

The aristocratic domus of late antique Rome: public and private

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On the 25th of December, 438, the praetorian prefect and consul Anicius Acilius Glabrio Faustus convened the Senate of Rome for the ceremony of presentation of the Theodosian Code.¹ The work presented by Faustus had been commissioned by the emperor Theodosius II as a compilation of all imperial edicts and constitutions issued since the time of Constantine. Its aim was to bring order to the empire, to assemble in one single code the sacred decisions that regulated different aspects of life, from property rights to religious beliefs.² Roman law was not the product of the rational deliberation of representatives of the people, but the divinely inspired proclamation of a sacred emperor and his sacred councils. The senators who attended Faustus' meeting were witnessing an event of – at least according to imperial ideology – cosmic resonances.

Contrary to modern expectations, this meeting did not take place in the *Curia*, where the Senate still usually met. It did not take place in any of the imperial palaces of Rome, either – a location that would have been suitable, since emperors were at that time spending increasingly longer periods in Rome again. The meeting took place, instead, in a private house, the *domus* of an aristocrat, Faustus himself. We know this because this important political occasion was registered in the senatorial

¹ The meeting is narrated in the so-called *Gesta Senatus*; see J. Mathews, *Laying down the Law*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 31-54. More recently, E. Dovere, «Epifania politica del *Theodosianus*. La pubblicazione romana del *Codex*», *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité* [online], 125-2, 2013 (URL: <http://mefra.revues.org/1742>)

² The aims and criteria for the compilation of the Code were stated in *Cod. Theod.* 1.1.5 and 6. See now B. Salway, «The publication and application of the Theodosian Code. NTh 1, the *Gesta Senatus*, and the *constitutionarii*», *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité* [online], 125-2, 2013 (URL: <http://mefra.revues.org/1754>).

proceedings by Flavius Laurentius, secretary of the Senate, who recorded the location of the meeting without showing any sign of how odd this could be.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss some of the questions raised by the event presided over by Faustus. As Salway recently observed,

(...) the meeting (...) afforded Faustus an opportunity for self aggrandisement in front of his fellows amongst the urban aristocracy. He was able to boast to them of the special distinction that communicating the Code to them conferred upon him. Faustus co-opted the senate to assist him in fulfilling the part in the process of dissemination *per orbem* that Theodosius had entrusted to him.³

The setting of the senatorial gathering allowed Faustus to assert his preeminence over his peers while communicating the imperial will. How could such an important senatorial meeting take place in a domestic space? Trying to make sense of this setting, André Chastagnol considered an exceptional occasion, but the notary's silence suggest otherwise.⁴ If this is correct, what can the use of a house for such a purpose tell us about the boundaries between categories like public and private in late antique Rome? Recent years have been marked by a renewed interest on the Roman *domus* as an interface between notions of public and private.⁵ These have explored primarily the architecture of houses, its decoration and the setting of specific activities. The picture they have shown is one of complementarity – one could say interdependence between what we would call, in modern European languages, public and private. These issues were particularly pronounced in the case of late antique Rome, where powerful house-owners frequently occupied the most important offices in the Roman empire, identifying themselves with the state and the city itself, as

³ Salway, «The publication and application of the Theodosian Code», *op. cit.*, 45.

⁴ A. Chastagnol, *Les fastes de la préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire*, Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1962, 288.

⁵ See most recently the articles collected in K. Tuori and L. Nissin (eds.), *Public and Private in the Roman House and Society*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 102, Portsmouth, RI: 2015. For Late Antiquity, see L. Lavan, L. Özgenel and A. Sarantis (eds.), *Housing in Late Antiquity. From palaces to shops*, Late Antique Archaeology 3.2, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Faustus did. In order to deal with these questions, I am going to discuss in the first place the impact of aristocratic *domus* on the city of Rome and its spaces. I will then consider the monumental character of these houses, and how they were defined as part of the personality and political standing of their owners. Finally, I will analyze the ways in which domestic spaces could be used for political purposes in late antique Rome. As I will argue, aristocratic *domus* played a crucial role in the definition of public life in the former imperial capital, helping to define not only the relationship between private and public spaces, but also that between private and public power.

1. Houses and public spaces

The fourth century was marked by a remarkable boom in the Roman housing market. Although houses certainly occupied a prominent place in the early imperial city-scape, the evidence available suggests that house building had a different type of impact on the late antique urban space.⁶ In different parts of the city, newly built houses incorporated public structures and monuments, as well as *insulae* and other types of utilitarian structures.⁷ On the Oppian hill, a luxurious house was built on top of the Sette Salle cistern that supplied water to the baths of Trajan, adapting the earlier structure that occupied the site. The fourth century *domus* was provided with a nymphaeum, a large apsidal reception hall, and a hexagonal room that opened up to smaller rooms on each one of its sides, two of rectangular form and four with an apse

⁶ On the impact of private houses on early imperial Rome's urbanism, see the surveys of F. Guidobaldi, «Le abitazioni private e l'urbanistica», in A. Giardina (ed.), *Roma Antica*, Bari: Laterza, 2000, 133-61; and A. Wallace-Hadri, «Case e abitanti a Roma», in E. Lo Casio (ed.), *Roma imperiale. Una metropoli antica*, Firenze: Carocci, 2000, 173-220. I have discussed these issues in C. Machado, «Aristocratic houses and the making of late antique Rome and Constantinople», in L. Grig and G. Kelly (eds.), *Two Romes. Rome and Constantinople Compared*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 136-58.

⁷ Machado, «Aristocratic houses and the making of late antique Rome and Constantinople», *op. cit.*, 143-7. This discussion is indebted to the work of F. Guidobaldi, esp. «L'edilizia abitativa unifamiliare nella Roma tardoantica», in A. Giardina (ed.), *Società romana e impero tardoantico, vol.2: Roma – politica, economia, paesaggio urbano*, Bari: Laterza, 1986, 165-237; and «Le *domus* tardoantiche di Roma come 'sensori' delle trasformazioni culturali e sociali», in W. V. Harris (ed.), *The Transformations of 'Urbs Roma' in Late Antiquity*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 33, Portsmouth, RI: 1999, 53-68.

at the short end – all decorated with coloured marble.⁸ The beauty of the decoration and the architectural sophistication of the building attest to the care of its owner and commissioner. Far from being an exceptional example, the house on top of the Sette Sale cistern is a clear indication of a new relationship between domestic and public structures in late antique Rome.

Not very far from the baths of Trajan, on the Caelian hill, a house was built incorporating two earlier *insulae* and blocking what seems to be a street next to it. The owner of the house is identified by a mosaic inscription found in the room identified as a *triclinium*: ‘*Gaudenti v[ivas]*’.⁹ Across the Tiber, in the area of the Conservatorio de San Pasquale Baylon, in Trastevere, a large house was in the process of being built between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century when it was abandoned. The *domus* incorporated different earlier structures, including two *insulae* fronted by *tabernae*.¹⁰ As houses were built adapting and taking over preexisting buildings and public spaces, the lay-out of the city was redefined, acquiring a decidedly aristocratic tone.

This type of behavior should be seen in the context of the private appropriation of public resources, such as water from aqueducts and building materials.¹¹ Scholars have previously referred to it as a process of ‘privatization’ of public spaces, but this is not certain. There are only three examples of public structures converted for domestic

⁸ See, for this house, L. Cozza, «I recenti scavi delle Sette Sale», *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia*, 47, 1974-1975, 79-101; also R. Volpe, «La *domus* delle Sette Sale», in S. Ensoli and E. La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2000, 159-60.

⁹ See G. Spinola in C. Pavolini *et al.*, «La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio. Gli scavi nell’Ospedale Militare», *Römische Mitteilungen*, 100, 1993, 473-83; also G. Spinola, «La *domus* di Gaudentius», in S. Ensoli and E. La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2000, 152-55.

¹⁰ S. Fogagnolo, «Testimonianze del sacco del 410 in un cantiere edilizio a Trastevere (Conservatorio de San Pasquale Baylon)», in J. Lipps, C. Machado, and P. von Rummel (eds.), *The Sack of Rome in 410 AD. The event, its context and its impact*, Palilia 28, Wiesbaden: Dr. L. Reichert Verlag, 2013, 151-61.

¹¹ Discussed in detail in Machado, «Aristocratic houses and the making of late antique Rome and Constantinople», *op. cit.*, 147-52.

use: the *domus* on the Sette Sale, the *domus on Largo Argentina*, and that in the *Porticus Curba*, and they suggested a complicated process that does not fit the idea of privatization.¹² In the case of the Sette Sale, as we saw, the fourth century house incorporated an earlier structure of uncertain function and ownership, possibly a much humbler house or an office used by officials in charge of Trajan's baths. We are poorly informed about the *domus* near Largo Argentina, and it is impossible to be certain about the nature of the structure over which it was built.¹³ In the early 6th century, Theoderic addressed a letter to the *vir illustris* Albinus, granting him permission to incorporate the *porticus Curba*, a structure convincingly identified as the *porticus Absidata* that closed the *forum Transitorium*, into his *domus*. In this case, however, rather than an outright privatization, Theoderic emphasizes the fact that Albinus was performing a service to the city, beautifying and preserving a public monument that was in process of physical decay.¹⁴ Furthermore, public authorities continued to be praised for curbing the encroachment of public structures, showing that this was not an irreversible process.¹⁵ More importantly, fourth and fifth century houses frequently incorporated *insulae*, structures that were privately owned, even if occupied by more than one family.

The construction and renovation of houses at the expense of the previously existing urban fabric was not just an irregular practice that became common; nor

¹² See, for a brief but useful discussion, R. Meneghini, «La trasformazione dello spazio pubblico a Roma tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo», *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité*, 115, 2003, pp. 1060.

¹³ Identified as the *Diribitorium* in F. Guidobaldi, «L'edilizia abitativa unifamiliare nella Roma tardoantica», *op. cit.*, 175-81; and «Le *domus* tardoantiche di Roma come 'sensori' delle trasformazioni culturali e sociali», *op. cit.*, 57.

¹⁴ Cass. *Var.* 4.30; see the comments of C. La Rocca and Y. Marano, in A. Giardina (dir.), *Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro Senatore. Variae*, vol. 2, Libri III-V, Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2014, 356-7. For a discussion of the house, see F. Guidobaldi, «Domus: Albinus V. I.», in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, vol. II, Roma: Quasar, 1995, 28-9 and «Una domus tardoantica e la sua trasformazione in chiesa dei SS. Quirico e Giulitta», in A. Leone, D. Palombi, and S. Walker (eds), *'Res Bene Gestae'. Ricerche di storia urbana su Roma antica in onore di Eva Margareta Steinby*, *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae, Supplementum VI*, Roma: Quasar, 2007, 55-78.

¹⁵ Amm. Marc. 27.9.10 praises the urban prefect Praetextatus (367) for removing the *maeniana* and the walls of houses that encroached onto temples.

should it be seen as a sign of the decline of the ancient city either. It was the expression of a social change, a sign of a new type of relationship between the city and its elites. This practice is also documented in other cities, as in Ostia: it is the case of the *domus* of Amore e Psiche, the *domus* del Ninfeo, and the *domus* of the Dioscuri, for example.¹⁶ Roman aristocrats used their houses as a way of appropriating public spaces and public structures. They were doing it in different parts of the city of Rome, in very visible locations – in the case of the *domus* on top of the Sette Sale, it explicitly occupied a public structure that was still in use.

2. Personal monuments

The irruption of domestic structures in late antique Rome's urban fabric should be seen in the context of the renewed importance of these spaces as personal and family monuments.¹⁷ Since the earliest history of Rome, houses were a focus for economic investment, a symbol of wealth and personal power, and a way of legitimizing the social position of aristocrats.¹⁸ This was still true in Late Antiquity – in fact, the identification between houses and their owners seem to have become even more pronounced than in earlier periods.¹⁹ This is well illustrated by the *domus* of the Valerii, on the Caelian hill (Fig. 1). The excavations that were carried out during the building of the Ospedale dell'Addolorata, in the early 20th c., revealed the remains of

¹⁶ It is the case of Ostia, for example: see the examples now discussed in C. Pavolini, «Un gruppo di ricche case ostiensi del tardo impero: trasformazioni architettoniche e cambiamenti sociali», in *Marmoribus Vestita. Miscellanea in onore di Federico Guidobaldi, vol. 2*, Studi di Antichità Cristiana 63, Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2011, e.g., pp. 1032 (*domus* di Amore e Psiche), 1034-5 (*domus* del Ninfeo), and 1036-8 (*domus* dei Dioscuri).

¹⁷ The notion of houses as family monuments was criticised by J. Hillner, «*Domus*, family, and inheritance: the senatorial family house in late antique Rome», *Journal of Roman Studies*, 113, 2003, 129-45; but see J. Dubouloz, *La propriété immobilière à Rome et en Italie, Ier-Ve siècles*, Roma: École française de Rome, 2011, 507-36.

¹⁸ See the seminal work of T. P. Wiseman, T. P. «*Conspicui postes tectaque digna Deo*: the public image of aristocratic and imperial houses in the late Republic and early Empire», in *L'Urbs: espace urbain et histoire (I^{er} siècle av. J.-C. – III^e siècle ap. J.-C.)*, Roma: École française de Rome, 1987, 393-413; also J. Bodel, «Monumental villas and villa monuments», *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 10, 1997, 5-36

¹⁹ As shown in C. Machado, «Between memory and oblivion: the end of the Roman *domus*», in R. Berhwald and C. Witschel (eds.), *Rom in der Spätantike. Historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012, 111-138.

a magnificent late antique *domus*.²⁰ Among the structures identified there was a *porticus* on the western side (Fig. 1: a), private baths, and a richly decorated *aula* on the northern side (Fig. 1: f). Five inscribed marble bases recording the dedications of statues by a number of corporations to Lucius Aradius Valerius Proculus, urban prefect in the middle of the fourth century, were found in this area. Six bronze *tabulae patronatus* dedicated by African cities to his brother, Quintus Aradius Valerius Proculus, were also found in this same spot.²¹ The most likely provenance for the inscriptions is the *atrium* of the house, where statues of famous historical characters, philosophers, and different herms were found.²² It is possible that the *porticus* found in 1902 was part of this *atrium*, as three marble herms were found there in their original position, between columns and the wall.²³

Honorific statues and *tabulae patronatus* were prestigious objects that added to the honour of any house, celebrating the achievements of past and present family members and their social and political connections – in the case of the Valerii, with the corporations of Rome and different cities in Africa. They were reminders of the family's prestige and power, just as statues and other monuments in the Forum

²⁰ For the original publication of these discoveries, see the reports of G. Gatti in *Notizia degli Scavi di Antichità*, 1902, 267-69, 356, and 463-64; also *Notizia degli Scavi di Antichità*, 1903, 59 and 92; see A. M. Colini, *Storia e Topografia del Celio nell'antichità*, Memorie della Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia 7, Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1944, 253-258; F. Guidobaldi, «L'edilizia abitativa unifamiliare nella Roma tardoantica», in A. Giardina (ed.), *Società romana e impero tardoantico, vol.2: Roma – politica, economia, paesaggio urbano*, Bari: Laterza, 1986, 186-188. See C. Pavolini, «Nuovi contributi alla topografia del Celio da rinvenimenti casuali di scavo», *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*, 96, 1994-95, 84-88 and C. Pavolini, *Archeologia e topografia della regione II (Celio). Un aggiornamento sessant'anni dopo Colini, Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae, supp. 3*, Roma: Quasar, 2006, 65-66 for more recent works. Further excavation was undertaken in 2005, immediately to the N of the area excavated on previous occasions, revealing late republican and early imperial phases abandoned and buried in the course of the 3rd c.: see M. Barbera, S. Palladino, and S. Paterna, «La *domus* dei Valerii sul Celio alla luce delle recenti scoperte», *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 76, 2008, 75-98 and 349-54.

²¹ See for the statue-bases: *CIL VI*, 1690-94=*Last Statues of Antiquity* (LSA) 1396-1400; for the *tabulae patronatus*: *CIL VI*, 1684-89=Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR) 111462-66. For the findings, see R. Lanciani, *Storia degli scavi di Roma*, vol. 3 (1550-1565), Roma: Quasar, 1990, 77.

²² Cited by C. Hülsen, «Die Herminenchriften Beruehmter griechen und die ikonographischen Sammlungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts», *Römische Mitteilungen*, 16, 1901, 205-206.

²³ G. Gatti, «La casa celimontana dei Valerii e il monastero di S. Erasmo», *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*, 30, 1902, 158.

reminded citizens of the glories of Rome. The house was more than just the material expression of the family's wealth; it was the arena where different groups, in Rome and in other parts of the empire, celebrated their political and social connections with powerful patrons and benefactors. The *domus* of the Valerii served different, complementary political functions, for the Valerii themselves as well as for their clients and allies.

There was no opposition between public power and personal celebration, and houses were the interface where these two dimensions of aristocratic life could be combined. A good example of this combination is the magnificent apsidal hall conventionally called the 'basilica of Junius Bassus', a structure that has been convincingly identified as part of an aristocratic house.²⁴ The building, which was converted into the church of Sant'Andrea on the Esquiline in the late 5th century, was only demolished in the 1930s, but it was already in a bad state of preservation in the 15th century. All that survives of its decoration are magnificent *opus sectile* panels depicting animals, a mythological scene, and what is thought to be the ceremony of inauguration of Bassus' term as consul, the circus games that took place at the beginning of the year and that he presided.

The inscription that ran along the apse was copied in the later Middle Ages, and it records: 'Iunius Bassus, v(ir) c(larissimus), consul ordinarius, propria impensa a solo fecit et dedicavit.'²⁵ It is worth paying attention to the official language of Bassus' inscription. The language is typical of that employed in texts recording public

²⁴ On the building and its history, see C. Hülsen, «Die Basilica des Iunius Bassus und die Kirche S. Andrea Cata Barbara auf dem Esquilin», in *Festschrift für Julius Schlosser zum 60. Geburtstag*, Zürich: Almathea-Verlag, 1927, 53-67; G. Lugli and T. Ashby, «La basilica di Giunio Basso sull'Esquilino», *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 9, 1932, 221-55. See also, more recently, Guidobaldi (1986) 184-85 and M. Sapelli, «La basilica di Giunio Basso», in S. Ensoli and E. La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2000, 137-39.

²⁵ *CIL* VI, 1737=ILCV 59=EDR111532. The copy was preserved in the Siena Codex K X 35, see *CIL* VI, p. xliii.

works, and it accorded with the extraordinary position occupied by Bassus in Rome's hierarchy of power. He was consul in 331, after having spent 13 years as praetorian prefect – in other words, a key player in the consolidation of the Constantinian regime.²⁶ There was no opposition between the aristocrat's personal standing and public office. In fact, one was enhanced by the other. The magnificent hall constructed by the consul Bassus was located somewhere in-between the public and the private sphere, just as he was by virtue of his many years of close association with the court.

The dedication of honorific statues by corporations and provincial cities, usually exposed in the *atria* of aristocratic *domus*, also enhanced the public character of domestic spaces. Since the time of Augustus, emperors and members of their families had dominated the dedication of statues in Rome, being frequently honoured in the most prestigious (public) spaces.²⁷ Senators were also honoured with statues in public and private contexts, but in much smaller numbers. Emperors and their families continued to receive the largest share of statue dedications in Late Antiquity, being honoured in 48 per cent of the surviving dedications made in Rome between 270 and 535.²⁸ What is remarkable, however, is the fact that aristocrats were honoured in 43.4 per cent of the surviving dedications whose honorand can be identified (112 out of 258): a very high number that is in clear contrast with what is known for the early empire. Statues of members of the Roman elite occupied a much more prominent role

²⁶ See *PLRE* I, Bassus 14, for his career.

²⁷ As observed by W. Eck, «Onori per persone di alto rango sociopolitico in ambito pubblico e privato», in *Tra epigrafia, prosopografia e archeologia. Scritti scelti, rielaborati ed aggiornati*, Roma: Quasar, 1996, 311; see also J. Weisweiler, «From equality to asymmetry: honorific statues, imperial power, and senatorial identity in late-antique Rome», *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 25, 2012, 322.

²⁸ I.e., 124 out of 258 inscribed dedications that can be identified included in the *Last Statues of Antiquity* database (I am excluding 93 dedications whose honorand cannot be identified). Although these numbers only reflect the information available at the time of publication of the database, they present a fairly accurate picture of the Roman statue habit. See <http://laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk> for the data.

in the city-scape than ever before, and houses had become a primary space for the setting up of these honours.

It is not always easy to tell the provenance of these monuments, as often times we have no information about it. Some inscriptions, however, do mention the setting up of a statue in a domestic context, in one case going as far as specifying its location in the vestibule of the house.²⁹ In other cases, one or more dedications of a strong personal nature (set up by a client, or a member of the family) indicate that the original provenance was a house. Even when we consider these difficulties, the number of statues probably placed in domestic areas is remarkably high: 48 out of 112 bases. A few *domus* had a significant collection of statues, like the *domus* of the Valerii with five bases, mentioned above, as well as the residence of Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus near the Lateran, with four bases. Houses were important spaces for the setting up of honorific monuments, similar to those that adorned the *fora* of Rome and of many cities all around the empire.

The identification between houses and their owners was one of the defining features of Rome's city life.³⁰ Aristocratic houses were decorated with genealogical trees, inscriptions, and the images of their famous ancestors. These personal monuments served as their owners' claim to historical greatness. It is impossible to know how old was this practice, but Roman writers like the elder Pliny associated it with a distant past:

In the halls of our ancestors it was otherwise; portraits were the objects displayed to be looked at, not statues by foreign artists, nor bronzes nor marbles, but wax models of faces were set out each on a separate side-board, to furnish likenesses to be carried in procession at a funeral in the clan, and always when some member of it passed away the entire company of his house that had ever existed was present. The pedigrees too were traced in a spread of lines running near the several painted portraits. The *tablina* were kept filled with books of records and with written

²⁹ For example, *CIL* VI, 1675=*LSA*-1392; *CIL* VI, 32051=*LSA*-1253; *CIL* VI, 41383=*LSA*-1521.

³⁰ I discussed these issues in greater detail in Machado, «Between memory and oblivion», *op. cit.*, 113-15.

memorials of official careers. Outside the houses and round the doorways there were other presentations of those mighty spirits, with spoils taken from the enemy fastened to them, which even one who bought the house was not permitted to unfasten, and the mansions eternally celebrated a triumph even though they changed their masters. This acted as a mighty incentive, when every day the very walls reproached an unwarlike owner with intruding on the triumphs of another.³¹

The properties built and embellished by the late Republican senator Lucullus earned him the reputation of ‘Xerxes in a toga’, and were remembered in the 1st c. AD by Pliny the Elder as a sign of luxury and by Symmachus in the 4th c. as a sign of good taste in decoration.³² Symmachus’ reference to Lucullus indicates that the memory of owners and builders of magnificent houses could survive for centuries. A century later, the Ostrogoth Odoacer confined Romulus Augustus *in Lucullano Campaniae castello*, referring to another property of the Republican senator, this time in Campania, in the vicinity of Naples.³³ In the case of Rome, the most illustrious example was the *domus* of Pompey the Great, the *domus Rostrata*. The location of this house is not certain, but we know from Cicero that Pompey had decorated it with the *rostra* of the pirates’ ships he defeated in 67 B.C.³⁴ According to the largely fictional account of the *Historia Augusta*, the family of the Gordiani owned it in the mid-3rd c., a fact that would attest to the family’s wealth and power.³⁵ The biography of the emperor Tacitus (also in the *Historia Augusta*) suggests the same, stating that ‘[h]is [i.e., Tacitus’] image was placed in the property of the Quintilii, depicted in five different ways in one panel, wearing a toga, in a military cloak, in an armour, in a

³¹ Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 35.7 (transl. Rackham).

³² On the splendour of Lucullus’ properties, the main source is Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 39.3-4; Pliny: *HN* 36.49; Symm.: *Ep.* 6.70.

³³ See Jord. *Romana* 344 and *Get.* 46.242. The post-antique life of the villa of Lucullus was discussed by E. Savino, *Campania Tardoromana (284-604 d.C.)*, Munera 20, Bari: Laterza, 2005, 226 n. 415.

³⁴ Cic. *Phil.* 2.68; for the location, see V. Jolivet, «*Horti Pompeiani*», *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, vol. III, Roma: Quasar, 1996, 78-79.

³⁵ *Gord.* 2.3.

Greek mantle, and in the guise of a hunter'.³⁶ Although the historical accuracy of this information cannot be verified, it also suggests that memories could be added to properties. Houses were therefore symbols of the standing of present and previous owners, museums recording their political achievements and social connections. In late antique Rome, aristocratic *domus* gave a new meaning to the urban fabric, creating new centres of power that redefined the political map of the city.

3. The political use of houses

Houses invaded and incorporated the surrounding urban space, at the same time that they served as a symbol of the public standing and ambitions of their owners. It is their use as venues for public and official functions, however, that marks the importance of domestic structures in the life of late antique Rome. This is best indicated by the importance attributed to apsidal halls like the one built by Junius Bassus, an architectural feature that frequently serves as the most conspicuous (sometimes unique) remain of late Roman houses in the *Urbs*.³⁷ The senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus illustrates the importance of spaces designed for receiving visitors, when he mentions in one letter the works that he was carrying out in his house, which were necessary "...because the previous owner had prioritized capacity of reception over the solidity of the building, as well as quickness in construction over safety".³⁸ Although mainly concerned with the safety of the structure, the reference to the room's capacity of reception makes it clear that there was a connection between decoration and political function.

³⁶ SHA, *Tac.* 16.2: "*Imago eius posita est in Quintiliorum, in una tabula quinquplex, in qua semel togatus, semel chlamydatus, semel armatus, semel palliatus, semel venatorio habitu.*"

³⁷ E. De Albentis E., «Abitare nella tarda antichità. Gli apparati di rappresentanza delle *domus*, le strutture absidate e i loro antecedente ellenistico-imperiali», *Eutopia*, 3, 2003, 119-89; the fundamental reference remains Guidobaldi, «L'edilizia abitativa unifamiliare nella Roma tardoantica», *op. cit.*

³⁸ *Ep.* 6.70: "...*quia frequentationem soliditati conditor primus antetulit et antiquiori ei visa est celeritas utendi quam securitas succedentium*".

The connection between domestic spaces (and their dimension) and the political strategies of the aristocracy was highlighted by Ammianus Marcellinus, in a passage in which he described a visitor's entrance into an aristocratic *domus*:

But nowadays, if as an honourable stranger you enter to pay your respects to some noble and well-to-do man (and therefore puffed up), at first you will be greeted as if you were a long-expected friend (...). When, encouraged by this affability, you make the same call on the following day, you will hang about unknown and unexpected, while the man who the day before urged you to call again counts up his clients, wondering who you are or whence you came.³⁹

An aristocrat's dwelling was the space where his social network was built, a space where social and political interactions were constantly taking place. This power-base was a very concrete resource that could be counted in the context of the *domus*. Ambitious aristocrats could thus enhance their standing in late Roman society by attracting people with gifts and the promise of benefactions to a space that was shaped according to his (or her) self-image. The house was not a public space, in the sense that it had an owner and that it was not open to all. Doors and *nomenclatores* helped to block the entrance and identify who was not allowed in, even if they could be bribed, and guests could turn up unexpectedly.⁴⁰ As a result, the social encounters that took place in aristocratic houses were of a very particular type, much more personal than those for which the streets and *fora* of Rome served as scenario, but much more public than those that we associate with domestic spaces in modern societies. As Wallace-Hadrill aptly put, “[a] public figure went home not so much to shield himself from the public gaze as to present himself to it in the best light.”⁴¹

House-owners' obsession with the size and decoration of reception rooms was not something new in Late Antiquity. This is a development that can be clearly seen

³⁹ Amm. Marc. 14.6.12-13 (Transl. Rolfe).

⁴⁰ As we are reminded by Ammianus himself: 14.6.15.

⁴¹ A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 5.

in the late Republican period, as the influence of Hellenistic palatial architecture begins to appear more clearly in the material and literary evidence from Rome and – especially – that related to suburban and rural *villae*.⁴² Vitruvius had already pointed out that prominent citizens should have their houses fitted with spacious and grand reception rooms, *atria* and *basilicae*.⁴³ The adoption of features usually associated with public buildings by house-builders can be seen in different late antique cities, as throughout the empire the upper strata of local elites asserted their dominance over their fellow citizens and their city councils.⁴⁴ Home to a powerful and well-connected senatorial elite, Rome was an ideal setting for this type of architecture, as the meeting of the Senate in the house of Faustus suggests.

We can examine these issues more closely by considering in greater detail a particularly well documented late Roman house. The excavation of the *domus* of the Symmachi (Fig. 2), on the Caelian hill, revealed a complex that occupied an estimated area of c. 6,500-8,500 sqm, and therefore among the largest in late antique Rome.⁴⁵ The *domus* was adapted from an earlier building, probably from the late 2nd or early 3rd c. The house's main reception room was a single space until the 4th c., when it was subdivided by the erection of walls and of a second, smaller apse (Fig. 3). These changes created an apsidal hall with a corridor running around it. Carignani suggests that the corridor might have been used by servants, but it is also possible that the

⁴² See P. Gros, *L'architecture romaine du début du IIIe av. J.-C. à la fin du Haut-Empire*, vol. 2: *Maisons, palais, villas et tombeaux*, Paris: Picard, 2006, 72-7; and especially E. La Rocca, «Il lusso come espressione di potere», in M. Cima and E. La Rocca (eds.), *Le tranquille dimore degli dei. La residenza imperiale degli 'horti' Lamiani*, Roma: Marsilio, 1986, 3-35.

⁴³ Vitruv. *De Arch.* 6.5.2. This is explored by A. Wallace-Hadrill, «The social structure of the Roman house», *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 56, 1988, 43-97.

⁴⁴ See, for useful surveys, K. Bowes, *Houses and Society in the Later Roman Empire*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010, 35-60; G. Brands and L. V. Rutgers, «Wohnen in der Spätantike», in W. Hoepfner (ed.), *Geschichte des Wohnens, Band 1*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999, 855-918; and especially J.-P. Sodini, «Habitat de l'Antiquité Tardive», *Topoi*, 5, 1995, 151-218 and *Topoi*, 7, 1997, 435-577.

⁴⁵ See A. Carignani, in Pavolini *et al.*, «La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio. Gli scavi nell'Ospedale Militare», 483-502, and «La *domus* 'dei Simmaci'», in Ensoli and La Rocca (eds.), *Aurea Roma*, *op. cit.*, 149-51; see also F. Guidobaldi, «*Domus: Q. Aurelius Symmachus s. Eusebius*», *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, vol. II, Roma: Quasar, 1995, 183-4.

walls were erected to bring solidity to the structure – a requirement that, as we saw, Symmachus was very much aware of.⁴⁶ The decoration of the pavement was very elaborate, with two different styles of marble *opus sectile*, and with the part corresponding to the apse on a higher level. These changes also transformed the setting that framed the appearances of the house-owner in public, placing him on a higher level, a tribunal, from where he greeted his visitors. Whereas the earlier exedra was decorated with niches for statues, the 4th c. apse masked it, being itself decorated with marble revetment and with a mosaic adorning the apse's ceiling.⁴⁷ Symmachus' interest in mosaics and *opus sectile* is well documented in his correspondence,⁴⁸ but what is interesting is that we can actually see a choice of one *medium* of self-display over another, probably with the same purpose, to cause an impression on viewers, but with different visual effects.

Symmachus' grand apsidal hall was part of an impressive series of elaborate spaces that formed the main reception area of the house, on the eastern part of the complex (Fig. 2).⁴⁹ Here, a series of rooms were built opening up to an open courtyard surrounded by a colonnade (Fig. 2: I). It was probably in this part of the house that the honorific statues dedicated by his son Memmius dedicated to Symmachus and to Nicomachus Flavianus (Memmius' father-in-law).⁵⁰ The rooms next to the apsidal hall probably served different functions. Whereas room M might have served as a connecting space, those on the East side, R and S, had different shapes, allowing the creation of articulated spaces limited by the outer wall of the house. The function of these rooms remains unknown, but perhaps their function can be illuminated by a

⁴⁶ Carignani in Pavolini *et alii*, «La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio», *op. cit.*, 488.

⁴⁷ Carignani in Pavolini *et alii*, «La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio», *op. cit.*, 488-89.

⁴⁸ See *Ep.* 1.12; 6.49; 6.70; and 8.42.

⁴⁹ The following description is indebted to Carignani in Pavolini *et alii*, «La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio», *op. cit.*, 483-502.

⁵⁰ Respectively, *CIL* VI, 1699=*LSA*-270 and *CIL* VI, 1782=*LSA*-271.

passage of Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, in which he tells us that it was Gaius Gracchus and Livius Drusus who first adopted the practice of separating the crowds that frequented their houses, clients and friends.⁵¹

To receive visitors of different status in more or less exclusive rooms was a mechanism of distinction, not only in terms of who was seen and received, but also in terms of the importance and secrecy of what was discussed in such meetings. We can see an example of this in a passage of the life of bishop Silverius (536-537) in the *Liber Pontificalis*, in which the Christian bishop, having been accused of corresponding with the Ostrogoths, was summoned by the Byzantine commander Belisarius to the *domus Pinciana*:

He [Belisarius] made the blessed pope Silverius come to him at the Pincian palace, and made all the clergy wait at the first and second curtains. When Silverius entered the inner chamber alone with Vigilus, the patrician Antonina was lying on a couch with the patrician Belisarius sitting at her feet. On seeing him, Antonina said: 'Say, lord pope Silverius, what have we done to you and the Romans to make you want to betray us into the hands of the Goths?' While she was speaking, John, the regionary sub deacon of the first region, entered, took the *pallium* from his [i.e., Silverius'] neck, and led him into the bedchamber. John stripped him, dressed him in a monastic habit, and hid him. Then Xystus, regionary sub deacon of the sixth region, seeing him as a monk, came out and announced to the clergy that the lord pope had been deposed and had been made a monk. On hearing this they all fled.⁵²

Although slightly later than the period that interests us, the events surrounding the deposition of Silverius illustrate perfectly the ways in which elaborate domestic spaces suited political occasions. Walls, doors, and curtains allowed the articulation

⁵¹ *Ben.* 6.33.3-34.2.

⁵² *Lib. Pont.* I, pp. 292-93: "Tunc fecit beatum Silverium papam venire ad se in palatium Pincis et ad primum et secundum velum retenuit omnem clerum. Quo ingresso Silverius cum Vigilio soli in musileo, Antonina patricia iacebat in lecto et Vilisarius [sic] patricius sedebat ad pedes eius. Et dum eum vidisset Antonina dixit ad eum: 'Dic, domne Silveri papa, quid fecimus tibi et Romanis, ut tu vellis nos in manu Gothorum tradere?' Adhuc ea loquente, ingressus Iohannis, subdiaconus regionarius primae regionis, tulit pallium de collo eius et duxit in cubiculum; expolians eum induit eum vestem monachicam et abscondit eum. Tunc Xystus, subdiaconus regionarius regionis sextae, videns eum iam monachum, egressus foras nuntiavit ad clerum, dicens quia domnus papa depositus est et factus est monachus. Qui audientes fugerunt omnes."

and expression of hierarchies of personal status, filtering access to the inner parts of the *domus* and to the most important political decisions made. This is true also for other societies, such as Early Modern England, where the use of cabinets and antechambers became more common precisely for this reason.⁵³ Symmachus, who led an active political life, being involved in major debates (including conspiracies), is someone for whom this type of spatial differentiation would be well suited.

Macrobius' *Saturnalia* gives illustrates how important such meetings and their spatial dimension could be. There we are told that an unexpected guest arrived at the house of Praetextatus during the banquet of the *Saturnalia*.⁵⁴ The guest, Evangelus, on seeing such important people gathered, remarked: 'Has mere chance gathered all these men to you, Praetextatus, or is the meeting pre-arranged so you could conspire on some deep matter better left unwitnessed? If that's the case (I judge it is), I'll leave rather than get involved in your hidden goings-on, from which I'll gladly distance myself, though I chanced to burst in upon them.'⁵⁵ The protection of the *domus*' walls, the fact that only authorized people had access to this space, and the possibility of meeting friends of similar inclinations, opinions, and ambitions, made domestic space an ideal setting for conspiracies and political plots.⁵⁶ Those issues that senators could not discuss in the *Curia* could be agreed upon in private libraries and dining halls.

Aristocratic houses were however associated to political life in a more fundamental sense. Vitruvius had already noticed this, when he observed that the houses of noble citizens should be both magnificent and luxurious, "(...) for in the

⁵³ A process analysed by M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

⁵⁴ Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.7.1-2.

⁵⁵ Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.7.4 (Transl. Kaster).

⁵⁶ See discussion in L. Özgenel, «Public use and privacy in late antique houses in Asia Minor: the architecture of spatial control», in Lavan, Özgenel and Sarantis (eds.), *Housing in Late Antiquity*, *op. cit.*, 239-81.

homes of these people, often enough, both public deliberations and private judgements and arbitrations are carried out.”⁵⁷ Activities that we tend to associate with public life (and, accordingly, spaces seen as public) could also take place in the domestic sphere. Two laws issued by Constantine in 331 to ‘the provincials’ emphasized that officials should conduct hearings and trials in tribunals open to the public, instead of hiding themselves in their own chambers, appearing only to those willing to pay for it.⁵⁸ Although they do not mention the use of domestic spaces, this is explicitly referred to in a law addressed by the emperors Valentinian and Valens in 364 to Artemius, *corrector Lucaniae et Brittiorum*. This law established that judges should conduct audiences or pronounce sentences concerning the condition and patrimony of men in the public chambers of the *fora*, with all citizens being invited, instead of in the seclusion of their own houses.⁵⁹ Imperial legislation was concerned with making sure that officials used publicly owned buildings such as governors’ palaces.⁶⁰ However, a law issued by the emperor Leo in 471 insisting that governors should not abandon their official *praetoria* for their houses indicates that this practice remained common.⁶¹ Houses could serve as spaces where public power was used, even if such a practice was against the law.

4. Conclusion

Olympiodorus of Thebes famously remarked, in the early 5th century, that the *domus* of Rome contained everything that a city contained: baths, fora, and fountains.⁶² This passage is usually taken as a simple example of the rhetorical

⁵⁷ *De Arch.* 6.5.2: “quod in domibus eorum saepius et publica consilia et privata iudicia arbitriaque conficiuntur.”

⁵⁸ *Cod. Theod.* 1.16.6-7.

⁵⁹ *Cod. Theod.* 1.16.9.

⁶⁰ E.g., *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.8; 15.1.35; see L. Lavan, “The *praetoria* of civil governors in Late Antiquity”, in L. Lavan (ed.), *Recent Research in Late Antique Urbanism*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplementary Series 42, Portsmouth: 2001, 43 for discussion.

⁶¹ *Cod. Iust.* 1.40.15.

⁶² *Frag.* 41.1.

exaggeration of late antique texts, but I would like to re-consider it for a moment, in light of what we have discussed so far. During the late antique period, aristocratic houses were not seen or used in opposition to public spaces, or to the rest of the city. Houses were a tool for the assertion of personal power over the city-space and the society that inhabited it. They incorporated previously existing structures and spaces, redefining the area around them. They were the arena where clients, be they slaves, officials, corporations or entire cities represented their social and political bonds with their powerful patrons, commemorating aristocrats and their lineages in the same way as they did in their headquarters and fora. Houses provided the ideal setting for the personal exercise of public authority, as important officials heard cases and skilled politicians discussed issues of potential public interest with their friends, away from the ears of emperors and their spies. Olympiodorus was right, in a sense, and houses were cities because they were the focal point where Romans of different social background went to, where vertical and horizontal bonds of solidarity were established under the careful eyes of aristocrats and their servants.

Houses were not public or private spaces. Scholars have talked of different degrees of privacy within the house, setting it in a *continuum* that extended from the forum and the street to the inner chamber of the house owner. In the case of late antique Rome this is only partially correct. Roman aristocrats appropriated public spaces and functions, turning them into part of the physical and functional definition of their houses. Public and private were certainly important notions, but it is time we consider the ways in which they were combined in a given historical context, rather than trying to separate them.

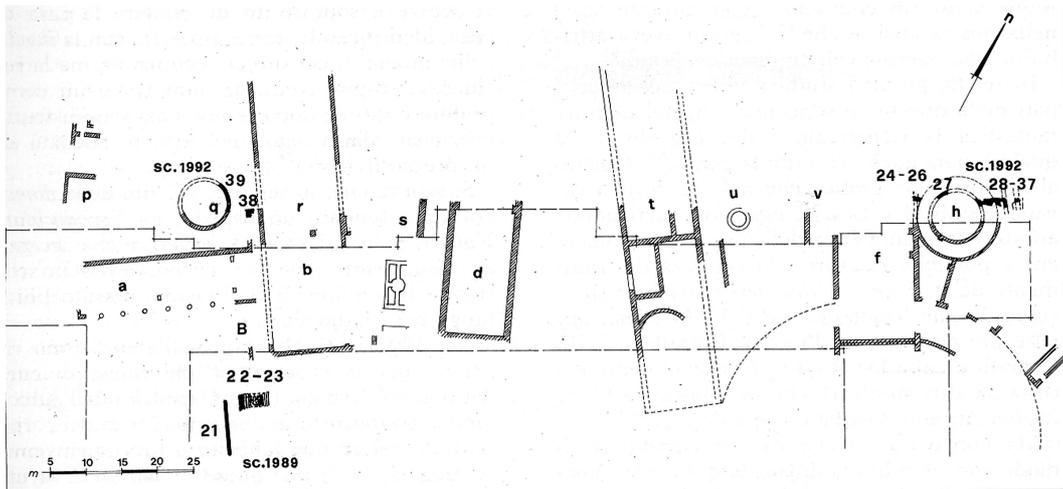


Fig. 1: *Domus* of the Valerii (plan): from C. Pavolini, "Nuovi contributi alla topografia del Celio da rinvenimenti casuali di scavo", *BullCom*, 96 (1994-95) 83.

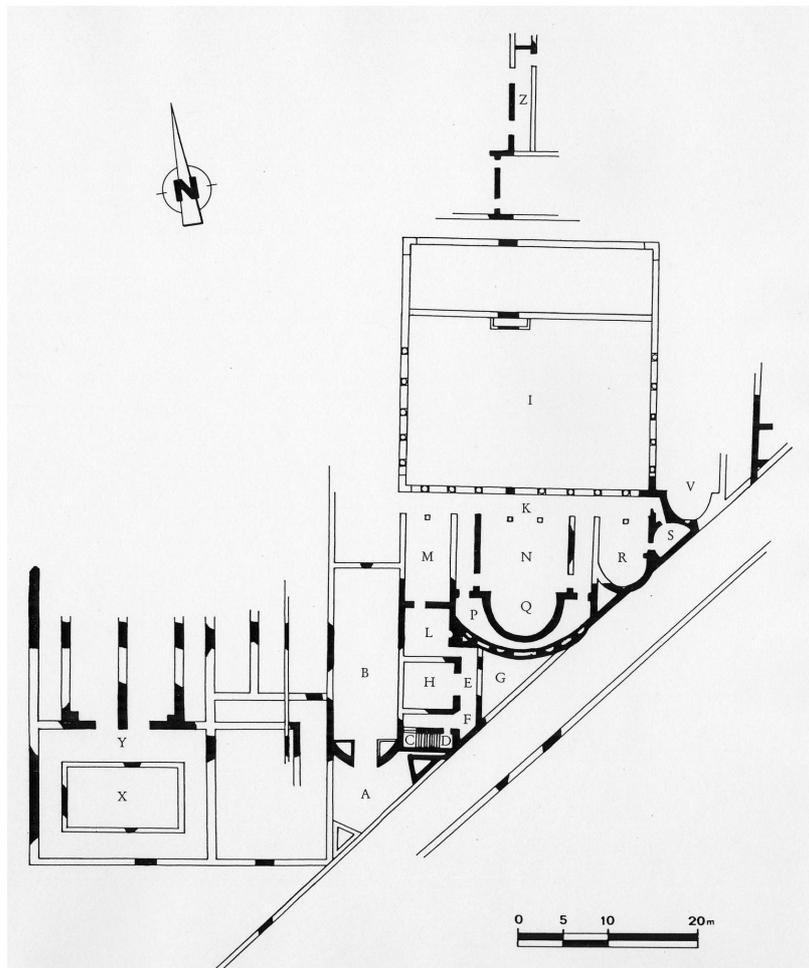


Fig. 2: *Domus* of the Symmachi (plan): from C. Pavolini *et alii*, "La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio. Gli scavi nell'Ospedale Militare", *RömMitt* 100 (1993), fig.16.

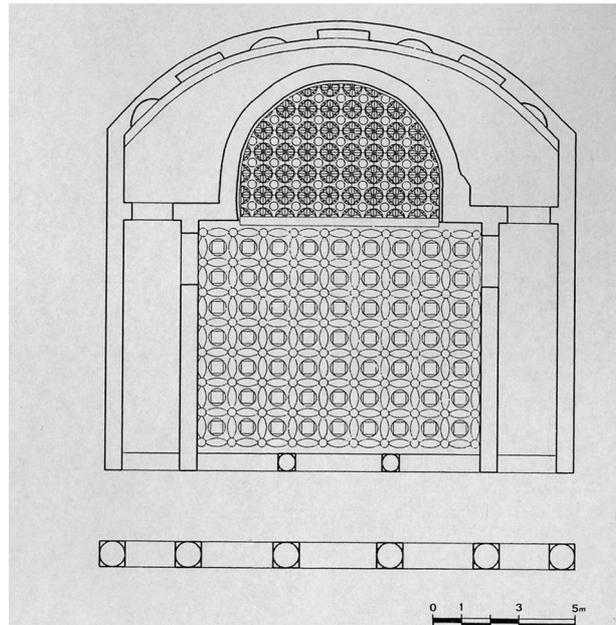


Fig. 3: *Domus* of the Symmachi, apsidal hall (plan): from C. Pavolini *et alii*, “La Topografia antica della sommità del Celio. Gli scavi nell’Ospedale Militare”, *RömMitt* 100 (1993), 491.