

Elements of the peristyle in Campanian *atria*

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Introduction

The *atrium* looms large in modern perceptions of the Roman house. Fashioned from a combination of literary accounts of Roman custom and archaeological evidence in Campania, the image of the *atrium* as the staid core of the *domus* has become axiomatic. This concept endures despite the fact that many aspects of the Campanian *atrium* have never been sufficiently explored. The following discussion is a preliminary attempt to broaden the prevailing view of the domestic *atrium* by focusing on a particular facet of its decoration.

The rôle of the *atrium* in the reception of guests in the élite household is perhaps the best known of its functions. The mechanics of the morning *salutatio* are not perfectly understood but it is clear that this daily event was set mainly in the *atrium*, a fact that renders the *atrium* the premier location in the house for displays of wealth, status, and taste.¹ Pliny the Elder's nostalgic descriptions of Republican élite houses, in which *atrium* and *vestibulum* were adorned with painted and wax ancestral *imagines*, portraits, genealogies, and military trophies, attest to the antiquity of the practice.² Much to Pliny's chagrin, the increased popularity of Greek art saw the eclipse of ancestral portrait galleries by the bronzes and marbles of famous Greek sculptors. Delivering a less personal and more generic message of affluence, these *imagines pecuniae* alarmed Pliny with their promotion of a taste for Greek *objets d'art* as status symbols over the celebration of distinguished careers in public service. Pliny's concern over this change is countered by other contemporary authors, who indicate that exhibitions of ancestral achievement in the *atrium* persisted, and that in Pliny's day the *atrium* was still an effective location for such displays.³ Yet Pliny's anxiety compels him to contrast in detail the *atria* of

* Frequently cited references:

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- 1 T. P. Wiseman, "Conspicui postes tectaque digna deo: the public image of aristocratic and imperial houses in the late Republic and early Empire," in *L'urbs: espace urbain et histoire* (ColLEFR 98, 1987) 393-413; F. Coarelli, "La casa dell'aristocrazia romana secondo Vitruvio," in H. Geertman, W. de Jong (edd.), *Munus non ingratum* (BABesch suppl. 2, 1989) 178-87.
- 2 *NH* 34.17, in which Pliny explicitly identifies the display of portraits in the *atrium* as a popular way for clients to honour their patrons; see also 35.6-8. The message of achievement sent by military trophies became attached to the house itself, withstanding even changes in ownership (Wiseman *ibid.*, 393-96) For wax ancestor-masks, see H. I. Flower, *Ancestor masks and aristocratic power in Roman culture* (Oxford 1996).
- 3 E.g., Sen., *De Ben.* 3.28.2; *Ep.* 44.5; Mart. 2.90.5-8; 5.20.5; 4.40.1-4; Juv., *Sat.* 8.19-20; Suet., *Galba* 2. The display of *imagines maiorum* in the *atrium* was a popular *topos*, suggesting that the practice was still familiar enough in the early Empire to have some rhetorical force.