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THE (IN)DISCREET CHARM OF THE  
BOURGEOISIE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES  
IN A ROMAN HOUSE IN HERCULANEUM  
(*CASA DEL TRAMEZZO DI LEGNO*)

KAIUS TUORI · LAURA NISSIN · JUHANA HEIKONEN  
SAMULI SIMELIUS

1. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN THE ROMAN HOUSE

FOR a historian of the ancient world, domestic arrangements give an exciting window into the world beyond the battles and poets and into the actual lives of the people. The house, as the centre of the life of its occupants, is a reflection of the society at large. Interest in Roman private houses has grown in recent years and new scholarship has questioned many of the presumptions in earlier research and has led to a rethinking of the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> Here, we will look at the Roman house through one example, and through it, the social, cultural, economic and administrative structures and practices of Roman society.

The purpose of this article is to examine *Casa del Tramezzo di Legno* (CdTL) in Herculaneum (III,11)<sup>2</sup> as an example of how the lines between public and private spheres were formed. The article ties into two important ongoing debates. First, the distinction between the public and private in the Roman house and whether such divisions were flexible and fluid or rigid?<sup>3</sup> Second, it pertains to the question whether the evidence from literary sources from the elite has explanatory value in the understanding of the arrangements and cultural conventions prevalent in more modest surroundings outside Rome?<sup>4</sup>

The main question is thus: How were the ideals of the *atrium* house adapted to real-life circumstances? This can be divided into different subquestions, namely how real or perceived ideals were reflected in concrete examples of how Roman houses operated. This leads to a number of further queries about the social and

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently: BALDINI LIPPOLIS 2001; BONINI 2006; BOWES 2010; CARUCCI 2008; ELLIS 2000; GRAHAME 2000; HALES 2003; LAURENCE and WALLACE-HADRILL 1997; ZANKER 1998.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, DE KIND 1998, 105-106 for references to literature. The main works on this house are RUGGIERO 1885, 586-608, 614-615, 622-623, 628, 675; MAIURI 1958, 207-222; DE KIND 1998, 105-113. For earlier interpretations, see, for example, Catalano 2002, who calls it the House of Remnius Rufus.

<sup>3</sup> On the issue of public and private spheres in the Roman house, see WALLACE-HADRILL 1994; RIGGSBY 1997; GRAHAME 1997; TREGGIARI 1998; BURCKHARDT 2003; ZACCARIA RUGGIU 2005; COOPER 2007; WINTERLING 2009; TUORI and NISSIN 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The issue has been focused on the *atrium* house and how typical it actually was: LEACH 2004; HALES 2003; LAURENCE and NEWSOME 2011; WALLACE-HADRILL 2015. On the provinces, see BONINI 2006; CARUCCI 2008; BOWES 2010; ELLIS 2000.

cultural significance of style and appearance. For example, how did the “middle classes”<sup>1</sup> appropriate style signifiers? Did the bourgeoisie try to follow the style of their social and economic superiors? How did commercial functions (rental spaces, commercial activities) and public functions interact, although according to the ideals of the time they were supposed not to? How did houses change and adapt to the changes in cultural and social conventions?

In earlier research, it has been noted that the Roman house was a focal point for many social functions: Not only was it a living space for the extended *familia*, but it served as the main locus for their social activities, representation and banquets. The private house was an important factor in the political life of the elite.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, and this is something that traditional research has overlooked, the house had a number of economic activities (such as work or trade)<sup>3</sup> and administrative functions. In the literature we come across the numerous cultural conventions that influenced how houses were seen and used, from the custom of morning *salutatio* to cultural events organized in them.<sup>4</sup>

The Roman scholar of architecture, Vitruvius divided the house into private and public parts and outlined how the upper classes should have extensive places for representations (such as vestibules, *atria* or peristyles). These were essentially public places, while the middle classes, such as bankers and merchants, should have ample storage areas for their wares.<sup>5</sup>

This juxtaposition of public and private was upheld until some twenty years ago, when new studies began to question this orthodoxy. Archaeologists from earlier generations, such as Maiuri, who had excavated much of Herculaneum, were adamant that upper class houses were in essence symbols of conspicuous consumption meant for status display, while domestic, commercial, female and slave activities were held strictly separate from the display of wealth and status. Their views reflected, by and large, nineteenth-century European views of homes of the bourgeoisie and nobility.<sup>6</sup> What these early studies had in common was their focus on grandeur and the artworks that were found in the houses, rather than the daily life of the people that inhabited them.

In studies since the mid-90s, this strict separation was rejected and replaced by ideas of access, gradual change and cultural appropriation, showing how houses were designed to present wealth and status through sightlines.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the applicability of the whole concept of privacy was problematized.<sup>8</sup>

We will present here our interpretation of one house in Herculaneum, *Casa di Tramezzo di Legno* (CdTL). Its inhabitants remain unknown, but as one of the

<sup>1</sup> Whether one may or may not speak of the middle classes in the context of the ancient world is an interesting question. See MAYER 2012.

<sup>2</sup> TREGGIARI 1998; WINTERLING 2009; ROLLER 2010.

<sup>3</sup> FLOHR 2011, 2012; KASTENMEIER 2007.

<sup>4</sup> LAURENCE 1994, 131; SPEKSNIJDER 2015; GOLDBECK 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Vitr. 6.5.1-2.

<sup>6</sup> The main early works are FIORELLI 1875; MAU 1879, 1882, 1908 and MAIURI 1931, 1958. On their resistance to links between elite houses and commerce, see WALLACE-HADRILL 1994, 122.

<sup>7</sup> LAURENCE and WALLACE-HADRILL 1997; ALLISON 2004; PROUDFOOT 2013.

<sup>8</sup> NISSIN 2015a and 2015b; ANGIUSSOLA 2010, 2013; CARUCCI 2012a, 2012b; WALLACE-HADRILL 1988, 54-58.

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