

Axial peristyle houses in the western empire

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Introduction

Roman domestic architecture has long been a focus of archaeological research but due to their exceptional preservation the late Republican town-houses of Pompeii and Herculaneum have always attracted most attention while private houses of the Imperial period have been treated in a marginal fashion.¹ Even in the case of the Campanian houses, however, the analysis of their architecture and the materials found in them is far from complete. At the same time excavations carried out in recent decades in other areas, particularly the provinces, are broadening our knowledge of living conditions during the Empire.² Some surveys of domestic architecture of the Imperial period are already available, including R. Rebuffat's survey of previously-published peristyle houses in N Africa.³ His catalogue, prefaced by important remarks on systemizing the terminology connected with this kind of architecture, provides an excellent survey of Imperial town-houses in N Africa up to the early 1970s and a critical summary of the state of research, still basic for any comprehensive study of Imperial town-houses.

My review of the known plans of Imperial town-houses has led to the identification of at least one independent type, the so-called axial peristyle house.⁴ Distinctive examples of this type are found in numerous towns. Some houses of this type, published long ago, were interpreted as palaces of high-ranking individuals, members of the provincial or military administration. This was often based upon the enormous areas they occupied or their location on the outskirts of towns. This interpretation can no longer be sustained, however, since several houses of this type have been identified in Italica, Volubilis, Ostia, and Vienne in the West, and at Cyrene, Ptolemais and Apamea in the East. Indeed, whole quarters with houses of this type have been excavated in Volubilis, Banasa, Italica, and Vienne.⁵ The axial peristyle type is widespread in domestic architecture of the Imperial period. Its main features — considerable size and the presence of prestigious halls — point to a differentiated sociological interpretation. Methods used in recent studies of the social implications of houses, chiefly Late Republi-

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- 1 This is illustrated, for example, by J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman imperial architecture* (Harmondsworth 1981) and by the emphasis in R. Laurence and A. Wallace-Hadrill (edd.), *Domestic space in the Roman world* (JRA Suppl. 22, 1997).
 - 2 Important works include, for Italy, R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford 1960); J. E. Packer, *The insulae of imperial Ostia* (MAAR 1971); for the Iberian peninsula, A. Balil, *Casa y urbanismo en la España antigua* (Studia Archaeologica 20, 28; Santiago de Compostela 1973, 1974); J. Alarcão and R. Etienne, *Fouilles de Conimbriga I* (Paris 1977); *La casa urbana hispanorromana* (Zaragoza 1991); for Gaul, C. Goudineau, *Les fouilles de la maison au dauphin* (Gallia Suppl. 37, 1979); M. Mangin, *Un quartier de commerçants et d'artisans d'Alésia* (Dijon 1981); A. Desbat et al., *La maison des dieux Océans à Saint-Romain-en-Gal (Rhône)* (Gallia Suppl. 55, 1994); *La maison urbaine d'époque romaine en Gaule Narbonnaise et dans les provinces voisines* (Documents d'Archéologie Vauclusienne, Avignon 1996); for N. Africa, R. Etienne, *Le quartier nord-est de Volubilis* (Paris 1960); R. Rebuffat et al, *Thamusida II. La maison du dallage* (MEFRA Suppl. 2, 1970); S. Gozlan in *Karthago* 16 (1971-72) 41-100; M. Blanchard-Lemée, *Maisons à mosaïques du quartier central de Djemila-Cuicul* (Etudes d'Antiquités Africaines, Aix-en-Provence 1975); Ph. Leveau in *AntAfr* 18 (1982) 109-65; for the Roman East, J. Balty (ed.), *Apamée de Syrie* (Bruxelles 1984).
 - 3 MEFRA 81 (1969) 659-724 (part I), and *ibid.* 86 (1974) 445-99 (part II). Other synthetic studies of North African domestic architecture are: R. Rebuffat et al., *Thamusida II. La maison du dallage* (1970); Y. Thébert in *Histoire de la vie privée I* (1985) 301-97. For Hispano-Roman domestic architecture see also A. Balil, *BullVallad* 25 (1959) 25-58 and *id.*, *Casa y urbanismo* (supra n.2).
 - 4 I use the term "axial" in accordance with J.-C. Balty who, in his description of Imperial town houses at Apamea, distinguished the concepts of "plan axial" and "plan rayonnant" (*Apamée de Syrie* [supra n.2] 473 f.).
 - 5 See already N. Duval in *Apamée de Syrie* (supra n.2) 447-70, esp. 466-70.