

Roman Housing.

SIMON P. ELLIS.

London, Duckworth, 2000 (Hardback), 2002 (Paperback).

Pp. viii + 224, 30 figs., 22 black-and-white plates, one map.

Price: £16.99 (Paperback), £40.00 (Hardback).

ISBN 0-7156-3196-9 (Paperback), 0-7156-2877-1 (Hardback).

This book is based on Simon Ellis' doctoral thesis on late antique housing, commenced in 1978. The text of the paperback edition is unchanged from the hardback edition. The author's stated objective (p.1) is to produce the 'first empire-wide, overall introduction to Roman housing, covering all provinces and all social classes from the origins of Rome to the sixth century AD' for 'the student and general reader' and for the 'more specialised researcher'. The book is divided into seven chapters.

In the introduction Ellis highlights a number of themes ~~running~~ *that run/* through the following chapters: the definition of a Roman house and its design; the functions and inhabitants of Roman houses; and literary evidence and terminology. He provides a brief introduction to the relevant ancient authors and to some of the terms traditionally used to describe Roman-period houses and their various parts. Thus, this introduction brings to the attention of the student and general reader some of the issues which are currently facing investigators of Roman housing. For example, Ellis provides an evocative description of a modern visitor's tour of the preserved Casa dei Vettii in Pompeii, but is quick to warn of the misguided affinity which this visitor may believe s/he has with the Pompeians who once lived here.

Already, in these first few pages, the struggles with which Ellis is faced, in incorporating more recent scholarship with his twenty-year-old research and in combining his detailed knowledge of some areas with his limited knowledge of others, are evident. Ellis warns that the dynamics of a Roman household were quite different from those of a modern one and that we need to be more critical in our use of the ancient written sources when interpreting the material remains. Nevertheless, in this regard, he relies on a number of the premises of traditional scholarship that has recently been questioned. For example, he identifies the owners of the so-called Casa dei Vettii as two freedmen brothers, the Vettii. This attribution was made by Matteo Della Corte (*Casa ed Abitanti di Pompei* (Naples, 1954)), whose positivist and unscientific analysis of the epigraphical evidence in Pompeii has been strongly criticised over the last quarter century (e.g. P. Castrén, *Ordo Populusque Pompeianus: Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii* (Rome, 1975), 3-37; H. Mouritsen, *Elections, Magistrates and the Municipal Élite* (Rome, 1988), 19-27; see also P. M.

Pompeii a 'peristyle' (p. 34). His observation of the seeming conflation of terms for dining rooms (p. 36) demonstrates an uncritical approach to this relationship. For example, to my knowledge, no-one except modern scholars has applied the term *oecus* to spaces in Pompeian houses. So, in most cases, it is not the 'Romans' wish to apply Greek terms to fancy architecture' (p. 36) but the modern classifiers' desire to read ancient literature into these material remains. And why are apparent 'atria' in Spanish 2nd century AD houses, not true 'atria' because they are not associated with 'tablina' (p. 45)? Neither is the 'atrium' in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. And fig. 8, of a 2nd century AD Delian house, has a layout which would seem to fit in with the range of types of 'atrium' houses in Pompeii (e.g. House IX 1,22), so why does it have a 'peristyle' and not an 'atrium'? What makes the villa at Littlecote in Britain fit into this house type? Why is room 18 in the House of the Menander in Pompeii not a 1st century AD 'specialised reception room' (see R. Ling, *The Insula of the Menander in Pompeii I: The Structures* (Oxford, 1997), 59-61)? Ellis' use of Vitruvian terms to describe the different spaces in extant Roman houses relies on an unquestioning approach to traditional scholarship, despite the wealth of recent studies which have warned of the danger of such a prescriptive approach (e.g. A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, 1994), esp. 6; E. W. Leach, 'Oecus on Ibycus: Investigating the Vocabulary of the Roman House', in S. E. Bon and R. Jones (eds.), *Sequence and Space in Pompeii* (Oxford, 1997), 50-72; L. Nevett, 'Perceptions of Domestic Space,' in B. Rawson and P. Weaver [eds] *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment and Space* (Oxford, 1997), 281-298; P. M. Allison, 'Using the Material and Written Sources: Turn of the Millenium Approaches to Roman Domestic Space', *American Journal of Archaeology* 105 (2001), 181-208).

In chapter 3, Ellis discusses the housing of the vast majority of those in the Roman Empire who were not elites. He compares rural and urban housing, at the same time cautioning that this distinction is blurry. He explains that the availability of space is the essential difference between the two realms. He also explains that it is a fallacy to separate business, commercial and industrial activities from residential, both in the town and country settings. This chapter remarks on the greater variation between these, generally smaller, types of houses in the different parts of the Empire than in the more elite houses discussed in chapter 2.

Ellis notes the increasing density of urban living in Rome during the Empire and the sub-division of older buildings in late antiquity. He uses apartment-style housing ~~remains~~ in Ostia to explain the concepts of a 'cenaculum' and a 'medianum' house in the later Empire, terms used in the ancient texts. Some scholars would not agree with him on such uses for these terms. There also seem to be a number of houses discussed in

the remains of

Chapter 5 purports to be concerned with mobile furnishings but it concentrates mainly on room function and the role that the design and decoration of a room play in identifying its function. It commences with the traditional designation of room type, within the conventional 'atrium' house, and uses mainly literary evidence to identify the functions of such rooms and to furnish them. From time to time, extant furnishings and fixtures at sites like Pompeii and Sardis are indeed employed to provide further information on the furnishings and uses of certain parts of the house. In general, there are many interesting and useful ideas in this chapter, such as a mode for understanding how Romans lit their dining-rooms. Although, it should be noted that Romans tended to dine during daylight hours.

Again, Ellis does not seem to have kept abreast with current research in this area. His rather glib dismissal of the complexity of relationships between nomenclature, room type and function, notably the misconstruction of a 'cubiculum' as a 'standard Roman bedroom', show a lack of scholarly engagement with recent research (e.g. Leach (1997), 62-70 n. 6; Nevett (1997), 283, 290-2 n. 6; A. M. Riggsby, "Private" and "Public" in Roman Culture: the Case of the *Cubiculum*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 10 (1997), 36-56). There are other strange discussions which seem to indicate misunderstandings. For example, Ellis refers to a 'bed platform' (p. 158) in Pompeian kitchens and specifically in the Casa dei Vettii. There is no such platform in the latter kitchen, only the conventional hearth or kitchen bench, and I know of no 'bed platforms' in the many houses I have studied myself in Pompeii (P. M. Allison, 'The Distribution of Pompeian House Contents and its Significance', diss., University of Sydney, 1992 (UMI Ann Arbor, 1994); Allison, *The Material Culture of Pompeian Households* (Los Angeles, forthcoming)). Indeed, Ellis shows a lack of familiarity with, and even a confusion about, the nature of Pompeian evidence. On the one hand, he states (p. 159) that 'Pompeian specialists are still grappling with interpretations of the data, but excavators on many other sites have been well aware of the difficulties of interpreting the distribution of artefacts', and on the other hand (p. 164) that the 'evidence from Pompeii is unparalleled'. The former statement seems to deny both this 'unparalleled' evidence and that recent research in Pompeii, which is often investigating data from old excavations rather than excavating material using modern methods, has indeed been able to unravel something of the complexity of this particular data. This is demonstrated by Ellis' own use of some of this research and by its widespread acknowledgement by other Roman scholars (e.g. S. Dyson, 'Some Random Thoughts on a Collection of Papers on Roman archaeology', in S. E. Bon and R. Jones (eds.), *Sequence and Space in Pompeii* (Oxford, 1997), 153-4; D. Mattingly, 'Beyond belief? Drawing a line beneath the

positively
identified

Consumer City', in H. Parkins (ed.), *Roman Urbanism: Beyond the Consumer City* (London and New York, 1997), 215-16; G. Storey, 'Archaeology and Roman Society: Intergrating Textual and Archaeological Data', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 7.3 (1999), 220-31; Chadwick, 'Things Happening on the Way to the Forum...A review of "Briton and A. Romans: Advancing the Archaeological Agenda"', *Assemblage* 2003 [<http://www.shef.ac.uk/assem/issue7/chadwick.html>]; B. Rawson, 'The Roman Family' in Recent Research: State of the Question', *Biblical Interpretation* 11.2 (2003), 124).

Ellis argues that furnishings are of little use in understanding Roman housing because the role of the producer, or designer, of domestic space (pp. 159-60) is of greater significance than that of the consumer, or user, of that space who clutters it with the wrong type of furniture (cf. A. Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach* (Tucson, 1990))! Here Ellis also portrays his post-19th-century 'separate spheres' approach to ancient domestic practice (cf. A. Vickery, 'Historiographical review: Golden Age of Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36.2 (1993), 383-414; see also Allison (2001), 194, n. 6.). One would hope that a study of Roman housing would embrace a concern for the occupants of these residences and for their changing use of these spaces.

Indeed, chapter 6 looks at the importance of the house in the social history of the Roman family. Here Ellis emphasises that a household, or 'houseful', consisted of more than a nuclear family. He also emphasises the role that evidence for circulation about the house plays in our understanding of the dynamics of a Roman house. He stresses that slaves were to be found everywhere and that out-of-the-way parts of the house were as likely to be for guests and lodgers as for household servants. He points out the importance of the domestic developmental cycle in the evident changes in this household and its use of space. In this latter point, particularly, he negates his earlier statement that houses should be viewed from the designers' rather than the users' perspective.

The main points in this chapter are that houses were centres of political influence, through the reception of clients and guests at the *salutatio* and at dinner parties; and that inheritance played an important role in ownership of property and in the diversity of a household. Women receive a brief mention as the *materfamilias* who held control of the house while the *paterfamilias* was absent, although Ellis also acknowledges their ability to inherit and therefore own property in their own right. In his treatment of children, however, Ellis seems to be ignorant of much recent scholarship that has indeed reassessed Philip Ariès' concept of childhood in the pre-modern era (see B. Rawson, 'The Iconography of Roman Childhood', in B. Rawson and P. Weaver (eds.),

The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment and Space (Oxford, 1997), 205-32).

The final section of this chapter provides a useful review of the material and themes covered in the previous chapters, including an overview of the changing nature of Roman housing and its relationship to political change across the Empire.

Throughout the book there are a number of minor errors and erroneous or unsubstantiated assumptions. For example: Vitruvius was not writing in the 2nd century AD (p. 14); there is no epoch 'the third to the fourth century BC' (p. 20); and footnote 57 (p. 160) must be wrong. Also, in which Roman houses do wall-paintings, in reality, create a 'deeper cross-linked structure of metaphor and allusion' (p. 11)?

Ellis claims (p. 146) that 'chests have been found in the atria of more than ten houses in Pompeii'. His reference is Pernice's study of Pompeian display furniture (E. Pernice, *Hellenistische Tische, Zisternmündungen, Beckenuntersätze, Altäre und Truhen* (Berlin, 1932), esp. 72-94). However, Pernice recorded only two atria which actually had chests – the Casa dei Vettii and the Casa di Obellius Firmus (Pernice (1932), 91-93, n. 13.). Otherwise he listed 23 stone and masonry bases of various types which he suggested indicated the location of such chests (Pernice (1932), 72-6 and pls 44-5, n. 13). This is by no means proved, not least because no comparable study of such bases in other parts of Pompeian houses has been carried out.

Ellis' expectation (p.6) that 'new designs in Pompeii were preceded by similar designs in the capital, Rome, which probably took the lead on cultural matters' denies the extremely important role which Greek culture, and very probably Greek culture in Southern Italy, played in the development of 'culture' in the Roman capital.

The illustrations in this book are generally of good quality but are disappointingly sparse and not particularly comprehensive or illuminating of the text. For example, there are no illustrations of 'atrium' or 'peristyle' houses with the various spaces labeled according to the discussion, to guide the student and general reader. There also seem to be a number of errors in the references to these illustrations. For example, fig.10 does not show a cupboard in a triclinium (see p.152) and fig.14 does not show Shop E19 at Sardis (see p.153).

In summary, there is much good, interesting and thoughtful discussion and many important pieces of information in this book. Ellis has brought together a lot of information from the more specialised works of many of his colleagues, such that it is digestible by the 'student and general reader'.

Ellis acknowledges the difficulty of building a 'complete picture of housing across the Empire', not least because of the hugely diverse geographical and cultural regions it covers. There is also the problem of

*; B. Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford 2003)