DOMESTIC SPACE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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HOUSEHOLD ORGANISATION

According to Ellis (2000) 159 it is impossible to fully understand domesticity through artefact distribution, because the modern observer is unable to distinguish between the actual use of objects in a certain area and their storage. In addition, he argues, artefacts are not reliable in determining room function, due to their mobility in domestic space. There is also the problem of identifying the function of the artefact, which may change through time. Furthermore, because of the mobility of household furnishings, the usage of space can change frequently in a short period of time. While architecture and decoration reflect the intentions of the owner or architect, they do not represent the full scale of functions that rooms actually had (Allison (1999) esp. 3–5; (2004) 11–14, with bibliography). Household organisation in Antiquity was flexible and several rooms were used for a wide range of daily activities, even though they were designed and decorated for one specific purpose. Recent analyses of Pompeian artefact assemblages have in fact proved such a multi-functional usage of rooms (Allison (2004); Berry (1997a) and (1997b)).

Unfortunately, houses with furniture and household implements left in the place where they were used or stored are rarely encountered in archaeological contexts: even household assemblages from Pompeii do not reflect ‘a frozen moment in time’ (Bon (1997); Allison (2004) 11–26, 201–203). During the occupation of a structure, the inhabitants continuously cleaned their houses of all objects hindering ongoing daily activities. When the building was finally abandoned, the residents normally took all their precious belongings with them, leaving only broken pieces or low value objects behind. In most domestic contexts, only this small fragment of the originally present objects and fixtures is found, as far as they were made in non-perishable materials. To interpret these meagre remains, comparisons with exceptionally well-preserved domestic assemblages are very important. Apart from the textual sources, rich configurations of domestic artefacts are a main

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point of reference for reconstructing the content of houses and household organisation in Antiquity. Full reports on the small finds from late antique domestic excavations, however, are seldom published, and even then they are collected in separate catalogues that are often ordered by material category instead of archaeological context or functional category. In addition, in most cases, more attention is paid to artefacts which are exceptionally well-preserved or which have a high art-historical value. This selective recording of finds, together with the fact that probably the largest part of the furniture and household implements is not preserved, give a biased view of the objects present in houses during Late Antiquity.

Hoards of household implements, often found away from houses themselves, frequently provide a better idea of house contents. Such hoards are generally a collection of valuable and less valuable domestic artefacts, which, even though they are no longer connected to the places in which they were used, form a configuration of objects belonging together. Examples are the Modena hoards and the Sevso treasure. Some idea of function can be gained from architecture, when features such as marble tables or panels survive, or decoration, such as mosaic floors, give clues. But most publications of late antique houses only consider the architectural layout of the building, focusing on the reception and dining rooms of large urban and rural villas. Our dependence on literary sources for reconstructing everyday life in houses is still strong: it is largely this which allows us to label rooms and to describe the daily rhythms of life: but the relevant source material, present in texts as diverse as Libanius, the legal codes, saints’ lives, sermons and narrative histories has not yet been fully assembled, though “The end of the Roman House” by Ellis (1988) makes a good beginning.

The A.D. 749 earthquake in Palestine yielded exceptionally well-preserved deposits of domestic assemblages, providing insight into household organisation in the Early Umayyad period. At Pella, the earthquake caught humans and animals by surprise, trapping them in the middle of their activities with the objects they were using close at hand. Similar material can be expected from other sites in the region, but generally at these sites most attention has been paid to public monuments, leaving residential areas largely unexplored. Late antique houses with destruction deposits containing artefact configurations sealed within their architectural framework have also been found at Alexandria, Ptolemais, Beirut, Argos, Anemurion and Sardis. Other sites were gradually abandoned, leaving little material linked to the