

Domestic Space between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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This paper suggested a new reading of post-Roman references to domestic space, particularly in the work of Gregory of Tours, in the light of recent work on the boundaries of public and private in the Roman house.

As scholars such as Kate Cooper (following and developing earlier work by Andrew Wallace Hadrill and Richar Saller) have shown, the Roman house was a place of scrutiny. In the late republic and early empire the Roman elite male's ability to hold civic office was measured against his ability to control his household. The recognition of his authority by his wife, children, slaves and clients was paramount to define a *dominus*' social standing. As a consequence, the aristocratic *domus* had to be open to public scrutiny. The *domus* was generally open to all visitors (as reflected in the architecture of the peristyle house), though the *dominus* dictated the terms of progress through the house.

In the later Roman empire, Simon Ellis suggests, many houses of the aristocratic elite, both in Rome and in provincial towns, came to absorb civic functions. This development may have led to a more functionalist approach to domestic space that segregated humble and high-ranking visitors through the development of more ceremonial architecture. In brief, when public government became more autocratic and was transferred inside the household, the importance of the household to reflect on the correct management of civic business may have diminished.

Yet, as Kate Cooper argues, the rise of Christianity brought the concept of an omni-present God and, in consequence, a new form of scrutiny that complicated the authority of the *dominus* and his ability to determine his visibility. This view opens up new possibilities to assess the role of domestic architecture in the post-Roman world. Scholars such as Dietrich Claude have noted with puzzlement how little time authors such as Gregory of Tours dedicated to descriptions of domestic architecture and its role in elite representation (when compared to e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus or Sidonius Apollinaris). It is clear, and largely confirmed by the archaeological evidence, that the construction of elite identity in sixth-century Merovingian Gaul (and in general in the Barbarian West) did not rely on the formal and ceremonial use (or the talking about) of domestic space in the way we are accustomed to with the Roman *domus*. This may have to do with changed economic circumstances, or rather, as Chris Wickham argues, with shifts in cultural values. The significance of display of status and wealth within domestic space may only have mattered for an elite aspiring to civic office and not for a militarized elite.

However, it may be a fruitful approach to domestic space in the post-Roman world to shift attention away from the question of architecture and return to the concept of scrutiny. It is clear from many passages in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours that elite behaviour in domestic space continued to be scrutinized. Many crimes of the Merovingian aristocrats that Gregory describes are of a distinctly domestic nature (adultery, murder of relatives, mistreatment of slaves) and happen within domestic space. Domestic space, here, is represented as a place of alleged authority and secrecy; yet, as Gregory makes clear, this is an illusion in the face of an all-seeing and punishing God. Domestic space therefore continues to be the place where behaviour is measured, where morality is created and confirmed, but not (or not only) to judge the ability of a man to perform in civic life, but to perform for the next life.

Bibliography

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