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 Herculanum 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-

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).


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.