

Social stratification and the Pompeian domestic environment

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Abstract

Pompeii – described as “the most studied and least understood of sites” due to poor excavation and reporting practices in the past (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 65) – provides the modern observer with an opportunity to evaluate the domestic context for evidence of social stratification. Four aspects of the Pompeian house are particularly noteworthy for this purpose, and are examined in turn: building size and distribution, building design and use, decoration, and the domestic-commercial relationship. The evidence indicates a fundamental link between the domestic environment and social stratification, and the differentiation apparent in the archaeological record indicates the existence of a socially diverse society stretching from the very wealthy to their dependants and slaves. Conclusions are, naturally, uniquely applicable to this town; however generalisations can be extended to contemporary towns on the Italian mainland and to a select few Roman provincial towns in the first century AD.

Keywords

Pompeii, Roman Empire, houses, domestic context, decoration, social structure.

Introduction

Ancient Roman writers describe an inherent relationship between the architecture, decoration and function of a residence on one hand, and the social standing of its owner or occupant on the other (Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.138-139; Tacitus, *Annals* 3.55; Vitruvius, *de Architectura* 6.5). Despite their bias favouring the lives of the elite, these literary sources expose a perceived relationship between domestic environments and social status. Pompeii – a remarkably preserved Roman town “frozen” in time by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius on 24 August AD79 – affords a modern audience the opportunity to examine the archaeological evidence for such traits.

Historically, excavators’ interests have focused on the more opulent Pompeian residences. Recent decades have seen a shift towards the examination of smaller, previously disregarded structures in their contexts, however findings have thus far been restricted to localized areas within the town (see, for instance, [Berry, 1997b](#); [Bon, Jones, Kurchin & Robinson, 1997](#); [Pirson, 1997](#)). This paper seeks to redress the present gap in the scholarship with respect to social stratification *across the town as a whole*, by collating and evaluating individual findings to build a social profile of Pompeii in the first century AD. Considering the domestic environment exclusively, four aspects of the Pompeian house provide evidence of the town’s social stratification and are analysed in turn below: building size and distribution, building design and use, decoration, and the domestic-commercial relationship. The aim of this paper is not to pinpoint the status of individual owners or inhabitants, but rather assess social *diversity* within Pompeii. Archaeological evidence and modern scholarship have been utilised to evaluate past perspectives and interpretations, and articulate a position on Pompeii’s social stratification that is presently absent from scholarship.

This study is limited to the domestic environment; public buildings, administration, religion and trade are not considered here, although would undoubtedly contribute further to an understanding of Pompeii's social stratification. Throughout this paper, references are made to particular locations within the archaeological site of Pompeii using the standard numbering system introduced by Giuseppe Fiorelli. Numerical values refer firstly to one of nine regions (*regiones*), secondly to individual town blocks (*insulae*), and thirdly to building entrances or doorways.

Building size and distribution

Size and distribution of dwellings can be compared and assessed for evidence of social stratification. Pompeii has been described as an “interlocking jigsaw of large, medium and small houses”, integrated into *insulae* (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 99). Comparisons reveal a marked difference in residence size, from the large and grandiose villas and atrium-peristyle houses (for instance, the “House of the Faun” (VI.12) at 2865m²) down to the many small dwellings (including subdivided areas and units) measuring under 100m², and single room, inhabited “shops” as small as 25m². The impreciseness of house “size” deserves mention, reflecting ground area only despite archaeological evidence of upper stories (in the form of stair wells, down-pipes and holes for beams supporting ceilings). Wallace-Hadrill (1994, pp. 186-197, 206-216) and Pirson (1997, p. 170) both lament the current state of preservation limits comparisons, as today's observer is left with the ground area only to undertake a site-wide assessment. Within residential areas broad differences can be noted: a higher proportion of small dwellings (including inhabited commercial premises such as shops) were concentrated around the Forum and main thoroughfares, however larger properties also featured in these areas (Robinson, 1997, pp. 137-140; Grahame, 2000, p. 85;

Laurence, 1994, p. 18; Ling, 2005, p. 147). It is noteworthy that no region was consumed exclusively by larger dwellings, or conversely by small dwellings; rather there was a distribution of large, medium and small dwellings across the town's nine regions. Even within *insulae*, various types of dwellings – and thus different standards of living – co-existed, as evidenced by Berry's (1997b) analysis of *insula* I.9, Pirson's (1997) analysis of *insula* VI.6, Bon et al.'s (1997) analysis of *insula* VI.1 and Jones & Robinson's (2005) analysis within *insula* VI.1.

The ancient literary sources suggest house size was an explicit statement of social standing. Further, they imply that the common man would have no need for a grandiose *atria* or opulent *tablinum*, given he would not receive guests of the same standing as the more elite members of society, such as public figures. The archaeological record provides evidence of this social process, and is addressed below. A contemporary inscription at Tarentum (modern-day Taranto, southern Italy) notes the existence of a property qualification for its members holding public office, indicating the importance of house size (Lex Municipii Tarenti, *CIL* 22.590, as cited in Robinson, 1997, p. 137). Wallace-Hadrill (1990, p. 157) and Robinson (1997, p. 137) argue for similar expectations existing in Pompeii. This suggests that house size alone was an important aspect for the generation and promotion of social status.

Further practical concerns also influenced house size. Wealthier individuals would naturally require a larger space due to their sizeable entourage, including slaves and resident dependants (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 82). Such comparisons justify diversity of property sizes and their distribution in Pompeii, duly revealing differences in Pompeii's social composition. The evidence indicates that this encompassed members of the Roman aristocracy and very wealthy elites residing in villas and large atrium-peristyle houses,

independent property owners residing in medium-sized dwellings, others occupying small units or shops, and dependants and slaves living within the household of a wealthier member of society.

Building design and use

Closely associated with house size, the architectural design of dwellings and subsequent use of space were important – serving practical as well as symbolic functions – and provide evidence for social stratification. Excavators have long noted similarities in architectural features of Pompeian houses, yet no two were identical; each structure was unique, reflecting processes of evolution and ingenuity for a myriad of different purposes (for recent consideration, see Knights, 1997, p. 107; Ling, 2005, p. 141). With respect to the layout of Pompeian houses, two features are worthy of note due to the frequency in which they occur: *atria* and peristyles were both common architectural features, the former more common than the latter – even in small houses *atria* were incorporated (Wallace-Hadrill, 1990, p. 169; Robinson, 1997, p. 139). This indicates the importance of these architectural features to Pompeians.

The *atrium* (in combination with a narrow *fauces* or wider *vestibulum* entry) served as the formal meeting area of the dwelling where all guests were greeted. The archaeological record provides evidence for accompanying benches in larger houses: Allison's analysis found examples of such seating in 30% of sampled houses (Allison, 2004, p. 65; see also Hartnett, 2008). Both Hartnett and Allison have associated these benches with the daily *salutatio* (morning greeting), thus evidencing a manifestation of the patron-client relationship. This accommodation of waiting persons reveals an element of social stratification in which the anticipated visitors were less socially advantaged than their host

(as would be expected for *clientes* waiting for an audience with the *patronus*). Further, this evidence suggests the entry and *atrium* of the house were quite public, and were thus structured to indicate to visitors the owner's identity and importance. The addition of *atria* (and to a lesser extent porticos) in smaller houses – in the style of the larger houses and villas, even though visitors were less frequent – raises the possibility that such features were considered status symbols, designed to emulate the magnificence of the wealthy and invoke powerful connotations associated with the host. As such, the cultural language of the elite was being imitated.

House design frequently allowed a guest, standing in the entranceway or *atrium*, to glimpse deep into the interior of the structure and often see the peristyle beyond (which effectively formed a second nucleus within the house). The "House of the Painted Capitals" (VII.4) is one such example – Descœudres (1994, pp. 54-55) notes the *atrium* and subsequent two peristyles of this residence were positioned in linear form, allowing a visitor at the entrance recess to see in spatial progression a series of openings, doorways, screens, wells of light and shade, thus in effect revealing the scale and lavish decoration of the house.

A visitor's depth of penetration within the house was subject to their relationship with the host, and constituted an acknowledgement of their status. The degrees of "public" and "private" that can be attributed to any particular space in the Roman house ran along a continuum (noting that designations of "public" and "private" are a modern construct) – space was not "public" or "private" per se, but rather "more public" or "more private" relative to elsewhere (Grahame, 1997, pp. 139-140; Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 17). For instance, Grahame's investigation of the "House of the Faun" (VI.12) revealed the area centered on the two *atria* was more "public" and the peristyle more "private" due to its restricted accessibility. Grahame (1997, p. 161), Wallace-Hadrill (1997, p. 239) and Zanker

(1998, pp. 12-13) argue for the existence of differentiation, in that lower-status visitors could be restricted to the *atrium* while the more privileged associates and friends could access the intimate depths of the structure. Thus a social pecking-order was created, corresponding in spatial terms to increased access to the interior parts of the residence. Further, the layout of a house could influence and structure the relationship between inhabitants, including but not expressly relating to dependants and slaves (see in particular Grahame, 1997, p. 142; Grahame, 2000, pp. 76-77). Decoration played an integral role in regulating such flows of interaction within the household, considered below. By providing for a variety of people across the social spectrum, Pompeians have inherently presented the modern viewer with evidence for a diverse and interwoven social structure.

In addition to these “larger” structures, the archaeological record provides evidence for subdivided areas and units. Examples include the irregular cluster of units at VI.11.4/15-17 (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 210) and “Insula Arriana Polliana” at VI.6 (Pirson, 1997). Identification of 450 examples of these small, independent dwellings have been made throughout the town, suggesting such arrangements were not uncommon (for discussion, see Ling, 2005, p. 143; Pirson, 1997, p. 181). Of particular interest is the language and connotations that ancient writers associated with smaller areas: the ancient literary works of Horace (*Carmen Saeculare* 1.4.13-14), Ulpian (*Digesta* 50.16.183) and Varro (*Satires* 38, 47) demonstrate the inferred relationship between smaller dwellings and those of an inferior social background or importance, such as the humble, less fortunate and poor. The existence of such dwellings in Pompeii indicates that the social spectrum extended down to those who could not afford to own substantial property and those who rented.

A degree of hesitation must be associated with the study of Pompeian house layout as inherent gaps exist in the available evidence. None-the-less, the evidence available for

evaluation here reveals that social stratification existed in Pompeii, and spread from the wealthy elite who hosted the daily *salutatio* and ran their lives (and the lives of others) from their own home, to their visitors (themselves constituting a diverse social group of friends, business associates, clients, and dependants) who were permitted access to different parts of the house based on their social standing relative to the host, to the occupants of small units and shops who were in turn considered socially inferior by the wealthy.

Decoration

Decoration, in particular wall painting, has attracted much attention since Pompeii's (re)discovery, resulting in its prominence in modern scholarship. It was a common addition to many Pompeian residences: Wallace-Hadrill (1994, pp. 151-158) found that 59% of 137 houses sampled had at least one decorated room or area. This statistic clearly represents a greater proportion of the population than just the elite (to whom the luxuries of decoration had previously been limited), suggesting a rise in prosperity and social mobility (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994, p. 183; Ling, 2005, p. 145). The frequency with which such decoration is evidenced in the archaeological record – despite significant damage and degeneration of structures – indicates its importance in structuring the social environment, including conceptions of identity and status. Given that decoration was a (relatively) common phenomenon in Roman Pompeii, the *quality* and *extent* of decoration can serve as a better discriminator for social stratification. In particular, the stunning decoration of elite houses can be contrasted against the simple and modest aspirations of smaller dwellings (see Ling, 2005, p. 145; Zanker, 1998, p. 21). What is particularly significant is the *content* of wall paintings: Zanker (1998, pp. 184-191) and Wallace-Hadrill (1994, p. 23) independently concluded that the decoration of small houses sought to imitate the appearance of a villa,

while the decoration of larger houses was reminiscent of the grandiose architecture of royal estates. This suggests householders desired decoration, and wanted it to create the illusion of a luxury they were not able to attain in reality.

Within a house, differences in decoration served to differentiate space. In parts of some houses, a sudden cessation or conspicuous absence of decoration can be noted. This anomaly, coupled with small windows and narrow corridors, *may* have been indicative of service areas and slave quarters, with the “House of the Menander” (I.10.4) and the “House of the Centenary” (IX.8.3/6) serving as examples (for discussion, see George, 1997, pp. 22-24; Allison, 2004, p. 155). As decoration did not differ notably along the “public-private” continuum, this change from decorated to undecorated suggests that decoration was either not desired, or not required. Further, this lack of decoration would have been instrumental in regulating the flows of interaction within a house. Given that decoration was used as an indicator of the occupant’s (perceived) wealth or status, its absence acts as a discriminator and suggests that the activity taking place there and those involved in that activity were of a lesser social standing than the house owner.

The domestic-commercial relationship

The commercial aspect of residences is also an essential element of the town’s social stratification. Modern conceptions of “home” and “workplace” were largely synonymous in ancient Pompeii; the commercial nature of the domestic environment is evidenced by material finds (see in particular Allison, 2004, p. 123; Berry, 1997a, p. 195), and further entrenches the notion that the home was a focus of *public* life. As discussed above, the occupant received dependants (in the case of the elite), business partners, associates and friends at home. A subtle difference can be noted here between those of higher and lower

status: while the elite's residence was primarily a private dwelling, from which business was conducted as required, for the *mercennarius*, the place of work often also served as a place of residence (Laurence, 1994, p. 132). This indicates that an individual's social status was coupled with the domestic-commercial relationship in which he or she participated.

In addition to this, the archaeological record attests to the habitability of workshops, in the case of *tabernae* (with cooking facilities, latrines and niches for beds set into the walls of back rooms) and *pergulae* (with mezzanine floor spaces attached to workshops below), as revealed by Pirson's (1997) analysis of *insula* VI.6 and Bon et al.'s (1997) analysis of *insula* VI.1. As noted above, ancient authors portray the residents of such workshops as socially inferior, however the reality that these occupants lived independently and were involved in some form of commercial activity suggests they could have been financially self-sufficient. Additionally, the archaeological record reveals the mixed nature of "residential" properties (for instance houses and villas) and "commercial" properties, the latter including large bakeries and textile manufacturers (see for instance Laurence, 1994, p. 57; Parkins, 1997, p. 87). This evidence implies these people fulfilled a necessary and important role in society and were duly accepted as such, rather than being socially ostracised as suggested by the ancient literary sources.

Conclusion

The existence of a relationship in ancient Pompeii between the domestic environment and social stratification (and diversity) is undeniable, with the evidence unveiling the intimately entwined nature of these aspects. House size and distribution, design and use, decoration, and commercial activity were all elements that interacted to promote and sustain the social standing of the respective inhabitants. The differentiation apparent from the evidence

reveals a socially diverse society across the town, stretching from the very wealthy to their dependants and slaves.

The wealthy elite, residing in villas and large atrium-peristyle houses, ran their lives (and the lives of others) from their own home. Their residences were structured to indicate to numerous visitors their identity and importance, and the degree of access allowed a visitor was proportional to their social standing relative to the host. The decoration of their houses was reminiscent of the grandiose architecture of royal estates, suggesting they sought to emulate the luxury of their social superiors. Next, independent property owners resided in medium-sized dwellings with decoration that imitated the appearance of a villa, evidencing a desire to create the illusion of luxury they could not attain in reality. Nonetheless, the existence of decoration suggests a rise in prosperity and social mobility. The urban “poor” resided in small units or shops, often as tenants. Despite their position as socially inferior to the wealthy, they were financially autonomous and fulfilled an indispensable role in society. Lastly, dependants and slaves lived with wealthier members of society. Their existence is suggested by an absence of decoration in houses, signifying their social standing below that of the owner of the house. Accordingly, the domestic environment provides conclusive evidence for the exceptionally diverse social stratification of Pompeii in the first century AD.

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