

Boundaries and control in the Roman house

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How should we read the structure of the atrium house? On the one hand, it is an open space; its rooms are arranged around the central courtyard or atrium. From its narrow entrance it is often possible to see straight through to the back of the garden or peristyle, and it is hardly surprising that scholars have claimed that the house was intentionally designed to allow people to see within, to guide their gaze to special features in order to demonstrate the wealth and status of the owner, or to make outsiders want to enter and see more.¹ On the other hand, the house was also a sacred space that carried a potent symbolic value. It was protected by the household gods, and was sustained by religious, social and economic resources.² Symbolically, the house was private even when it was used for public business. It was also strictly monitored and controlled.³

Scholars are increasingly challenging the idea that the inhabitants of Roman houses were more concerned with display than with privacy, and are suggesting methods by which privacy was established.⁴ I will argue here that in the Roman house display and privacy are not mutually exclusive, but of equal importance. Within the open atrium plan there were both physical and symbolic boundaries that functioned to control movement and protect the home from visitors who were not members of the household or family. My aim is to explore the creation and deployment of such boundaries in a society that often used aesthetic markers to control space, and to discuss how what may seem to have been free movement within the atrium house may actually have been restricted.

First I make a brief review of the ideology and structure of the atrium house, based on literary sources. Then comes an introduction to some anthropological theory on the creation and maintenance of boundaries. Third comes a comparison with the layout of ancient Greek houses and, fourth, a discussion of how boundaries were established, maintained and reinforced in the atrium house, drawing on examples from Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The literary sources I will use range in date and vary in style and genre. My intent is to build up a general picture of Roman attitudes and beliefs pertaining to the atrium house and the control of movement within it.⁵ I use traditional terminology (*fauces*, *tablinum*, *cubiculum*, etc.) to describe particular spaces without any assumptions about their actual everyday use.⁶

1 E.g., A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, NJ 1994); S. Hales, *The Roman house and social identity* (Cambridge 2003).

2 Y. Thébert, "Private life and domestic architecture in Roman Africa," in P. Veyne (ed.), *A history of private life*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA 1987) 407.

3 K. Cooper, "Closely watched households: visibility, exposure and private power in the Roman domus," *Past and Present* 197 (2007) 23.

4 E.g., E. Proudfoot, "Secondary doors in entranceways at Pompeii: reconsidering access and the 'view from the street'," *TRAC 2012* (Oxford 2013) 91-116; M. T. Lauritsen, "Doors in domestic space at Pompeii: a preliminary study," in D. Mladenović and B. Russell (edd.), *TRAC 2010* (Oxford 2010) 59-75; id., "The form and function of boundaries in the Campanian house," in A. Anguissola (ed.), *Privata luxuria: towards an archaeology of intimacy* (Munich 2013) 95-114.

5 See, however, L. Nevett, "Perceptions of domestic space in Roman Italy," in B. Rawson and P. Weaver (edd.), *The Roman family in Italy: status, sentiment, space* (Oxford 1997) 281-98, for a discussion of the perils of using literary sources to interpret archaeological evidence.

6 I have argued that most rooms in the Roman house were multi-functional: "The conditions of