

# 'Public' and 'private' in Roman culture: the case of the *cubiculum*

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This paper investigates the problematic distinction between 'public' and 'private' in the Roman world, focusing on the *cubiculum* (a place where this distinction is particularly fraught) as a case-study. Having examined most known occurrences of the word with an eye toward the public-private question, I first present (Part I) a catalogue of common, widely attested functions of the *cubiculum*. This material then serves as the evidentiary basis for (Part II) a synthetic, theoretical study. Analysis is based primarily on the occurrences of the word in the Packard Humanities Institute database of Latin texts. This collection includes virtually all literary Latin texts up to the 2nd c. A.D., as well as selected later works, most notably the *Digest* of Justinian. (By "literary" I mean texts preserved in manuscript, rather than in inscriptions or other media.) The word *cubiculum* occurs fewer than 400 times, so it has been possible to examine all instances.<sup>1</sup> While my approach is primarily philological, I have attempted to proceed in awareness of the significant results already achieved by scholars working primarily on the basis of archeological evidence. It is my hope that this study will in turn be suggestive to more archeologically-oriented scholars. By 'Roman house' I mean the large, urban, élite houses of (at least) Rome and the Bay of Naples of the 1st c. B.C. and A.D., particularly the '*domus*' of the stereotypical *fauces-atrium-tablinum*(-peristyle) form.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section I will try to establish the primary associations of the *cubiculum* in classical texts. Part of this task involves cataloging the most common activities attested in *cubicula*. Although strictly numerical data are useful, it will also be important to read certain individual passages more carefully. I will give particular attention to texts in which the term *cubiculum* is used more or less synecdochically to signify a particular activity, even when that activity is not clearly described. When the space of the *cubiculum* can be used as a figure for something else, it reveals a particularly strong association. Many of the specific associations of the *cubiculum* will lend themselves to immediate commentary in terms of the broader social context. In the second section I will attempt a more synthetic interpretation of a pattern underlying the specific features of the *cubiculum*. This will revolve around the rôle of the public/private distinction in the articulation of the Roman house. My reading will focus on the claim that not only the public but also the private are primarily loci of responsibility rather than of rights. Being in a given area does not so much allow behavior as it compels actions 'appropriate' to that space. This notion of public and private can then be connected with the structure of Roman political culture — a culture simultaneously concerned with exaggerating social hierarchy overall and containing it within the élite. A brief concluding section will consider how far the results of the first two sections can be generalized.

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1 Derivatives such as *cubicularius* are all much rarer. I have also checked *TLL* and the index to *CIL VI*, but have not cited inscriptions or post-classical authors systematically. Leach 1997, which appeared after this paper was completed, offers brief surveys of the usage of the whole spectrum of room-types based on a similar corpus search. I am in agreement with virtually all of her remarks on the *cubiculum* (68-70), and I have added references to some of her more important conclusions below.

2 On the legitimacy of the *domus* as a category of analysis, see Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 15-16 and Fredrick 1995, 271. I do not mean to take a position on the historical evolution of the form. On the legitimacy of the category of *cubiculum*, see the end of Part I.