LATE ANTIQUE HOUSING AND THE USES OF RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS: AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION—the Book and the Discipline

This book presents a selection of papers surveying developments in Mediterranean housing from the 4th to 6th centuries A.D., with some articles addressing issues of later periods which are much less well-known. Inevitably, for any work of this nature, it presents a partial view. It presents works by authors with different perspectives (sometimes different perspectives on the same house), and it has gaps from both a geographical and chronological perspective. Sometimes the different perspectives of authors can be turned into a strength, demonstrating that there are two sides to every coin, while the lacunae reflect gaps in the evidence as much as gaps in this book. It is the task of any editorial overview to point out where the strengths and weaknesses lie.

It is always worth repeating that houses tell the story of the individual owners and their families. Public buildings represent the overall conventions and traditions of a society. Houses on the other hand should, more than any other building, reflect the personal taste of their first owner and his family when they were built. The owner’s taste was, however, interpreted by his architect and craftsmen, and was to one degree or another constrained by the social norms of the era in which he lived. Whenever a reader reads a sentence in this volume saying “this house can be compared with…”, they should rightly pause, and reconsider whether this was because the houses were the product of the same society, or like-minded owners. A unique house may represent a unique mind, or it may simply be the only preserved example.

Geographically, the volume contains important syntheses of the archaeology of late antique housing in Asia Minor, North Africa and Spain, with other studies concentrating on Italy and Gaul. The most notable gaps in the book concern the Balkans and parts of the eastern provinces, though these regions have, to some extent, been covered by papers in earlier volumes of Late Antique Archaeology. Geographical distinctions also encompass town and country. For example, Africa is
considered the region ‘par excellence’ for the presence of great estates, and yet all our archaeological evidence for houses comes from towns! In the case of Spain, archaeological research has concentrated heavily on late antique villas, and this volume is fortunate to contain a paper by Arce and Chavarria that redresses this balance by concentrating on towns.

Sources

Late antique houses are not of course understood merely from their physical remains. Most of the papers in this volume begin with the physical evidence and then develop their interpretations using other sources. One paper, however, that of Baldini-Lippolis, specifically sets out to adopt the opposite approach, by taking the building legislation of Late Antiquity and setting this against the physical evidence for the practices it mentions. Italy is particularly rich in all types of evidence and correspondingly complex to interpret. Augenti presents an avowedly archaeological approach to the late antique houses of Ravenna. Volpe presents Canosa and San Giusto in a broad context of landscape studies and historical sources. Marano, faced with the somewhat piecemeal evidence of rescue archaeology in northern Italy, relies heavily on the literary sources to understand the significance of the bishop’s house in early episcopal complexes.

Closely allied to literary evidence are illustrations from late antique manuscripts. Until recently, these were generally published as curios in art history texts, but are increasingly being seen as sources of observation on everyday life, in the same way that archaeologists have long used the illustrations from domestic mosaics. Epigraphic evidence tends to consist of either major public statements or personal funerary records, neither of which tend to be central to work on domestic contexts. Nevertheless, official records concerning domestic architecture emerge from Baldini-Lippolis’ work on legislation, while work on episcopia, like that on praetoria discussed below, can sometimes be enlightened by a well-placed official inscription. I have often felt that the epigrams and dedications of late antique dining rooms should be subject to some synthetic study concerning literary allusions, as well as more concrete issues of setting and chronological analysis. They seem, on the face of it, often linked to the common mosaic themes of heroism and abundance.