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Privata Luxuria – Towards an Archaeology of Intimacy: Pompeii and Beyond

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28 March 2012 *Anna Anguissola*

Preface

The idea for a panel on privacy in Roman housing occurred to me shortly after completing my dissertation on the alcove rooms of Pompeii (the so-called *cubicula*), when I became aware of other doctoral and post-doctoral scholars in different countries who were addressing very similar issues from a variety of perspectives. Invited papers have addressed four major themes: the identification of "private" spaces and routes in the houses of Pompeii, the relationship between work and family life in buildings that hosted both living quarters and commercial or industrial facilities, the use of quantitative methods to define the levels of seclusion, and the inner organization of houses built (or rebuilt) in two key moments of Pompeian history: the earlier Samnite phase and the last few years before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E. The last section develops a comparative perspective through these case studies: the houses of the mid- and later Empire in northern Africa, Iberia, and the Ancient Near East (focusing on the city of Ephesus).

"Privacy", today, is a widely debated concept and a paramount concern for modern societies. With this word, we define a large number of situations with regards to everyday life, social interaction, public and political communication. The ideas and prerogatives that "privacy" encapsulates are considered, nowadays, to be essential human rights and key issues when defining the mutual relationship between the individual and society at large. Privacy, as described by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, includes a variety of aspects: "The state or condition of being alone, undisturbed, or free from public attention, as a matter of choice or right; seclusion; freedom from interference or intrusion." In itself, the "private" dimension of existence is far from limited to individual activities, with the highest level of confidentiality. This is rather the sphere of intimacy, which counts among several other specifications of privacy. Turning to the *Oxford English Dictionary* again, we read that intimacy is "the quality or condition of being intimate," which is described as "pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal."

When addressing privacy, we necessarily confront ourselves with a wide set of problems, situations, circumstances, and expectations. In order to restore a historical dimension to the concept and perceptions of privacy in ancient cultures, we need to be keenly aware of the complex methodological issues at stake, as well as of the extreme difficulty in defining the object of our research. One possibility is to concentrate on a specific aspect of human experience – be it the built environment, the forms of oral and written communication, the construction of the body and the expression of emotions, or the policy on in-

dividual liberties. Within the many spheres of life, privacy constitutes a relative dimension and lies in the interaction between individual and collective identities.

Only in a few other areas the effort to define and circumscribe privacy is as vital as in the study of domestic environments. Any theoretical approach to housing, both in ancient and modern times, requires that we try to codify and quantify the access that outsiders may have to the individual sphere, both physical and emotional. In order to investigate the role and boundaries of privacy in the houses of the Romans, the city of Pompeii provides a rare case in point, due to the extraordinary concentration and readability of the contextual archaeological data. Nonetheless, it is important not to overlook the huge chronological, geographical, and cultural variety included in what we conventionally call the "Roman world." This extreme diversity prevents both an arbitrary extension of foreign categories to Campanian domestic architecture, and the generalization of those drawn from Pompeii or Herculaneum. Indeed, throughout its whole history Pompeii remained a town of little relevance for those who lived in Rome or in other areas of the Mediterranean. At the same time, notwithstanding its peripheral position and the peculiarities of its own vernacular tradition, Pompeii belonged to a much broader (however multifaceted) cultural horizon ruled by Rome, its models and elites. In this sense, the study of Pompeii's domestic environments provides a precious term of comparison as well as an ideal test-bed for theories, methods, and new avenues of investigation.

Of course, the levels of "privacy" and the extension of "public" areas within a house directly mirror the prestige of a household and the strategies employed to stage its affluence – that is, its "social capital." Therefore, in the past decades scholarship has concentrated mainly on the role that houses played in self-presentation and the construction of personal identities, especially through the analysis of layouts, wall-paintings and mosaics. Within this perspective, the combined study of archaeological remains and the Latin written sources has accumulated a wealth of precious information on how the *domus* was perceived, planned, and used for the purpose of social communication. Recent work, however, has brought a number of different approaches into the limelight and has taught new modes to define the Roman dwellings in terms of privacy, from anthropological and comparative perspectives, to the study of artifact assemblages and perceptions. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill once developed a cross-axis diagram to establish the levels of social permeability through a double distinction between public and private spaces, and between lavishly-decorated and humble spaces. By combining this diagram with the latest directions of research, a more refined definition of the public and private dimension of the house can be obtained. In this sense, rather than describing

spaces as, simply, either public or private, we may rather think in terms of degrees of publicness and privateness (and, on a similar yet different level, degrees of sociality and intimacy).

The issues that a careful reappraisal of the archaeological remains and the written sources arouse are numerous. The "controlled axiality" that we observe in many houses of Pompeii requires a contextual approach aimed to account for both the display and the concealment of spaces, people, and functions, for the purpose of both reception and everyday tasks. To the side of the most-obvious division between front (dedicated to the reception of visitors or occupied by retail outlets) and back (reserved to the everyday life of the family and the meeting with guests), multiple other axes could structure the house into a diverse environment.

The houses of the Romans (with all the differences that this label implies) can hardly be interpreted, *tout court*, in terms of a diametral contraposition between inside and outside. Although, in principle, everything that happens inside a house pertains to the "private" sphere, the domestic life of the Romans included a striking variety of modalities, encounters, and behaviors, several of which we would not hesitate to call "public." At least for those who belonged to the uppermost echelon of society and those who had the means to emulate some of their living practices, domestic space integrated activities related to the public image of the *dominus* and others connected to everyday and family life. It is clear that our notion of "privacy" hardly applies to a system where social conditioning played such a pervasive role to the definition of domestic space. Indeed, the idea of "privacy" itself, as a definition for a whole sphere of existence, does not have a universal character, but is rather determined in accordance with the peculiarities of each human group and constitutes the results of community-specific dynamics of social interaction.

All these remarks lead to the main issue at stake, while trying to understand the meaning and boundaries of privacy in the domestic realm: Are houses built for their inhabitants or rather to impress outsiders? This question needs to be framed within each historical context and is fundamental to address the interplay between individual and social space. A vital aspect is to determine the relationship between the importance, frequency, and architectural impact of the events and actions performed in the house. This is all the more important when we consider that, in the Roman house, several "invisible" functions (both social and intimate) had to coexist with the representative dimension. A chronological perspective can provide some additional elements to understand how a *domus* may have actually accommodated a variety of functions within a strongly characterized layout. Spaces, in fact, could be used differently according to the hour, day, or time of the year, although only

one of their uses may be expressed by architecture or decoration (as has been argued by Ray Laurence). Once the daily ritual of the morning *salutatio* had been performed, for instance, even the atrium could become available for different uses and inhabitants. Following this line of thought, our fundamental question changes once again: instead of deciding what the function (and the corresponding degree of "privacy") of a certain space was, we are encouraged to determine what the possible functions were (or, the other way round, what could not have happened there).

From yet another perspective again, it is clear that investigation on privacy cannot be limited to the dialectics between inhabitants and outsiders. The group of residents, in fact, included many more people than the owner and his close family alone. The Roman *familia*, in fact, included a wide number of persons who were drawn towards the *dominus* and derived their social status and support from their relationship with him (in particular, slaves and freedmen still employed by their former owner). The cohabitiation of persons and functions, therefore, has to be assessed at several levels – taking into account the variety of people within the categories of both inhabitants and visitors, as well as the multiple aspects of seclusion (which, of course, may be meant to hinder sight, sounds, or smells). Besides, according to both prominence of the family and the location of the house (in the town or in the countryside, and in this latter case with an accent either on production or leisure), the social obligations that informed domestic life varied profoundly.

All these themes have been dealt with by the papers delivered in Munich and collected in the present volume. It is naturally not the aim of the book to state a final word on issues that deserve attention from several other points of view (most notably the study of artifacts' assemblages, as argued in Penelope Allison's seminal work on Pompeii). Rather, it is intended as a discussion on issues that lie at the core of the recent research by the scholars involved in the project. The idea throughout the conference and the book preparation has been that of creating a common ground and a lively discussion platform to deal with the problem of "privacy" in the domestic life of the Romans and to improve our understanding of it.

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