxford 2001).

¹⁰ Shelley Hales' book, *The Roman House and Social Identity* (Cambridge 2003), which was published in September 2003 has contributed significantly to this discussion.

¹¹ M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain. An Essay in Archaeological Interpretation* (Cambridge 1990).

with Roman Rule. As a consequence, the elite wished to emulate Roman material culture, and use symbols of *romanitas* to boost their social standing. The lower classes attempted to imitate the Romanized elite and thus the material culture spread.

I am well aware of the criticisms of this model, most notably by Richard Hingley and P.W.M. Freeman. Hingley accuses Millett of offering a deterministic model of progressive Romanization, thus implicitly advocating the Roman point of view. The nuances of dominance and resistance in different regions of the Empire and their impact upon Roman and native perspectives are omitted, whereas the bias towards native elites *a priori* excludes a balanced narrative.¹² Finally, as both Freeman and Hingley stress, how can we analyse a process of Romanization if we do not know what Roman material culture contained or what exactly the label 'Roman' signified?¹³

However valid Hingley and Freeman's objections might be, they tend to overlook the fact that material culture is Millett's starting point. What Millett proposes is not an all-inclusive, simplistic 'How the West was won' narrative. Rather, he seeks to explain the rapid spread of Roman material culture in Britain, and thereby allows for the possibility of different perceptions and uses. It is true that Millett's model is elite based, but for the purpose of this paper that is a virtue, not a defect.

The houses

Now, let us have a closer look at the houses primarily in North Africa but with some evidence from Britain as well. I am well aware of the risk of oversimplification when dealing with broad and complex themes, but it is not my aim to present all encompassing models or solutions. Essentially, arriving at

¹² R. Hingley, 'The 'legacy' of Rome: the rise, decline, and fall of the theory of Romanization', in Webster and Cooper 1996, op. cit. (n. 9), 35 ff., esp. p. 44 "We may actually expect the situation to have been far more complex, with emulation and opposition working in a variable manner." Mark Grahame critically questions the idea of an already socially stratified native society as the starting point. In his view, the Romans actively *created* native élites; see M. Grahame, 'Redefining Romanization: material culture and the question of social continuity in Roman Britain', in C. Forcey, J. Hawthorne and R. Witcher, eds., *TRAC 97. Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference Nottingham 1997* (Oxford 1998), 1 ff.

¹³ Hingley 1989, op. cit. (n. 7); Hingley 1996, op. cit. (n. 12); P.W.M. Freeman, 'Romanisation' and Roman material culture (= review article of Millett 1990, op. cit. [n. 11]), *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993), 438 ff.

a universal model is impossible since domestic architecture is not only a reflection of social relations in a broad sense, but foremost a response to local human needs for creating spaces for sleeping, cooking, eating etc. This may sound mundane, but it tends to be overlooked in the theoretical debate.

The African sites chosen here are Bulla Regia, Utica and Dougga (ancient Thugga), all in modern Tunisia, and Volubilis in Morocco. All four sites were founded before the arrival of the Romans. In his important contribution to the series *Histoire de la vie privée*, the French scholar Yvon Thébert has pointed out the importance of Mediterranean, Hellenistic influences upon later African domestic architecture from the Roman Period.¹⁴ Peristyles, for example, already were introduced by the third century BC in Punic cities like Carthage and Kerkouane, a site on the coast of Northern Tunisia.¹⁵ It is essential to stress that this is earlier than the appearance of peristyles in most town houses in Roman and Romanized Italy. Another Hellenistic feature found frequently in the houses of Kerkouane is the bathroom with a hip-bath.

Furthermore, urbanization was not a phenomenon introduced by the Romans, and larger settlements, both Punic and Numidian, existed before the Roman arrival. For example, towns like Bulla Regia, Dougga and Zama Regia were Punicized centres of the Numidian Kingdom and only in a later period became cities governed in the Roman style.

Let us return to Thébert, who writes:

African domestic architecture, like that of other Roman provinces, was the product of theoretical reflection. As such, it was distinguished from a vernacular architecture – architecture without architects, if you will – which often creates quite different types of buildings in response to the same social demand. Vernacular architecture usually has no real program. The person commissioning the project states his desires in

¹⁴ Y. Thébert, 'Private life and domestic architecture in Roman Africa', in P. Veyne, ed., *A History of Private Life. I: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, Mass.-London 1987), 313 ff.; on Hellenistic influences esp. 325 f. Originally published as *Histoire de la vie privée. I. De L'Empire romain à l'an mil* (Paris 1985).

¹⁵ See for the pre-146 BC houses of Carthage: S. Lancel, J.-P. Morel and J.-P. Thuillier, *Byrsa II. Rapports préliminaires sur les fouilles 1977-1978: niveaux et vestiges puniques sous la direction de Serge Lancel* (Rome 1982); S. Lancel, *Carthage* (Paris 1995), 167 ff.; F. Rakob, ed., *Karthago I. Die deutschen Ausgrabungen in Karthago* (Mainz am Rhein 1991), 238 ff. On Kerkouane: M. Fantar, *Kerkouane. Cité Punique du Cap Bon (Tunisie). Tome II Architecture domestique* (Tunis 1985).

some vague way, generally referring to concrete examples close at hand. The result is a characteristic “regional” architecture, with builders improvising on the possibilities inherent in the locale: climate, availability of building materials, and so forth. In the Roman era, however, architecture freed itself from local limitations and turned its attention toward social, aesthetic, and individualistic considerations. This resulted in a highly elaborate architectural theory, to which both architect and client referred in making proposals and plans.¹⁶

If we put Thébert’s ideas in a scheme, we get the following:

Native / vernacular	Roman / Romanized
No theory	Theoretical architecture
No architect	Architect
No uniform building	Uniform building
No building plan	Building plan
Local building material	Imported building material (<i>assumption</i>)
Climate and local building material as determining factors	Society, aesthetics and individual preferences as determining factors

I doubt whether reality was this rigid or clear cut. This is a good example of the type of blind assumption I mentioned earlier: the superior Romans teach the backward African tribesmen how to build a proper house. It is impossible to prove that the pre-146 BC city of Carthage was built without architects, building plans and so on. In fact, all archaeological evidence has shown the opposite.¹⁷

Such assumptions lead to a variety of specious claims. We see this in regards to the basements in some of the rich houses of Bulla Regia, a site in modern North Tunisia. Fig. 1 shows an example of the Maison de la Chasse, where a dining room and two bedrooms were situated in the basement. These basements, dug into flat terrain rather than making use of a sloping hill, are a unique architectural feature in the Roman world. To quote Thébert again:

¹⁶ Thébert 1987, op. cit. (n. 14), 326 f.

¹⁷ See above n. 15.

The fact remains that Bulla Regia is the only Roman city known to exhibit so many examples of an architecture in which the occupant increased the amount of space available to him by digging down into the earth. Although the climatic advantages of such constructions are obvious, they are not in themselves a sufficient explanation.¹⁸

Why not, I wonder. Would this be a ‘vernacular’ feature uncommon in Roman or Romanized architecture? It is true, as Thébert states, that many other places with equally extreme climates have no comparable architecture, but, to mention just one possible explanation, perhaps the soil in such regions was not as well suited for large scale digging work. Thébert’s conclusion is that the owners were looking for more space within the constraints of the city’s grid-plan. This may be perfectly right. However, the choice for digging down instead of adding an additional storey still remains unexplained. The amount of work and the costs entailed in digging down rather than building up seem equivalent, so it must have been the climatic advantage that was the decisive factor. I believe it would be more productive to explore this particular architectural feature in a larger framework than simply how it compared with typical Roman modes of building.¹⁹

Material and building techniques

Let us look at some more physical evidence and discuss material and building techniques. Generally speaking, local building materials were used if they were of sufficient quality and quantity. Unlike Thébert, I believe that using local material is the logical thing to do. Why import building material at high costs, if the local material is adequate? One must then explore the material’s influence upon the building technique. A criterium often used in the provinces to distinguish between Romanized and non-Romanized housing is the use of *opus caementicium*. This has become sort of a myth. It seems to me a much too limited concept upon which to classify the architectural style. For example, many places lack the ingredients for making a

¹⁸ Thébert 1987, op. cit. (n. 14), 343.

¹⁹ We should also bear in mind that for example Vitruvius pays a lot of attention to the proper orientation of buildings based on climatic circumstances (e.g. *De Architectura* 5.10.1; 6.1; 6.4). For observations on the orientation of Greek houses see W. Hoepfner and E.-L. Schwandner, *Haus und Stadt im klassischen Griechenland* (München 1994²), 318 ff. Therefore, responses to climatic circumstances could easily be denoted as Roman or more generally Mediterranean.

good mortar, most notably pozzolana-earth, and without this mortar it is impossible to apply the *opus caementicium* technique.

On the other hand, careful study of Romano-British timber building has shown radical advances in woodworking skills after the Roman conquest of Britain. New carpentry techniques were introduced and made possible by Roman tools such as the carpenter's plane and frame-saw.²⁰ If the application of masonry had been the only criterium for establishing Roman influence upon housing, the Roman impact upon timber buildings would have gone unrecognized.

If highly functional techniques such as limestone framework, the so-called *opus africanum* (Fig. 2), already exist, it is only natural to apply them. This is neither barbaric nor should it be automatically interpreted as resistance to Roman Rule. Rather, it is simply a result of building tradition and building economy.

Certainly, material such as mediterranean marble was sometimes imported for architectural decoration, especially in the North-West provinces. The palace of King Cogidubnus at Fishbourne, dating from the Flavian Period, is an outstanding example of this.

Sometimes there are practical reasons for not using local material. Studying the private bath-suites of houses and villas in Central Italy, North Africa and England, I was struck by the uniformity of the hypocausts in the heated sections. With few exceptions, most hypocaust systems looked remarkably similar: pillars of baked, heat resistant tile, that supported an upperfloor of tile. These tiles were of standard sizes, thus creating standardized systems. In regions of North Africa and Britain where brick was not used otherwise in houses, it did appear in the hypocausts of both public and domestic baths. The reason for this was undoubtedly functional: tile is heat resistant, whereas material such as limestone is unable to endure extreme temperatures. The mere fact that sophisticated Roman technology was applied, must have had social significance for both the owner of the house, the commissioner, and owner's guests who were invited to the baths. The use of Roman technology itself was a message that would have been well understood.

Form, function, and architectural pretension

The main components of Roman elite houses can be found in their provincial counterparts. Both town houses and villas feature reception areas for

²⁰ See D. Perring, *The Roman House in Britain* (London-New York 2002), 83 f.

different social groups, Roman-styled *triclinia*, baths with hypocausts and running water. It is impossible for us to establish exactly how these amenities were used. For instance, we do not know if the inhabitants actually adhered to the ‘Roman way’ (assuming there was such a thing as a ‘Roman way’). But is this a problem? The fact remains that the owners deliberately chose Roman-styled designs for their dwellings, investing money in a way unseen before the arrival of the Romans. The reason for choosing such designs could differ from region to region, period to period, or owner to owner. However, there must have been one constant rationale: the house had to satisfy the needs of its owner. They were not entirely private dwellings, but rather performed specific roles in the public and social life of the owner. The owner used his home to receive a large number of visitors and guests. This was not only the case in Italy, but, as both the archaeological evidence and literary sources suggest, was true of the elite dwellings throughout the Empire. Apuleius, for instance, speaks about a lady entertaining numerous guests in her home and adds that this was something expected of a high ranking person.²¹ Needless to say, the symbolic messages communicated through the house’s size, lavishness and decoration were intended for an audience with an at least vague familiarity with the meaning of these messages.

Just as in Italian houses, the entrance of the elite home was an architectural statement. Large door openings, such as the one in the Maison de la Cascade in Utica (Fig. 3), were designed to create a striking impression and offer a hint to the entering visitor or passer-by of what they could expect inside.

Access to the house was controlled by a doorkeeper who sometimes had a little room next to the entrance, as is for example the case the Maison aux Travaux d’Hercule at Volubilis.²² Within the house, the main reception rooms were emphasized by their axial planning. The Maison de Vénus in Volubilis offers a clear example of this phenomenon. Axial planning created visual axes, along which peristyle columns were located, so as not to obstruct the view. Furthermore, architectural ornamentations such as framing

²¹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 2.19: *Frequens ibi numerus epulonum, et utpote apud primatem feminam flos ipse civitatis.*

²² For recent plans and descriptions of the houses in Volubilis see M. Risse, ed., *Volubilis. Eine römische Stadt in Marokko von der Frühzeit bis in die islamische Periode* (Mainz am Rhein 2001).

columns, and floor, wall and ceiling decorations immediately denoted which were the important rooms.

For the use of these reception areas, we first need to make a clear distinction between rooms where *clientes* were received in the morning, and those where in the afternoon guests were entertained. The first group, the clients, were received in *vestibula* and reception halls, usually labelled *basilica* by modern scholars.²³ The plan of the Maison de Vénus shows a large double *vestibulum*, the one of the Maison aux Travaux d'Hercule is around 50 square metres. The private *basilicae* are even larger.

The African houses lack *atria*, but this does not constitute a major difference in the house's function. The role of the *atrium* was fulfilled by large *vestibula* and *basilicae*. At any rate, even in Italy, from the end of the first century AD onward, the *atrium* began to disappear, its function being taken over by other rooms.

In the late afternoon guests were received in *oeci* (gardenrooms), private baths and dining rooms. Roman-styled *triclinia* are easily recognizable by their floor mosaics, which show the exact location of *triclinium* beds. The guests were either members of the elite or were higher ranked clients of the house owner. Competition among the elite was fierce, and one's house acted as an essential instrument for displaying and highlighting personal status. The modes for showing off social standing varied in different local circumstances. In England, for instance, dining and reception rooms were heated, an amenity that was uncommon in the Mediterranean region. As far as I know, this amenity was specific to the Northern provinces. Heated *cubicula*, sleeping rooms, do exist even in Ostia, but dining rooms with a hypocaust are absent in the Mediterranean world.

The North African house owners had other ways of displaying their wealth and social status. The number of waterbasins and fountains in upper class houses is remarkable (Fig. 4). Most likely, some of the basins were designed to keep fish. In inland towns, it was a statement of wealth and prestige when a host offered fresh fish to his guests.²⁴

Furthermore, the fountains functioned as air conditioning. They also sparkled in the light and made a tinkling noise – features that were intended to impress visitors. Fountains, especially in arid zones where water could be scarce, were a clear form of showing off one's wealth. Because it was Roman technology that made such fountains possible and because the Roman

²³ On the phenomenon of private *basilicae* see Thébert 1987, op. cit. (n. 14), 377 f.

²⁴ Thébert 1987, op. cit. (n. 14), 365 ff.

administration regulated the access to water, this display of wealth was integrally linked to *romanitas*.

Conclusion

If we limit ourselves to elite housing, the debate over the Romanization of housing becomes somewhat clearer. Too often, the discussion has been complicated and confused by bringing in middle and lower class living accommodations. Overall, the pattern for elite housing places a strong emphasis on the social status of the inhabitant, primarily the male house owner. The goal of the house is to leave both *clientes* and *amici* impressed.

This is not a surprise. Similarly in Italy, members of the local elite vied for social status, and the house was one of their most effective tools. Hence, adopting Roman lifestyles and acting as Roman as one possibly could was in the interest of the elite, the evidence for which can be seen in the layouts of their houses, designed for the reception of clients and friends.

The differences that can be discerned are the result of responses to local, mostly climatic circumstances, and not a resistance to Romanization. Policies of resistance were usually not in the best interest of the elite. After the arrival of the Romans, at least in Africa, local material was still widely used. However, the extent to which local building traditions were persistent can hardly be established in detail. Our knowledge is simply too limited for such speculation. The Punic houses at Dougga and Volubilis, for example, could have provided us with useful information, but they were built over in the Roman Period. Without destroying this upper layer, we cannot study the building sequences and the possible persistence of architectural traditions. This same dilemma holds true for many more sites.²⁵ The idea that the architecture of the African provinces changed drastically in *all* respects after the arrival of the Romans has been shown to be misleading. Schemes of vernacular versus Roman/Romanized domestic architecture as proposed by Thébert are too rigid. The crux is that the architectural development was both malleable to local circumstances and indebted to Roman influence and therefore featured previously unknown amenities associated with the 'Roman' lifestyle. Whether these amenities expressed Roman superiority, local power, Roman luxury or just novelty is difficult to assess. Nevertheless we can con-

²⁵ Some preliminary work has been done; see R. Daniels, 'Punic influence in the domestic architecture of Roman Volubilis (Morocco)', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 14 (1995), 79 ff.

clude that they were well integrated into the social lives of the house owners and their guests.

Finally, looking at single houses is an unviable strategy, since town houses were not isolated from one another. House owners would have been aware of other houses because they would have often been guests themselves. Furthermore, situations could differ from settlement to settlement, and from region to region. The availability of building material also played an important role in this respect. For example, in an environment where marble was unavailable, an upper class house that was not adorned with a marble veneer would not have been looked down upon. Therefore, I would like to conclude with a plea for contextualizing the evidence. Only by carefully evaluating the context of each house, including its physical environment, can we start to gain a better understanding of how these houses were used, and how they can shed more light on their inhabitants. In the end, it was not so much how a house was built, but in what ways it was used that made its inhabitants, at least in their own eyes, Roman.

Rome, January 2004