

## Introduction

### Between Words and Walls: Material and Textual Approaches to Housing in the Graeco-Roman World

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This collection begins from a methodological problem familiar to all who have worked on the housing of the ancient world. That problem centres on the relationship between the diverse texts that have come down to us from antiquity, documentary and literary, and the archaeology of Classical settlements. In relation to housing, the problem is a special instance of the sometimes fraught disciplinary relationship between Classical archaeology and Classical history, which goes back to the formation of the modern academic disciplines, and the more particular issue of a perceived gap between the material world and the textual world.<sup>1</sup> Texts and archaeology rarely tell the same story.

From the 18th century onwards, there was an increased availability and understanding of material remains. Classical archaeology brought together aesthetic interests, focused on art and architecture, but 'early' archaeology also aimed itself at resolving questions derived from the literary material (see the historiographical elements in the studies of Varto, Morgan and Allison in the volume). From Schliemann's discoveries of Troy and Mycenae to the investigations at Pompeii, texts often determined patterns of excavation and how that material evidence was interpreted.

Until the late 19th century, history was very much focused on the political and the event, while social history was a minor discipline.<sup>2</sup> The hegemony of political history created a problem for archaeology; Classical archaeology proved poor at providing evidence of particular events and thus the narratives emerging from archaeological material were difficult to reconcile with mainstream historical studies. Nevertheless, expeditionary and excavation decisions were determined largely by the interest in the political on the one hand and the aesthetic on the other, and so concentrated on major public buildings and monuments at those sites perceived to be of civic importance. Even today, if one wanders across major Classical urban sites, such as Corinth or the Athenian Agora or Rome, it is the major civic buildings, the temples, the meeting places, the basilicas, that is, especially the monuments, to which one's attention is directed. In so many

urban centres, the Campanian cities preserved by Vesuvius being an exception, the archaeology of housing is either invisible or hidden away. Archaeology's role as 'handmaiden to history' determined its agendas.<sup>3</sup>

Texts retained their primacy in understandings of the Classical world even after cultural and economic history came to challenge the hegemony of the history of the event.<sup>4</sup> With regard to household spaces, as various contributors to this volume show (Varto, Morgan, Speksnijder), historians and archaeologists sought to discover physical traces of the spaces and material artefacts represented in their texts.<sup>5</sup> The perceived presence or absence of such traces allowed them in some cases, particularly for Archaic periods, to argue about the realities depicted in those texts.<sup>6</sup> It also provided illustrative material for the social and political structures understood from the texts: archaeology was used to confirm what was already 'known' from historical sources.<sup>7</sup>

The hegemony of the textual heavily influenced the development of study of the ancient domestic, and indeed the very notion of 'the domestic' as Meyer's contribution to the volume demonstrates. Textual hegemonies encouraged a practice of labelling material remains and creating typologies thereof which drew heavily on textual resources (Speksnijder, in this volume), sometimes to the exclusion of material, archaeological, realities.<sup>8</sup> This was a particularly tempting tactic for work on the Roman world for which Vitruvius could be mined for a wealth of labels and architectural descriptions.<sup>9</sup> But such labelling created an epistemic circle: the use of Vitruvian labels for spaces in the archaeological record allowed the labels in the textual record to be given material form, which in turn confirmed the labels applied to the archaeological record. Consequently, archaeologists applied a vocabulary derived from Vitruvius to the spaces on which they worked with a presumption that the spaces in the texts (often very poorly described, or described with other purposes in mind) were identical to the spaces on the ground; historians saw the spaces on the ground as confirmation of the societal models they were developing from the texts. Practitioners of both disciplines ignored the leap of faith that such an epistemic circle required. In both cases, particular methodological concerns which are almost innate to the disciplinary areas (the 'elite' nature of texts; the difficulties of deriving social meaning from material form) were set aside.

For Greece, which does not have an associated treatise on architectural forms, the same process followed from the excavation of significant numbers of domestic structures, as at Olynthus and Priene.<sup>10</sup> The interpretation of the archaeological remains needed a vocabulary and a taxonomy. That taxonomy, as Morgan (in this volume) shows, employed a

vocabulary that was derived from Classical Greek. Consequently, the labels themselves gave the impression that the taxonomy was drawn from Classical texts, that it was part of a Classical Greek world view, and that there was thus a very close relationship between texts and walls that was simply uncovered by the scholars. In reality, of course, archaeologists educated in and deeply familiar with the Classical texts invented the taxonomic system. Baird points to a similar dynamic in the study of Durene housing. Consequently, the taxonomies had embedded within them similar epistemic relationships to texts in Italy, Greece, Egypt and Syria.<sup>11</sup>

This process of labelling also had the unfortunate consequence of reinforcing the primacy of the texts. In the ‘Roman’ instances, historians and archaeologists found ways of interpreting the social significance of those spaces through the textual record.<sup>12</sup> Archaeology remained subservient to the tropes and narratives of the historians. For the Roman world, narratives of aristocratic decline, luxury and the rise of ‘insurgent’ social groups, such as freedmen and a bourgeoisie, were written into the domestic architecture of Pompeii.<sup>13</sup> For the ‘Greek’ world, such labels encouraged historians to write into the very fabric of the house perceived features of ‘Greek’ society (normally derived from Athenocentric texts) such as the spatial segregation of women, homosociability, and democratic egalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> Hellenistic variation from this model fitted within a trope of Classical decline and cultural contact with non-Greeks.<sup>15</sup>

Methodologically, as Allison has forcibly argued, such scholarly endeavours took scholarship on the house to an unfortunate location.<sup>16</sup> In the first instance, the relationship between archaeological–architectural taxonomies and the labels drawn from texts tended not to be treated critically.<sup>17</sup> Nuances of textual description were lost. There was, for instance, no perceived need to entertain the possibility that Vitruvius was not describing an everyday reality of ‘Roman’ or ‘Greek’ housing, since Vitruvian models could be seen in the archaeology. Whereas, Varro and other didactic writers of the late Republican and Augustan period could be seen as engaged in a form of cultural creation, and thus treated more cautiously and critically.<sup>18</sup> Further, the words in texts tended to be treated as descriptive architectural terms, associated with built forms, and through analogy with modern architectural plans were divested of any ideological value or contentious content. Yet, almost every contribution in this volume stresses the flexibility of spatial use and that the function of the spaces within the house was likely to have been varied and subject to adaptation (see summaries below), related not only to the built environment but to

activities and objects. As a consequence, we need not necessarily think of the words in ancient texts as referring to closely defined and regulated architectural forms rather than to the function the space was performing at a particular moment.<sup>19</sup> As Morgan (in this volume), for example, polemically argues, the labelling of rooms by architectural features to which function is then associated misrepresents the nuanced descriptions of spaces that we see in our literary material. Indeed, the tendency in our sources is the reverse: rooms seem to have been identified by function rather than by architectural features. One may also note, in advance of the discussion below, that the modern bourgeois house operates with a high degree of functional separation, which is often clearly reflected in the architecture, and this tendency of scholars to universalize Western bourgeois experience has been a pervasive feature of much social history.

Furthermore, seeing the house through such labels constrains archaeological interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Allison's work on the domestic archaeology of Pompeii in particular argues for the employment of archaeological techniques and interpretative strategies familiar from non-Classical archaeological studies.<sup>21</sup> Her work (notably Allison 2004) poses the challenge of how can we understand the urban houses of Campania if we start from the archaeology rather than from the texts, and in the coda to this volume she argues once more for detailed attention to be paid to archaeological data. The rigour with which the archaeology is treated needs, in Allison's view (in this volume), to be matched by the rigour with which texts, especially literary texts, are treated.

The problems of interpretation are not, however, limited to the methodological. As Alston and Meyer (both in this volume) argue in very different ways, the interpretation of domestic architecture has embedded within it complex cultural assumptions about the 'home'.<sup>22</sup> Meyer examines the representation of domestic archaeology in three museum displays. These displays offered to reconstruct elements of domestic life, very much against contemporary preferences for taxonomic displays of artefacts. There seems to have been a need on the part of the museums to construct an image of 'everyday life', presumably in part to connect visitor to object and culture.

'Everyday life' is a difficult term. In a non-theorized way, it offers a descriptive insight into forms of low or popular culture.<sup>23</sup> These cultural forms can be distinguished from the products of high artistic cultures on display elsewhere in the museums, but also from the deeds and thoughts of 'the great men', who exercise hegemony over historical narratives. Once more, Classical archaeology, in forms other than art history, is deployed to

provide a narrative secondary to that of the perceived major fields of historical and literary analysis. This is not just a narrative from a century ago: anyone who visited the 2013 British Museum exhibition, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (British Museum, London, 28 March–29 September, 2013) will have experienced that same emphasis on ‘the everyday’ the centrepiece of which was a reimagining of a Pompeian house.<sup>24</sup>

Within these models of the everyday, certain assumptions are offered. Invariably, these everyday are bourgeois. They offer us an image of Rome and Greece that is familiar to middle-class audiences. In the British Museum exhibition, the ‘Roman house’ was notable in its familiarity, explicit in drawing connections to contemporary middle-class Italian mores and startlingly liberal social values, particularly in regard to gender, especially in the depiction of a slave society. It even safely concentrated the erotica in the bedroom.

The reconstruction of this everyday also tends to provide a history for women, normally ‘respectable’ women.<sup>25</sup> For moderns, gender construction is deeply intertwined with an understanding of the domestic, and Meyer shows how modern norms and assumptions about domesticity and sexuality inflected the understanding of artefacts and spaces.<sup>26</sup> If the history and archaeology of women is to be a history and archaeology of the domestic, a history of an unproblematic everyday separated from the mainstreams of cultural, social and political history, then it simply maintains and repositions familiar, heavily gendered and repressive tropes of social and historical analysis.

Of course, some of this investigative focus on the female and the domestic derives from textual material, such as the much-quoted section of Lysias 1, but for eastern Mediterranean lands there is a clear replication of Orientalist tropes and explicit or implicit anachronistic parallels with much later societies.<sup>27</sup> More generally, seeing the domestic as somehow more closely related to female histories replicates modern notions of the domestic as predominantly female space and particular forms of gender politics. Such assumptions carry over into understandings of social class (through norms of respectability) and ethnic identity (for which the woman is seen as a carrier; see Alston in this volume). But imagined continuities between the Classical and more modern Mediterranean gender constructions tend to depict the house as fundamentally unchanging and representative of ‘Mediterranean’ sexualities or honour/shame cultures that are seen fundamentally as ahistorical.<sup>28</sup>

Such understandings of ‘the everyday’ can be traced back to the essentialist discourses around the formation of the nation state in the late

18th and 19th centuries and to the related perception of fundamental divisions between public and private realms that led to the 19th-century cult of bourgeois domesticity.<sup>29</sup> As Alston (in this volume) argues, within structuralist anthropology the domestic has been seen as the primary location of acculturation and even a microcosm of cultural value and identity. If the public was the realm of change, the private was the realm of continuity (and resistance). If national values were embedded in a remote past and a cultural inheritance, that past needed to be located not in the ever-changing public sphere, but in the resistant and culture-producing private.

‘Seeing’ the house as cultural or national signifier changes the sorts of questions that we ask of the evidence, determining what we ‘look’ for in ancient household structures and how we conceptualize difference between housing cultures.<sup>30</sup> The axis of private and public, for instance, which has been so influential in studies of Roman housing,<sup>31</sup> is a way of thinking about how the communal is integrated in the private and how the domestic becomes political.<sup>32</sup> It is also a way of thinking about difference between the ‘Roman experience’ and the ‘modern experience’: in weakening the separation of public and private, the Roman domestic sphere becomes more closely integrated into the dynamics of public culture and its histories than contemporary bourgeois domestic culture (supposedly). For the more private ‘Greek’ house, by contrast, the dynamics are reversed and the boundaries between public and private spheres maintained. The results may be different, but the theoretical presumptions are the same.<sup>33</sup>

One consequence of such a perception is to see the house as the producer of a form of cultural identity and to focus attention on any aspects of domestic cultures which seem exogenous to a community.<sup>34</sup> Structuralist or essentialist analyses are notoriously ahistorical and find accounting for change, especially change generated within societies, difficult. If cultures are set and timeless and cultural values are embedded within the everyday of the house, it follows that changes in that everyday structure are likely a response to influences external to the local culture. As Baird has pointed out, much of the historiography of the Middle East has been shaped around an obsession with cultural origins and identities.<sup>35</sup> The narratives that historians of culture have deployed have, for the Classical world, focused on the degree to which a culture has retained local values or adopted exogenous characteristics. For historians of imperial phases of Mediterranean history, notably the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods, Hellenization and Romanization have been defining issues. For Classical archaeologists, taxonomic debates around artefacts and

architectural features have ultimately revolved around this question of cultural origins. The narratives spun around household archaeologies have been shaped by this essentialist rhetoric.<sup>36</sup> The ideal type of the ‘Greek’ or ‘Roman’ or ‘Syrian’ or ‘Egyptian’ house is driven by an assumption that there was a unitary and long-lasting ‘Greek’ or ‘Roman’ or ‘Syrian’ or ‘Egyptian’ culture.<sup>37</sup>

One response to the problems outlined here could be to sever the tie between words and walls. One could start afresh and examine the words without thinking about the archaeology, and the walls without regard to the texts. Arguably, one could consider the separate ‘data’ sets, as Allison describes them, separately. We could, as Speksnijder’s analysis of ‘vestibulum’ (the word) or the *vestibulum* (the architectural feature) might encourage us to do, narrow our definitions so that those aristocratic residences in the city of Rome, as understood from Vitruvius, were seen as an entirely separate category to those of the Campanian cities. One might, as Morgan (2010) and Nevett (1999) suggest, emphasize the variety and mutability of housing from the ‘Greek world’, wherever and whenever that may have been, and thereby render diverse the category of the ‘Greek’ house’, consequently undermining meanings underlying a ‘national’ typology.

But, of course, these are somewhat artificial techniques and one may doubt whether such mental discipline is even possible. One has undoubtedly to be critical of the way in which words used to describe architecture in one area of the ancient Mediterranean might inform our understanding of archaeological spaces in another part, and aware of the methodological and theoretical issues that are involved. Even with documentary evidence that can be closely associated with the archaeology, there are significant problems in the translation between document and space. But with the fragmentary and difficult evidence at our disposal, we need to use all that we can to understand the house and its meanings.

The key shift is not so much methodological as theoretical: we need to change the questions. If we reject the epistemological understandings associated with the nation state and bourgeois historiography as outlined above, then issues of typology and taxonomy and the meaningful content of spatial labels, ancient or modern, become much less important. Instead of seeing housing as representative of a culture, we get to ask a more basic question about how the house functioned within a culture and created cultural value. Specifically, we can ask about the cultural value of particular houses in particular settlements at particular times. Instead of thinking about the house in terms of the macro-level narratives of empires and peoples and their relationships with ethnic culture, we can focus on the



workings of power and the making of cultures within specific communities. The commitment, then, is to the microhistories, or object biographies, of houses and settlements.<sup>38</sup> Such histories may play into narratives of widespread cultural change or integration in or resistance to imperial forms, but will inevitably give more focus to immediate and local social, economic, environmental, cultural and political influences.<sup>39</sup> It is those influences which structured the ‘everyday’ lives of the inhabitants of the houses studied in this volume. This commitment to microhistories, in whatever form, is the guiding thread through this collection.

The benefits of such an approach can be seen in the chapters in this volume. The authors restore temporality and histories to their houses. Volioti uses the notion of a biography of things to think about *lekythoi* within the Greek cultural context. Baird applies the same notion to the Durene houses, whose ‘biographies’ might stretch over generations. Instead of seeing the house as a cultural symbol or as productive of a form of ethnic identity, we can situate the house in its particular conditions of production in which the everyday struggles to get by and maintain status are played out. Pudsey and Baird both focus on the familial and the complex inter-relationship between the structures of family and its places.<sup>40</sup> The house emerges not just as having its own biography, but as offering us insight into the familial histories of those who resided within it. Family and household are also depicted as non-fixed groups, shifting in composition and interests, needs and abilities through their life courses. These familial entities are interrelated in complex ways, or as Baird puts it, ‘entangled’ in the physical forms of the houses. We can become more sensitive to variation, as Pudsey and Uytterhoeven show, for houses both within a single rural community (Tebtynis) and to variation between urban and rural settlement. Baird shows that although the Durene houses have marked similarities, they also have differences. But if we can, as outsiders, identify differences within the limited remains and documentation available to us, we can be certain that to members of the community themselves, likely hypersensitive to social nuance and sociocultural markers, such differences must have been very clear.

Such microhistories allow us to interpret houses within the social and economic structures of those local communities. The chapters associate shifts in house forms with changes in economic activities over the long term (Nevett; McHugh) and see its symbolic functions within a changing historical and cultural context (Varto and also Nevett). They are sensitive to the particular needs and desires of the residents (Alston; Platts) and how particular communities used the domestic as means of negotiating status



and identity (Kaczmarek). We can assess the needs of economic production (Alston; McHugh) in shaping the distribution of residences across the environment and the forms that those residences took. We can rethink housing design, paying attention to senses other than the visual (Platts) and functions beyond the symbolic. But we can also reframe our understanding of the symbolism of the house and the domestic, paying due regard to the values written into spaces in particular ritual contexts (Smith) and the emotional engagement with house (Varto) and its symbolic objects (Volioti) which must in part derive from a shared experience of living within that space (Baird).

Alston's contribution attempts to think through the problem of domestic space starting from a fundamental question about the relationships between space and society. Deploying insights from spatial theorists and political philosophers, he focuses on the micro-dynamics of household formation. If we assume, as he suggests, that the primary desire and requirement of the domestic community was for social reproduction, ensuring the continuity of individuals and families from year to year and generation to generation, then any household must have had an interest in controlling the economic resources necessary for maintaining itself to an appropriate status, controlling the household's labour resources and its productive and reproductive capacities, and negotiating and asserting status with persons and institutions external to the household. Social reproduction depended upon maintaining a level of control in the family and in negotiating relationships with wider societal powers. Households could not be in any meaningful sense autarkic since they must always have engaged in the wider community. Households must, however, have always been multiple, composed of individual agents whose interests and desires were not necessarily aligned: one need only imagine discussions around the forming of new conjugal relations. Yet, the multiplicity of agents does not open the way to anarchy. To negotiate one's path through society, one needed to follow social codes and convention and to find modes of communication and cooperation. The built environment becomes the enabling structure and symbolic representation of these needs and desires and it is in terms of those needs and desires that we can interpret those spaces. In a number of brief case studies, he argues that we might explain evident change, such as the development of villa culture in Italy, and seeming continuities, such as the rural housing types in Syria, through an interplay of desires, resources and power. The culture of villas, for example, can be seen as a coming together of an extreme desire for individual power and the concentration of economic, cultural and political resources in the

hands of a small and immensely privileged elite: what happens if when we look at one of the many fantastic 4th-century CE villa mosaics, we see them not as aesthetics, but as representations of massive social inequality? Through such an approach, Alston argues, we can explain the villa's cultural association with sexual excess and tyranny. In the Syrian examples, Alston links the house form to the modes of economic production and familial and societal reproduction. He embeds the house in particular needs and desires to concentrate and control household resources of land and labour. In contrast to the notion of the everyday deployed above, Alston's view of the everyday is of a field of contestation and competition, ordered, but subject to economic, ideological and political modifications.<sup>41</sup> There was more than one way of exploiting a particular environment and ensuring that a family survived from generation to generation, and it was the politics of the everyday that ensured that particular modes were followed and, sometimes, adapted. It was the everyday negotiation of these complex social requirements that gave shape to the histories of the domestic communities, and to understand those histories we need to return to the individual agents who acted within those households.

We can see a similar interplay of desires and needs in Pudsey's analysis of the houses of Tebtynis. Her focus is on the dynamics of family, dynamics which are only visible through the documentary material, and their interplay with housing. She shows how families (however defined) managed their marital strategies to ensure that their particular households maintained the means by which to survive and continue from generation to generation. She argues that there was a flexibility in the arrangements of domestic space that allowed a negotiation of complex tenurial arrangements. The Egyptian partible inheritance system empowered multiple agents within a household, which must have given rise to a need to negotiate within a household of mutually dependent individuals. Gender dynamics were likely influenced by female control of economic resources and the normative residency of a wife in the house of her husband's family. Since the management of the household/house depended on economic and social resources, it seems likely, as Pudsey suggests, that different dynamics applied in different types of settlement: the houses and households of Tebtynis were likely different, when taken as a group, than the houses and households of nearby Ptolemais Euergetis, the regional capital.

Uytterhoeven similarly argues for a level of diversity in the housing of the Fayum villages. Although many of the sites were poorly excavated and even more poorly published in the early years of the 20th century, more recent and smaller-scale archaeological investigation has allowed