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The Influence of the Roman Atrium-House's Architecture and Use of Space in Engendering the Power and Independence of the *Materfamilias*

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ABSTRACT

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Architecture has a remarkable capacity to not only reflect social patterns and behaviors but to engender public image and identity. Therefore, it has proven to be a viable source for understanding the lives of ancient people. In fact, many scholars have established a connection between the atrium-house's design and the power and social identity of the *paterfamilias,* or male head of household. However, little has been said about what these same architectural features mean in relation to his female counterpart, the *materfamilias.*

Therefore, this paper argues that the architecture of the atrium-house likewise engendered a sense of power and freedom for the Roman matron in two main ways. First, the atrium-house was considered in many ways a continuation of the public realm, and was thus structured to be open and outward instead of inward and private. In addition, archaeological and other evidence suggests that the atrium-house lacked gendered divisions and therefore allowed the matron to freely utilize even the most public areas of the home. Second, just as the *paterfamilias* was able to use the visual dynamics of the atrium-house to manipulate his public image and to glean authority, so also did the *materfamilias* use the tactics of visibility to assume masculine power. As a result, the architecture of the atrium-house helped to structure the social identity of the *materfamilias* in promoting her power and influence in both family and social life.

Keywords: *materfamilias*, atrium-house, Roman architecture, social identity

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The households of ancient Rome were intimately connected to important social rituals and the events of daily Roman life. However, architecture served not just as the primary locale for these proceedings but as a controlling power to which these events conformed and in effect, was a dramatic reflection of the lives and social structure of its inhabitants. This being said, while a substantial amount of scholarship has been devoted to understanding how the design and decoration of Roman atrium-style homes were carefully structured so as to promote the social identity and power of the *paterfamilias*, or male head of household, the role these same architectural features played on the lives of his female counterpart, the *materfamilias*, has been largely overlooked.[1]

If domestic architecture could reflect the lives of Roman men so greatly, it stands to reason that the architecture of the atrium-house will be equally telling of the women who lived within its walls. For this reason, this paper will utilize research that has been done on the relationship between the architecture of the Roman atrium-house and the social identity of men, and use it to obtain a more enlightened understanding of the Roman matron. This will principally be achieved by demonstrating that the design and use of space in the atrium-house helped to engender the *materfamilias's* identity and influence in two main ways. First, the open and outward design of the house curtailed the western world's traditional use of the private female/public male binary, and therefore afforded the Roman matron a sense of independence, mobility, and significance as a contributor to family and

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[1] No doubt a look at the relationship between *insulae* architecture and women would be valuable scholarship, this paper is directed towards examining the relationship of women to specific architectural elements and features in the atrium-style home, in particular the atrium itself, which are not present in *insulae.*

social life. Second, the *materfamilias's* control over visibility and the use of the gaze in the atrium-house, afforded her the ability to garner masculine power and manipulate her own social image. As a result, she was able to assume greater relevance and authority in the home and larger community.

It must be clear, however, that the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that women had complete freedom or were considered entirely equal to men. Any analysis of Roman law and custom can confirm the fact that women did not share all the same rights as male Roman citizens, such as the right to vote or hold office. Nevertheless, what this paper does argue is that the Roman *materfamilias* did have a substantial, even surprising, amount of power and autonomy, which is not only reflected in, but made possible by, the atrium-house's design and use of space.

The Sociological Truth About Roman Women

The idea that Roman women had a respectable level of independence and influence in their society is not new. Many scholars and, in fact, a great deal of research will attest to this.[2] For example, instead of being confined to a domestic setting, Roman women frequently attended plays, sporting events, and public baths. They also circulated in the forum "as parties to law suits, to worship at shrines and

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[2] Scholars such as Kampen, Wallace-Hadrill, Hanson, Fantham, Saller, Kleiner, and Berry have all published various works that deal with the power and independence of Roman women. The following publications serve as specific examples: Ann Ellis Hanson,"Widows Too Young in Their Widowhood," in *I Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society*, ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Richard Saller, "Paterfamilias, Materfamilias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Households," *Classical Philology* 94 (1999): 182-197; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Joanne Berry, "Household Artifacts: Towards a Reinterpretation of Roman Domestic Space," in *The Organization of the Roman Domestic Space,* ed. R. Laurence and A. Hadrill. (JRA Monographs, forthcoming).

to take part in public festivals, and to do private business in markets and shops."[3] As Wallace-Hadrill points out, "Romans were conscious of the central role played by women . . . and saw their own treatment of women . . . as a distinct feature that characterized Roman practice in contrast to that of others."[4]

Such a belief led Romans to establish a certain level of equality in marriage. For example, marriage in ancient Rome was not formalized by any specific ceremony or legally binding contract, but could be entered into merely by cohabitation and mutual intent. Similarly, a marriage could be ended as easily as it was entered. Furthermore, *manus* marriages, where a wife would come under her husband's control, virtually died out by 100 BCE. Therefore, most women entered marriage either independently or under her father's *potestas,* or legal jurisdiction.[5] This meant that instead of a wife entering marriage as a subordinate companion, marriage for the Roman woman was more of a business partnership.

This can be seen in the senate debate of 21 CE, which met to discuss the presence of women on tours of duty, as some sought to ban wives from joining their husbands. However, men "were overwhelmingly against the motion for banning . . .

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[3] Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Engendering the Roman Household," in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 104. Baths in Pompeii such as the Stabian and the Forum baths had women's quarters, Fantham et al., 341. Also, Roman women dined with their husbands and attended parties, games, and shows," Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Shocken Books, 1975), 39.

[4] Wallace-Hadrill, 104.

[5] In many cases a woman would choose to remain a legal dependent of her father rather than husband, in part, to ensure that her property and dowry remained the property of her own family, Susan Treggiari, "Women in Roman Society," in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome,*" ed. Diana E.E Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 118.

as husbands felt the benefit of their wives' companionship."[6] Tacitus recorded one senator's position:

"Much of the old-world harshness [towards women] has been improved and softened …Wives share most aspects of life with their husbands, and that is no impediment to peace…Surely it would be a mistake because of the weak character of a few husbands, to deprive husbands in general of their wives, their partners in prosperity and adversity (Tac. *Ann.* 3. 33-4)."[7]

This partnership can be seen time and again in marriage portraits.[8] One notable sarcophagus relief depicts a husband and wife who visually appear to be equals, demonstrating their mutual respect by virtue of a handshake (Fig. 1). Generally used to represent the joining of any two parties in a contract or relationship of trust, this gesture, known as the *dextrarum iunctio*, gives a sense here of the harmony that existed in Roman marriages (Liv. 23. 9. 3). As Karen Hersch points out, in Roman law, a wife entering a marriage *in manu,* meaning she was to come under her husband's legal power, assumed the position of a child in terms of legal dependency. Therefore, it "does not seem likely that a woman would offer her own hand to show her acceptance into *manus*."[9] Additionally, since it is known that *manus* marriages became virtually nonexistent, such representations of this marital

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[6] Beryl Rawson, "The Roman Family," in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives,* ed. Beryl Rawson (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 27.

[7] Tacitus, *The Annals,* 3. 33-4, ed. and tr. John Jackson, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1913), 577-579; The old-world harshness spoken of refers to the Republican times when women were not allowed to travel with men on tours of duty.

[8] Natalie Kampen, "Gender Theory in Roman Art," in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, " ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 20.

[9] Karen K. Hersch, *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 202.

joining must be read as a woman freely entering a partnership unrestricted by her husband's control. Stephen D. Ricks explains, that instead, "This clasping...was a solemn gesture of mutual fidelity and loyalty."[10]

In addition to scenes of the *dextrarum iunctio*, in Roman funerary reliefs the wife often appears in no way inferior or secondary to her husband, but rather as Tacitus recorded, "partners in prosperity and diversity" (Figs. 2-3). [11] The conviviality and equality sensed in these reliefs is evident in the roles and respect given to the *materfamilias* within the home. Women would have been given charge over slaves and household duties more as a supervisor than a participant, would have conducted her own business and activities alongside her husband, been able to join dinner parties and social engagements, and was even consulted in important matters regarding home and family life. For example, women took an active role in arranging marriages for their children.[12] Livy recorded that in 187 BCE the Senate wanted Scipio to betroth his daughter to Gracchus, which he did right away. Upon returning home, however, his wife was irritated to find that he had done so without first consulting her, feeling that it was her right as a mother to have a say in the matter (Liv. 38. 57. 5-8).

In the event of death or divorce, or in some cases separation due to war and tours of duty, many Roman women assumed the duties and privileges of their husband's property. This is evident in the fact that during Rome's war against the

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[10] Stephen D. Ricks, "*Dexiosis* and *Dextrarum Iunctio:* The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World," *FARMS Review* 18 (2006): 431-436.

[11] Tacitus, *The Annals,* 3. 33-4, ed. and tr. John Jackson, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1913), 577-579.

[12] Jane. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 43.

invading Carthaginian Hannibal, many women were widowed or left for years at a time to run household affairs and take care of the family business.[13] Likewise, the civil war from 90-31 BCE left many heads of families killed or exiled. Ovid recounts the sentiment felt in the Roman empire during times such as this: "Now in wars far off Mars tries the souls of men, and 'tis Venus [that] reigns in the city (Ov. *Am.* 1. 8. 41-4)."[14] In other words, men were so consumed with foreign wars that it was the women who had to assume the responsibility of running affairs at home.

Inscriptions on tombs that lined the streets outside the cities of the Roman Empire preserve female voices from antiquity in unique ways.[15] For example, on many of these tombs are found epitaphs composed by women who had lost their husbands in war. As Rawson points out, the fact that so many women were left with the duty of commissioning their husband's tomb truly speaks of the Roman matron's status in the family.[16] This is because, for the most part, these widows became single parents in charge of running households and family businesses.

Aside from gaining de facto power and property rights in their husbands' absence, many women were able to own property and run businesses in their own right. This further demonstrates how women viewed themselves, and were equally viewed by others, as prominent and competent contributors to society. First of all, a woman, as mentioned earlier, in most cases remained under her father's *potestas* at

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[13] Fantham et al., 260-71.

[14] Ovid, *Heroides and Amores,* 1. 8. 41-4, ed. and tr. John C. Rolfe, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 346-355.

[15] The women of Rome have themselves written almost nothing that remains for posterity...we only have what derives from men," Rawson, 26.

[16] Ibid.

marriage, instead of her husband's.[17] This meant that her husband did not have legal power over her and therefore was legally restrained from taking control of any property she held in her name. Second, it meant that when her father died, not only did a daughter have equal rights to inheritance, she would become legally independent, or *sui iuris*.[18] This is significant because, as Richard Saller points out, by age twenty only 49% of women would have still had a father alive.[19]

While this independence still meant a woman would have a guardian placed over her, according to Augustan law, *isu-liberorum*, a woman earned full independence, free of guardianship, if she bore three children or four if she was a freedwoman.[20] Furthermore, aside from inheritance and dowry, a woman could have money put at her disposal by her father or even be completely emancipated by him.[21] There is no adequate evidence as to how often this occurred but we know that a mother or maternal grandfather, for example, might have persuaded the *paterfamilias* to emancipate his daughter if they wanted to transfer property to her directly.[22]

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[17] The most common form of marriage was *sine manu*, meaning the wife retained her father's family name and did not come under her husband's authority. Under this type of marriage, her dowry was reclaimed if the marriage ended in divorce or death. Rawson, 19.

[18] Additionally, a daughter originally under the *potestas* of her father does not come under the power of a brother or uncle after his death. This authority was only held by ancestors such as a grandfather, however, only 1% of women at age twenty had a paternal grandfather. Richard Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41. When the father dies, sons and daughters becomes *sui iuris*, or independent, the daughter taking on a guardian, which concerned her "property not her person," Treggiari, 119.

[19] Saller, 41.

[20] Rawson, 9-10, 19. It is important to note that men also received perks and privileges for having three or more children.

[21] Ibid, 18.

[22] Treggiari, 119.

So easy was it for women to own and sell property that in 169 BCE, the Voconian Law was issued to try and limit rights of inheritance for women in order to circumvent the amount of property passing into female hands.[23] It is important to realize, though, that this law was not likely passed to put a cap on women's rights and privileges by virtue of her sex. Instead, it was more likely motivated by an effort to keep more property within the family, since a woman's independence meant that property transferred out of the family's name. Even with the new mandate, however, ways to sidestep the law were quickly put in place, in which women could protect their legacies, dowries, and other property.[24]

Interestingly, the term *paterfamilias* in a legal sense was "used by jurists to denote no more than a property owner *sui iuris*, and by extension subsumed female owners... an indication of the empowerment of propertied citizen women."[25] It is even estimated that as much as 40% of land was in female hands.[26] For example, a papyrus from Egypt contains a sublease agreement of a certain Claudia Isidora, a wealthy and prominent woman who owned and rented out various properties, and even participated in trade and other forms of commerce (Fig. 4).[27] Similarly, a graffito on the wall of a home reveals that a certain Julia Felix owned and rented the property. It reads: "On the estate of Julia Felix... the following are for rent: an elegant

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[23] Rawson, 19.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Saller, 188-189; See also Ulp. *dig*. 50.60.195

[26] Kate Cooper, "Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman Domus," *Past and Present* 197 (2007), 6.

[27] Another papyrus on 24 June 214 attests to the fact that this same woman had paid someone to obtain a shipment of honey she had ordered for herself from Memphis. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson, ed. *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 95.

bath . . . shops, rooms above them and second story apartments."[28] It is also important to note that this was no meager property, but instead was a large complex complete with baths, shops, and apartments. Architectural remains reveal that it took up an entire city block in Pompeii, truly a manifestation of her wealth and standing.

With the use of their own financial means, evidence suggests that women also took part in building programs and public benefactions. As Kampen points out, the issue of female patronage has no clear answers, but from the examples that survive, we can assume that it was often done with the same objections in mind as men: "Family status, political ambitions for the family, love of one's community, and desire to be remembered by the community."[29] Eumachia, for one, "a public priestess of the city's patron goddess, Venus Pompeiana, and a businesswoman who ran her father's wine, amphora, and tile export business after his death," used her own financial means to purchase a plot of land in the middle of Pompeii's forum. Here she erected a large public building in about 64 BCE, around the same time her son was running for office (Fig. 5).[30] In addition, Eumachia commissioned a sculpture of herself to stand in one of the building's alcoves (Fig. 6). As Kleiner argues, commissioning buildings and works of art helped women to find a voice and a place in society.[31] This is evident in the inscription Eumachia placed on the building's wall: "Eumachia…had the vestibule, covered gallery and the porticoes

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[28] Fantham, 334.

[29] Kampen, 22.

[30] Diana E.E. Kleiner, "Imperial Women as Patrons of the Arts in the Early Empire," in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 33.

[31] Kleiner, 39.

made with her own money and dedicated in her own name."[32] This inscription together with her statue, symbols of a woman's entitlement to property and wealth, would have remained in the public eye continually endorsing her own status and identity to community goers. Not only is it impressive that women were able to independently finance the construction of public monuments and buildings, the fact that Eumachia erected her building and statue in the City's forum, a space traditionally tied to masculine use, suggests that it was not uncommon for Roman women to cross over into what today's ideologies would term male public space.

Overall, what these facts help to demonstrate is that the Roman woman did in fact realize a substantial amount of independence and power, and enjoyed privileges and rights uncommon to many of her female contemporaries.[33] With such an understanding, the connection between the *materfamilias's* power and the architecture of the atrium-house can now be set forth.

The Value of Architecture in Reconstructing Roman Lives and Its Relationship to Social Identity

Over the past few decades, scholars have begun to realize the importance of architecture in understanding the lives of ancient peoples. Particularly in Italy, Pompeii and its extensive archaeological record have helped scholars piece together a much more complete and accurate picture of the lives of Roman citizens. Domestic architecture, in particular, has proved to be a valuable resource in understanding the life and identity of the *paterfamilias*, or Roman head of household. For example,

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[32] Fantham, 332-4; CIL X.810, first-century CE inscription, translated by Natalie Kampen
[33] The subordination of Greek women, as an example, will be discussed later.

Mark Grahame and Kate Cooper have centered important research on the relationship between the social identity of the *paterfamilias* and the design and spatial layout of the Roman atrium-house.[34] While many of their theories will subsequently be addressed in more detail, they and others have effectively argued that the Roman atrium-house was strategically designed to enhance the social image of the *paterfamilias* through its decoration, layout and use of space. Cooper explains, "The private establishment of a *dominus* involved many elements that were crucial to his ability to attain high standing among his peers, leading in the best circumstances to public office. Foremost, it was critical to have at his disposal a physical space, the *domus,* appointed in a way that would impress his peers and show himself and his family to advantage."[35] For this reason, the atrium-house was designed in such a way that during business affairs and daily rituals, guests were greeted by displays of wealth, belongings, and artwork that served as reminders of the *paterfamilias's* heritage, education, and even political or military standing. Roman architect Vitruvius attests to this fact:

> "Those who do business in country produce must have stalls and shops in their entrance courts...For capitalists and farmers...showy apartments must be constructed;...men of rank [must have]...lofty entrance courts in regal style and most spacious atriums and peristyles with plantations and walks of some extent in them, appropriate to their dignity...finished in

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[34] The Roman *domus* (or *atrium*-style home) is the Latin term for house and is applied to the dwellings of middle and upperclass Roman citizens during the Republican and Imperial eras and was present throughout all Roman territories. The *domus's* most noteworthy feature is the large, central entrance hall called the *atrium*. Additionally, the term *domus* not only refers to the physical dwelling but also can mean the entire body of people, including kin and slaves, who lived within its walls. Cooper; Mark Grahame, *Reading Space: Social Interaction and Identity in the Houses of Roman Pompeii* (Oxford: Basingstoke Press, 2000).

[35] Cooper, 2.

style similar to that of great public buildings, since private laws suits and hearings before arbitrators are very often held in the houses of such men (Vitr. 6. 5. 2)."[36]

However, as Grahame points out, the real success of the Roman *domus* in promoting its owner's reputation is due to the fact that architecture has the profound ability to affect the lives of those who occupy its space. Buildings are not just passing thoughts, trivial containers to the drama of life, or in the case of the Romans a place to display their fortune. Rather, buildings and houses are a significant part of life and a factor in how one thinks and acts. In other words, not only is the Roman *domus* designed to accommodate social patterns and customs, it can also serve to create and in turn, perpetuate such patterns.

This idea has been the focus of many theorists whose works demonstrate the intriguing power architecture has over thought and behavior. Erving Goffman, for example, explores this relationship of 'dramaturgy' or what is called the 'Man-Environment paradigm,' which suggests that the space within architectural frames has a dynamic effect on the way humans live and the remarkable power to shape not only individuals but the society to which they belong.[37] Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu believes that the house is where children assume their understanding of

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[36] Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 6. 5. 2, ed. and trans. by Morris Hickey Morgan (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 182; Vitruvius is known primarily for his ten-volume treatise *De Architectura,* written in the first-century BCE. The work is considered by many to be one of the supreme authorities on Roman architecture. However, it is limited in the fact that it can only offer a description of building methods employed before 15 BCE. After Vitruvius's death, no known primary source on classical architecture exists.

[37] His model presents an interesting link between humans and space using an analogy between social life and a theatrical drama in which humans are like actors on the stage of life. As such actors, humans interact with and rely upon their architectural stage, as it both accommodates behavior and practice as well as directs it, Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London:Penguin Books, 1959),1-17.

the world, and it is by moving throughout the house that its architecture instills in the child a "way of being."[38] As a result, Bourdieu sees domestic architecture as an instrument in creating society, an idea Michael Foucault shares. He states, "Buildings are instruments that act upon the body and literally transform the character and personality of the individual . . . [and] classify and order social relations."[39] Therefore, it is by looking at the architectural design and layout of the Roman atrium-house that one can begin to see how the architecture not only reflected and accommodated social customs and activities, but also played an active role in cuing social behavior, enforcing ideologies, and shaping the identity of its inhabitants.

Architecture versus Literature as a Source for Understanding the *Materfamilias*

Surprisingly, however, while Grahame, Cooper, and others have issued compelling arguments for just how the atrium-house both mirrored and produced the social status and identity of the *paterfamilias,* a comprehensive analysis of just what these types of findings and patterns mean in relation to the *materfamilias* has for the most part been overlooked. Scholars have instead relied principally on literary texts to derive information and assumptions about the lives of Roman women. However, relying strictly on literature has its limitations. As Ruth Padel attests, literary sources such as plays and poetry as well as other primary historical accounts are "liable to distortion" and when used to back up any claim, "should

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[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 72-87.
[39] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (France: Gallimard, 1975), 72.

always be prefaced with an enormous 'perhaps.'"[40] This is because, Latin literature

and primary documents are for the most part written by male authors whose views

have overrun today's understanding of Roman women by "advanc[ing] standards of

womanly behavior that best serve the interests of patriarchy," namely by

characterizing women as biologically inferior, immoral, and weak.[41] In addition,

they tend to run amuck with inconsistencies. For example, the jurist Gaius, in his

Institutiones, speaks of how women needed guardians (male stewards) because of

their unreliability of judgment, only later to contradict himself by saying that there

is no reason for women of a mature age to have a guardian (Gaius *Inst.* 1. 190).[42]

　　To redress these discrepancies it is vital to take into consideration more than

just literary sources. Fortunately, what scholars like Graham and Cooper have

demonstrated, is the value of architecture in drawing more complete pictures of

ancient Roman lives.　Truly, if architecture reflects and encourages certain

behaviors and the way people view themselves and others, one can see how the

Roman house would have affected the identity and behavior of its matron. Domestic

architecture therefore, can thus be seen as a viable means to understanding the

ancient Roman woman both in terms of her role within the household and as a

member of society.

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[40] Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 3.

[41] Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

[42] See also Gordon Williams, "Representations of Roman Women in Literature," in *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, ed. Diana E. E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 126.

The Meaning of *Materfamilias*

It is by looking at the way the design and layout of the atrium-house helped to produce status for the male head of household that one can draw parallels about how the same architectural features would have correspondingly affected the social identity of his female counterpart, the *materfamilias*. For this reason, while many different types and ages of women lived within the Roman household, including slaves, this paper will limit its scope to the specific category of *materfamilias*. Therefore, it is first necessary to understand exactly what type of woman this encompasses.

Many scholars have assumed a gendered usage of the title *materfamilias,* understanding it to mean simply the wife of a *paterfamilias,* or in other words, a subordinate female who is responsible for raising children and overseeing domestic household duties. Additionally, to many the term *materfamilias* seems to reference only a small, upper-class minority of female citizens since the it is usually not applied to slaves or lower-class women. However, such a gendered and limited definition of the term does not account for the true scope of the word's use both anciently and presently. Taking into consideration valuable census information as well as scholarship on the semantic meaning of the term, one can begin to see that in actuality, *materfamilias* can be applied to a fairly large and mixed selection of Roman female demographics.

When referring to a married woman, the title already pertains to a wide scope of female citizens. In the first case, Augustan law placed marriageable age for a female at twelve, and demographic studies show that most women were in fact

married between the ages of twelve and seventeen.[43] This means that the term can be used to denote a woman from the onset of puberty to essentially old age. In addition, though matrons of atrium-houses were generally middle to upper class, in Roman society it was possible for many people to travel up the social ladder. For example, slaves who received manumission might marry someone of freeborn status as Roman law allowed even freeborn men to marry freedwomen (former slaves). In fact, in a sample of 174 freedwomen, 30 were married to freeborn men.[44] Additionally, children of former slaves automatically received freeborn status. As a result, this freedom of movement between social classes meant that the *materfamilias* could be anything from a freeborn citizen to a former slave.[45]

It is important to realize, however, that the term *materfamilias* was not exclusively used to mean a married woman. While it is true that the term was originally derived as a title for a woman married in *manus,* or under the legal control of her husband, when these marriages fell out of favor during the Republic period, so did the word's "value as a social distinction."[46] Instead, the term became easily applied to a divorced or widowed woman as well as a married one.

Surprisingly, divorce and widowhood were common in the Roman Empire. In fact, statistical data demonstrates that 13-15% of married women aged 30 or younger were widowed as were some 40% of women aged 30 to 50.[47] Furthermore, while it has been previously assumed that women would have recycled themselves

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[43] Rawson, 22; Gardner, 38.

[44] Gardner, 33.

[45] Rawson, 7, 12-13, 24.

[46] *Brill's New Pauly Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*, s.v. "Mater familias."

[47] Jens-Uwe Krause, *Witwen und Waisen im römischen Reich: 1, Verwitwung und Wiederverheiratung* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), 73.

into the marriage market after divorce, or the death of a husband, Jen-Uwe Krause's research surprisingly demonstrates that women were not overly inclined to remarry after age twenty.[48] This means that a substantial portion of the female population consisted of unattached females that would have lived either with family or as owners of their own households, depending on their economic circumstances. Hanson's analysis of living arrangements for unattached females additionally reveals that while many widows or divorcees lived with adult children or other relatives, out of a sample of 103 unattached women, 39 lived in predominantly female households, which included minor children, the woman's mother or sister, slaves and some other kin. Males in these households appear to have all been young.[49] Therefore, it is important to remember that in many cases *materfamilias* may indicate an unmarried woman.

For this reason, and because so many women owned property, Saller explains that the semantic meaning of the term *materfamilias* in Roman times was in actuality used to denote a respectable female property owner irrespective of her marital status.[50] In fact, the term *materfamilias* in a legal sense arose out of the necessity to distinguish between a male property owner and a female one. This is because, as mentioned previously, in Roman legal discourse the term *paterfamilias*

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[48] "The year 1994 was a turning point in "widow studies" in which Richard Saller and Jens-Uwe Krause, "relying on more sophisticated manipulations of demographic data, argued vigorously against the assumption that after loss of a spouse, fertile females up to age 50 inevitably remarried in the populations of the Roman empire. Rather, both claimed that the number of unattached, postmenarchic and premenopausal females, nearly all of them formerly married, represented a significant portion of the population." Hanson, 150.

[49] Ibid, 152-161.

[50] Saller, 182-197.

was used to refer to *both* male and female estate owners.[51] In other words, it was a

non-gendered word that indicated a property owning individual regardless of

gender.

Perhaps then, the best definition of the true semantic meaning of

materfamilias comes from Ulpian, who explained that a *materfamilias* is a woman

independent of *potestas* with the capacity to own property (Ulp. *dig.* 1. 6. 4). "It

makes no difference whether she is married or widowed, freeborn or freed."[52] What

did matter to him was that she was an upstanding, respectable woman (Ulp. *dig.* 50.

16. 46. 1). The essence of the *materfamilias,* in Ulpian's mind then, "was to be found

not in marital status or child bearing or rank or property rights, but in honorable

character."[53] Therefore, the term *materfamilias* encompasses a wide scope of the

female population, as it applies to women that were married, divorced or widowed,

from a vast range of ages, from various origins on the social ladder and who in many

cases owned and controlled property.

The Public Nature of the Atrium-House and Its Lack of a Female Private Sphere

With an understanding of the term *materfamilias*, as well as a sense of the

important role architecture can play in drawing conclusions about her life and place

in the community, one can now begin to look at how previous scholarship on the

paterfamilias and his relationship to the atrium-house can in turn reveal intriguing

information about the Roman matron. Specifically, there are two main ways the use

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[51] Ibid, 188-189.
[52] Ibid, 194.
[53] Ibid.

of architectural design and space in the atrium-house dramatically reflected the influence and power of the *materfamilias.* The first to be discussed is the outward, public nature of the house and its lack of a traditionally demarcated female private sphere and that of a male public one, which enabled the Roman matron to exercise freedom and equality in the use of its various spaces.

The *domus*, or atrium-style house, as opposed to *insulae* or apartment-style housing, was a single-family dwelling in which the vast majority of the community's middle and upper classes lived. In ancient Pompeii and other areas of the Empire, the atrium style residence varied in size and layout, from some of the grandest and largest homes in the community to modest, small-scale imitations of the wealthier versions. However, their basic floor plans were patterned alike. A typical example is the House of Pansa (140-120 BCE), where passing by the *fauces* (1)*,* or small rooms at the forefront of the house, one would have entered into the atrium (2), and then continued on to the *tablinum* (4), which served as a type of business office for the *paterfamilias* (Fig. 7). While many regard the home as principally the sphere of women, in ancient Roman society the daily affairs of the male head of household took place at home. The atrium and *tablinum,* as a result*,* were the center of commercial, social, and political activities. It was here that important documents were housed and where many business negotiations took place, namely the important ritual of *salutatio*, a daily event in which the *paterfamilias* greeted swarms of clientele that came to conduct business or to simply wish him a good morning. Hence the name *salutatio*, or salutation. In exchange for money, business, or protection from the *paterfamilias*, these lower class clients were expected to

bolster the *paterfamilias's* reputation and rally behind him in any upcoming elections.

Furthermore, while the forum, an important feature of any Roman city, was the center for public life where processions, elections, speeches, and trials occurred alongside a bustling marketplace, the atrium-house in many respects was the forum of its *paterfamilias*, serving as a locale for diverse activities, meetings, and rendezvous. This is because, for the Romans, the *domus* played an integral part in commercial, political, and other social affairs. In fact, due to the frequency of public activities that took place within the atrium-house, it can be argued that the home, rather than being a private retreat closed off from the outside world, was instead an actual continuation of the public realm, inseparably connected to the larger community. In Wallace-Hadrill's words: "A [Roman man] went home not so much to shield himself from the public gaze as to present himself to it."[54] Moreover, the foremost rooms of atrium-houses, namely the *fauces,* were often used for the family business as stores or even cafes, while in many cases, law suits, parties, games, political speeches, even civic building projects were managed through the *domus.* Truly, there was "a distinctively Roman synergy between the state and the household" and as a result, the home was strategically designed to both accommodate and enhance its connection to the outside world. [55]

Because the home was such a notable locale for public events, a close examination of the architecture in Roman households and the events they

[54] Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.
[55] Cooper, 2.

housed reveals that the architecture was, in fact, tactically designed and structured to aid the social image of the *paterfamilias*. Romans depended a great deal on their reputation in order to safeguard their status and position in society, especially men who held political or military offices. Therefore, homes were deliberately designed to be public spectacles instead of private interiors so as to ensure against scandals or malicious rumors about what went on behind a family's closed doors. For example, Livius Drusus, an important politician in 91 BCE, wrote to his architect, "If you possess the skill you must build my house in such a way that whatever I do shall be seen by all (Vell. 2. 14. 3)."[56] It was thought in Roman society, that if things were kept too private, the walls of a home must have something to hide. Therefore, families sought to open their homes outward to the community by putting themselves and their day- to -day affairs on display for all to see.

One of the principal means by which this was achieved was through carefully planned lines of sight that laid bare to the outside community the inward proceedings of the home. A dramatic example of this is the way the home was spatially arranged so that as many areas as possible could be seen from the street or front entryway. This visual axis of the *atrium-tablinum-peristyle,* evident in the majority of floor plans of atrium-houses in Pompeii, such as the House of Pansa (140-120 BCE), the House of the Silver Wedding (c. 300 BCE), and the House of Menander (late first-century BCE) (Figs. 7-9), is what Heinrich Drerup refers to as the "view through," like a window that peered into the innermost spaces of these

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[56] Vellius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History: Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 2. 14. 3, ed. and trans. Frederick W. Shipley, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1924), 79.

ancient homes (Fig. 10).[57] In particular, households were eager to show off their peristyle garden, a feature that was present only in wealthy homes that could afford one. As a result of this and the peristyle's connection to Greece, it became a symbol of a cultured and prosperous family and was often used to reinforce their public image.

So important was this idea of the "view through" that a great deal of effort went into maintaining this visual line of sight. For example, in the House of Menander, the specific plot of land the house was built on made it difficult to get the axis centered so that the peristyle was visible from the front entry. As a result, the architect widened the spacing of the columns around the peristyle to leave room for the uninterrupted visual line. In addition, the architect sought to articulate the home's message of wealth and grandeur by manipulating the peristyle garden so as to exaggerate the size of the house. He did this by spacing the columns in the rear closer together and the ones nearer the *tablinum* much wider, creating an optical illusion that the peristyle extends further back than it actually does.[58]

Furthermore, while atrium-houses could in fact be very inward looking and closed off when doors to the home were shut, the "view through" mechanism was maintained by virtue of the fact that these doors were generally left open except when a death in the family occurred. As part of funerary tradition, the front door was closed to the home during times of mourning in order to notify the public of the

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[57] J.R. Clarke, "The 'View Through' in the Ancient Roman House," in *Texas Classics in Action* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 1-3.
[58] Ibid.

death, which suggests that ordinarily these doors were left open.[59] Hales explains that this was in fact done because an open door signified a household's willingness to serve the community.[60] Even the backdoor, which usually opened onto the house's kitchen, was left ajar so that neighbors and friends could come in unannounced.[61]

The fact that the door was deliberately left open, however, also seems to attest to the power and control of the *paterfamilias* and his family by the fact that the house remained visible and accessible only by the will of the *dominus*. As Cooper elaborates, "The open aspect of the *domus* offered the prospect of inclusion to an outsider, but on terms set by the [*paterfamilias*] and within limits imposed at his whim."[62] Altogether it was this type of treatment of the home's architectural elements that ensured that the house was not only a continuation of the public realm but open and visible to the outside world.

Deconstructing the Male Public/Female Private Binary in the Atrium-House

Aside from conducting public activities in the domestic setting and visually opening the home up for public inspection, the atrium-house's open and public nature is augmented by the fact that it appears to have an altogether lack of truly private space. Furthermore, scholars have attested to the fact that it is virtually

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[59] Cooper, 15

[60] Shelley, Hales, *The Roman House and Social Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 38.

[61] Mark Grahame, "Public and Private in the Roman House: The Spatial Order of the Casa del Fauno," in *Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and Beyond*, ed. Ray Laurence and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1997), 140.

[62] Cooper, 15.

impossible to distinguish specifically male or female spaces within the Roman home. Jane Rendell admits that "feminist analysis of gender and space has tended to focus on . . . the paradigm of separate spheres," seeing the "dominant male public realm" and the "female subordinate private sphere of the home" as mutually exclusive categories.[63] But this is not the case in the Roman household. In Wallace-Hadrill's words, we "draw a blank" in trying to identify specific areas of the house that were set apart for women's household work.[64] Instead, it appears that neither activity nor gender were linked to a specific setting.

An analysis of the distribution of artifacts in the *domus* reveals that the rooms of the home, rather than being set aside for specific uses, were multifunctional, being open and accessible to a wide range of activities and people. Actually, it was even in the so-called *communia* spaces, where the aforementioned social and public events took place, that lackluster domestic chores were often conducted, suggesting that males and females in the home jointly utilized the different spaces and rooms without any type of gender segregation.[65]

The archaeological records extracted from various Pompeian atrium-houses shed light on this permeability of the household's interior space. First, what artifact assemblages of atrium-houses indicate is that the *atrium* was a center for civic and commercial enterprises as well as one for storage, food production, weaving,

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[63] Jane Rendell, "Ramblers and Cyprians: Mobility, Visuality and the Gendering of Architectural Space," in *Gender and Architecture*, ed. Louise During and Richard Wrigley (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 135-154.

[64] Wallace-Hadrill, 111.

[65] As Vitruvius explains, *communia* were spaces in the home that people may enter without being invited. These rooms would have included virtually all of the home's main rooms: the *fauces*, atrium, peristyle garden, as well as other halls and vestibules, Vitr. 6. 5. 1.

childcare, and many other domestic activities. [66] In fact, large amounts of tools and other evidence of domestic chores are frequently found in the atria of Roman homes. For example, in the atrium of the House of M. Epidius Primus in Pompeii (first-century BCE), an example of an average atrium-house, artifacts found include various parts of a horse's harness, work knives, numerous amphorae and cauldrons, shears, a chisel, three sculpting irons, and a travertine work table, or *cartibulum.*[67] Moreover, while these objects can obviously be tied to domestic work, in this case leatherwork, Joanne Berry points out that the cauldron and amphorae, possibly used for drawing water, can also indicate some level of food preparation.[68] This claim is backed by Penelope Allison who notes that in many homes storage of pots and pans and other kitchen items was in the atrium and that the *impluvium,* or sunken part of the atrium's floor, served as the household's water supply.[69]

Most notable is the fact that it was extremely common to find fragments of loom weights in atria and other public rooms like the *peristyle.* One Pompeian home, the House of the Weaver (c. 200 BCE)*,* even derives its name from the large amount of loom fragments found there. Alongside busts of the family's ancestry, the loom was considered one of the main symbols universally kept on display in the atrium in order to demonstrate to visitors the family's good standing and morality. This is because the loom was traditionally seen as an emblem of the *materfamilias's* virtue

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[66] Penelope Allison, "Labels for Ladles: Interpreting Material Culture in the Roman Household," in *The Archaeology of Household Activities*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 56-73; Penelope Allison, "How Do We Identify the Use of Space in Roman Housing?" in *Functional and Spatial Analysis of wall Painting: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on Roman Wall Painting,* ed. E. M. Moorman (Amsterdam, 1993), 1-8; Fantham, 339.

[67] Berry, 193.

[68] Ibid, 190.

[69] Allison, 70-73.

and skill at running the household.[70] In fact, women are often depicted on gravestones as woolworkers so as to memorialize them as chaste and industrious women. For example, one second-century gravestone shows a *materfamilias* with a spindle and distaff in hand, while other household goods at her feet represent her role as a manager of the *domus* (Fig. 11). The inscription *lanam fecit,* or "she made wool," appears on various funerary works, further attesting to the importance of the connection between women and wool-making. With this being said, the presence of the loom in the atrium indicates that it would have been here that the *materfamilias* did her weaving, right in the middle of *communia* space, just as Lucretia in Livy's account was seen working at her loom *in medio aedium sedens* or in the prominent, central area of the home (Liv. 1. 57. 9).

Overall, the loom, as well as evidence of other domestic activities taking place in the atrium, suggests that the *materfamilias* was indeed allowed to frequent and utilize the atrium for household duties. This in turn meant that due to the *paterfamilias's* use of the atrium for commercial and other business, the male and female heads of household would have jointly shared this space for their respective activities. Consequently, it could not have been uncommon for the *materfamilias* to be present in this public area of the home, meaning public space in the atrium-house was not exclusively tied to men.

This multi-functionality of rooms and subsequent lack of gendered space is present throughout the rest of the home as well. As mentioned earlier, artifact assemblages indicate that no rooms were linked to specific activities or genders.

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[70] Wallace-Hadrill, 107-108.

Instead, looking again at the House of M. Epidius Primus, tools, cookware, *amphorae*, and other objects for household duties were found distributed throughout almost every room in the house. Not only does this preclude the ability of labeling rooms for distinct uses, it continues to suggest that the *materfamilias* would have had access to all areas of the home instead of being confined to posterior, private, and distinctly female quarters. For example, not only were pots and pans found in many atriums, cooking and dining ware was frequently found in various rooms of atrium-houses.[71] Also, Fantham explains that because Roman women frequently had slaves to do their cooking for them, the "kitchen was not the feminine preserve it became in modern times."[72] Neither was cooking done by only female slaves, as many household duties negated gendered assignments.[73] Thus the image of the subordinate housewife secluded away in a feminine workspace fades further.

In looking at bedrooms, or *cubicula*, one can see that these rooms, while not the locale for many domestic chores, still negated specific gendered use and were likewise not private in the modern sense. No more than two meters wide, with little room for much else besides a bed, these rooms frequently adjoined public areas of the home. In most cases they were located directly off of the atrium, meaning that at least their entrances would have been visible to visitors during *salutatio* and other gatherings. Yet in some cases they even flanked *triclinia*, or dining areas, such as in the House of the Labyrinth (c. 400-300 BCE) in Pompeii. Moreover, *cubicula* were

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[71] Wallace-Hadrill, 110.
[72] Fantham, et al., 339.
[73] Ibid, 340.

frequently used for the reception of guests, private meetings, and in some cases even trials.[74]

In terms of male and female use, Wallace-Hadrill explains that it is "extraordinarily difficult to tell from the archaeological evidence …whether one or more of its cubicula would have been set aside for women's use."[75] Instead, literary accounts seem to suggest that the norm was for husband and wife to share a bedroom. According to Suetonius, Tiberius and Julia's decision to start sleeping apart was the sign of a broken and disintegrating marriage (Suet. *Tib.* 7. 2). Archaeologists have also seen the existence of *ampithalamoi*, or twin bedrooms, in which wall recesses accommodate two beds, as an indication that husband and wife slept together in the same room.[76]

Lastly, a look at *triclinia* and *convivia*, rooms for entertainment, also reveals a tendency for the Roman atrium-house to steer away from established gendered spheres, specifically a private, female one. This is because there is little evidence to suggest that women were not allowed to utilize these rooms, even during times when the *paterfamilias* entertained male guests. On the contrary, the absence of separate dining and entertaining rooms for women in the Roman house implies that the *materfamilias* would have joined her husband in entertaining, and unlike the Greeks, female guests would not have been separated from the males. Rather, it is assumed that the *materfamilias* would have dined alongside her husband in a

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[74] Wallace-Hadrill, 110.
[75] Ibid, 111.
[76] Ibid.

manner more similar to the Etruscan tradition.[77] One must indeed exercise caution in assuming the extent to which women were able join the men at their parties, however, since there is nothing to confirm that there was a complete realization of equality between men and women during these social gatherings. Nevertheless, literary sources indicate that women were at least present, and thus able to dine and converse with men. Ovid, for one, wrote about the secret instructions exchanged between himself and his lover Corinna at a dinner party she was attending with her husband (Ov. *Am.* 1. 4). In his *Satyricon,* Petronius also referenced two specific women by name, Fortunata and Scintilla, who are in attendance at a dinner party thrown by Trimalchio (Petr. 65). Therefore, even in the *triclinia* and *convivia* of the atrium-house, the idea of a female private sphere kept separate from a male public sphere is again disputed. Instead, what the archaeological record and other sources seems to attest is that "what may be historically distinctive about Roman domestic society is that man and woman [did] not inhabit worlds apart."[78] Rather, as Cornelius Nepos recorded in the first-century BCE, "What Roman would blush to take his wife to a dinner-party? What matron does not frequent the front rooms of her dwelling and show herself in public (Nep. pr. 6)?"[79]

The atrium-household's efforts to open itself up to public view, in design as well as use of space, already calls into question the interplay between public and private, male and female, spheres. However, when taking into consideration the multifunctional nature of rooms, and the apparent lack of demarcation for male

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[77] Ibid, 110.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Cornelius Nepos, *Cornelius Nepos,* pr. 6., ed. and tr. John C. Rolfe, Loeb (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 5.

versus female activity, the Roman *domus* simply cannot be considered private in the traditional sense. This is not surprising when one realizes that this idea of the public/private binary in the Western world was dramatically enhanced by eighteenth and nineteenth-century theories that arose with capitalism. As D. di Zerenga Wall points out, in the late 1700s the primary locale for the man's workplace moved outside of the home to a separate location. As a result, the home became principally a female domain.[80] Corinne Abate agrees by arguing that Protestantism and Enlightenment thinking encouraged the connection of women to the domestic sphere and called for a greater privatization of the home.[81] While various ancient cultures, such as that of the Greeks, did confine women to a more private, domestic sphere, one cannot presume that all ancient societies operated this way. This is especially true of the Romans.

Therefore, it is argued here that in looking at the atrium-house, one must be careful not to look at the home through the lens of a modern, capitalist ideology. Instead, it is imperative to see the Roman house as a true Roman would have, i.e. as a place where public and private as separate, mutually exclusive entities did not exist. As this paper would postulate, in the true Roman mindset, there was neither a divide between the outside community and the home, nor between any spaces within the home. Instead, public was private and private public, existing one in the same.

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[80] D. di Zerenga Wall, *The Archaeology of Gender: Separating the Spheres in Urban America* (New York, 1994), 2-13 ; Cooper, 9-10.

[81] Corinne S. Abate, *Privacy, Domesticity and Women in Early Modern England* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 2.

The Lack of Gendered Spheres and Its Effect on the *Materfamilias*

The overlapping of public and private spheres in the Roman house truly would have had an effect on the identity of the Roman matron within the home and society, as the house proved to be recalcitrant in conforming to the idea of gendered spheres. With this in mind, a look at the differences between the architectural design of the Greek house and that of the Roman atrium-house can offer a clearer understanding of what this would have meant for the Roman woman.

In Greek culture, women were generally given presidency over "transitional experiences" such as dying and birth, both of which are related to passing into and out of darkness, respectively.[82] This is because women were thought of as biologically inferior and were thus able to come in contact with what was considered polluting.[83] In correlation to this idea, women themselves were thought of as having an "inner space and inner darkness," something that is both inside and unseen.[84] It was precisely this sense of inwardness that is both promoted and echoed by Greek domestic architecture, seen in a typical Greek home (Fig. 12). Unlike the carefully orchestrated axial symmetry of the Roman house, the Greek home consists of a series of staggered rooms, built onto each other in a rambling effect, making it virtually impossible to see from one room into another. This, in effect, means that the lines of sight and important visual cues of the Roman house

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[82] Padel, 5.

[83] Hence, ancient Greek customs about the taboo of coming into contact with women during menstruation or after childbirth, or letting breast milk touch a man, Ibid, 6.

[84] Ibid, 8; " The interior space, sacred or domestic, which encloses women …in a home, is emblematic of the female interior itself, as perceived by men. The *muchos,* the 'women's quarter' was the inmost part of the inward looking Athenian home."   Athenian life was divided in two — almost like two races "one at ease in *andron* marble buildings and public spaces… other confined to the inmost part of the mudbrick domestic house with only limited exit even from the private home," Ibid, 15.

are lacking here. Most importantly though, there is a strict division of female and masculine space within the Greek home. The *muchos* or 'women's quarters' were located in the center of the Athenian home and were practically cut off from the male sphere, with even separate male and female entrances. The female workrooms were located as far as possible from the *andron,* the area of the home reserved exclusively for men. Also, evidence of a staircase to the upper story was found in the workroom, "suggesting that the women of the household could move freely from story to story without leaving their designated area."[85]

If we take into consideration the power of architecture in cuing social behavior, as discussed previously, the Greek home thus played an important role in not only reflecting the status of the woman in Greek Society, but also aimed to further keep her in subordination as it closed her off from the male, public realm.[86] By virtue of closing her off, the architectural design and cues played a key role in conforming not only her physical presence but her sense of self and identity to the patriarchal system.

With this in mind, one can thus see through the open and outward nature of the atrium-house, and its lack of a designated private, female sphere, how differently Roman women were viewed in their society, and as a result would have viewed themselves. While the household architecture in Greece served to enclose and seclude women in a distinctly feminine sphere, the opposite was true for

[85] Susan Walker, "Women and Housing in Classical Greece: the Archaeological Evidence," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron, and Amelie Kuhrt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 85.

[86] In Greece, patterns of controlling women derive from "a sense that women contain an inner space and inner darkness, which together interact with and provide one model for, traditional popular thinking about that inner space belonging to all normal i.e. male, human beings," Padel, 3.

women in the Roman Empire. The unrestricted nature of the Roman house, with its resistance to gender divisions, enabled its matron to experience a corresponding sense of openness and freedom not only in her ability to utilize virtually all spaces of the home, but to own property, erect public buildings, run businesses, and be present in the "midst of masculine business."[87] As a result, this ability to cross over into what would have traditionally been thought of as male public spheres, both in the home and the larger community, structured the identity of the *materfamilias* as a valuable and relevant contributor to home and society.

The Power of Visibility in the Atrium-House

The second major feature of the Roman atrium-house that had a dramatic bearing on the social identity of the *materfamilias* was the house's emphasis on the use of visibility and specific lines of sight to enhance status and control. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the characteristic features of an atrium-house was its axial symmetry and use of the *atrium-tablinum-peristyle* axis, or "view through" (Fig. 10). As clients entered the home, their line of sight would be drawn into the succession of architectural frames from the initial threshold of the *fauces,* through the atrium, to the *tablinum*, and eventually back into the *peristyle.* More than just allowing an uninterrupted line of sight from the street or threshold into the nethermost parts of the home, however, this visual axis played an important role during daily rituals like *salutatio.* It was during *salutatio* and other business meetings that the *paterfamilias* would stand directly in the *tablinum's* space

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[87] Cooper, 14.

interrupting this visual line in order to ensure that the visitors' gazes now terminated directly where he stood. In essence, this axis strategically created a viewing position for clients and guests, directing their lines of sight exactly where the *paterfamilias* willed. In so doing, the *tablinum* became a seat of power, and the position from which the *paterfamilias* was able to maintain control over his house.[88] Additionally, as the *paterfamilias* utilized the atrium and *tablinum's* space to conduct his day-to-day affairs, with the *tablinum* serving as a sort of office or study, the centrality of these spaces to the rest of the house had a sort of panopticon effect, meaning that the *paterfamilias* was not only able to keep a watchful eye over the various parts of his home that surrounded him, his presence remained in full-view to family, visitors and slaves who were thus less inclined to misbehave.

In addition to using the house's "view through" design to enact power and control, there were other ways in which the *paterfamilias* could control the lines of sight in his home. First, upon entering the home, visitors would be greeted by an *ostarius*, or doorman, whose job it was to help mediate their engagement with the interior space. Once inside, the gaze of visitors and clients could then be directed towards or diverted away from specific areas at the *paterfamilias's* discretion, Cooper explains, "by strategically placed domestic slaves standing duty as 'living barriers' steering even invited visitors away from areas not intended for display."[89]

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[88] This idea is further promoted with the understanding that Roman houses were designed on the same axis and spatial orientation of *templum*, or sacred spheres in which Etruscan and Roman priests would stand when performing priestly rituals, a place that afforded them mystical power and privilege. Because the paterfamilias was considered a sort of priest in his own house, it was thought by Romans that when he stood at the *tablinum* to conduct business, he stood as it were in the center of his own sacred *templum*, exercising power and control over the spaces of his home, A. L. Frothingham, "Circular Templum and Mundus," *American Journal of Archeology* 18 (1914): 302-320.
[89] Cooper, 8.

Or in the opposite case, these same barriers could also draw attention towards household features and decoration that served to promote the identity and status of the *paterfamilias* and his family. As Hales points out, the architectural design and decoration of the atrium was specifically designed to be the "art of impression."[90] Therefore, the *paterfamilias* would have understood the importance of using his home as a means to impress upon the minds of visitors positive messages about his and his family's character and wealth. This was specifically achieved through the use of three symbols that were often placed in the atrium: ancestral portraits (*imagines maiorum*), evidence of the family's noble heritage, the marriage bed (*lectus genialis*), representative of the married couple's morality and loyalty, and as mentioned previously, the loom, an emblem of industriousness and womanly virtue.[91]

Because the matron also occupied *communia* areas of the home, such as the atrium, she would thus have been frequently in full, public view as she went about her household duties and activities.[92] Scholars like Anna McCullough would suggest that the matron's visible presence in the Roman house was purposefully orchestrated so as to put her on display as part of a patriarchal propagandizing system. McCoullough even goes so far as to call this the Roman woman's feminine "invisibility" in that the matron was in a sense placed like a fixture in the atrium in the hopes her virtue, modesty, and even beauty would advance the social reputation of her husband or male family members.[93] This, of course, would mean that though

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[90] Hales, 16.
[91] Wallace-Hadrill, 107-108.
[92] Cooper, 14.
[93] Anna McCullough, "Gender and Public Image in Imperial Rome," (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2007), 46.

visible to society's gaze, she herself — her thoughts, desires, self-identity — remained obscured and irrelevant.

In contrast, it is here argued that if the *paterfamilias* exploited his own visibility in an effort to gain power and social prestige, then it seems contradictory to suggest that these same architectural features and visual dynamics would repress the *materfamilias* in the way described by McCoullough, especially in homes owned and run by unattached females. Rather, the matron was able to utilize her visibility to manipulate her public impression in the same way the male head of household did. This is because for both the *paterfamilias* and his female equivalent, there was no sense of powerlessness in being on display. Rather, setting oneself on display played a crucial role in the self-imaging of Roman society. By virtue of this, the matron would have been able to utilize her visibility to enhance and engender her own power and identity, exercising agency and control instead of merely subsuming to the role of spectacle.

In the first place, this was naturally achieved by virtue of the fact that the home's visitors were in many cases of a lower status. Roman custom was such that men of inconsequential means would visit the homes of more wealthy or influential members of society in order to petition them for business, protection, or even loans. As Vitruvius explains, the reason atrium-houses had such rooms as atria, peristyles, and so forth was in order to accommodate these meetings. Thus, he goes on to explain, men of lower status did not have such rooms in their homes since it was their social obligation to visit the houses of upper-class citizens, and not the other way around (Vitr. 6. 5. 1). With an understanding that visitors would have entered

the home aware of their own lowly-rank in contrast to the clout and capital of those whose home they called on, it is likely that they would have seen the *materfamilias,* as she circulated the home or sat weaving in the atrium, as a woman whose position of power and wealth warranted their respect. In this sense, her mere presence in a way demanded attention and spoke to her ascendency and influence. She was someone above them in rank and means, rather than an object meant for their gaze.

Even when entertaining guests of equal or higher status, the *materfamilias* could still utilize the power of visibility in her home to claim respect. This is because while the Roman matron frequently was in full view, she was able to retreat out of that public view as quickly as she entered it. With no clear delineations of female versus male spaces within the household, and with nothing attesting to the fact that the matron was restricted from certain areas at specific times, the fact remains that the *materfamilias* was able to control the terms of her own visibility as she freely moved about the spaces of the home. As Cooper explains, "To enjoy [such] freedom of movement without having to interact with or be seen by others except at one's own discretion [is] a valuable asset."[94] With this in mind, the mere fact that a Roman matron was seen because she chose to be seen, demonstrates a gesture of dominance. In other words, the visibility of the *materfamilias* was on her terms, not the viewer's.

The atrium-house was frequented by male guests and visitors who would have been able, no doubt, to see the *materfamilias* as she went about her daily business. However, when one considers that visitors were entering the home on the

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[94] Cooper, 7.

terms and limits set personally by the *materfamilias* and generally by the *dominus*, one can begin to sense the instability of gendered-looking in this scenario. Just as the *paterfamilias* willed his own visibility but also relied on his ability to keep others in his view, the Roman matron's mere presence in *communia* areas would have rendered her able to watch business negotiations and keep visitors and guests in her own scope of vision.[95] Thus, by holding others in her own gaze, and by being able to control the circumstances of her visibility, the *materfamilias* in a sense dislodged her viewers from a dominant viewing position, reversing the power relations and rendering herself impervious to other's attempts to objectify her.

In Roman society "a person's presence or residence in a particular sphere, [and] whether a person was watched, watching, visible, or invisible, could help categorize him/her as masculine or feminine in the eyes of onlookers."[96] Because the matron's presence in *atria*, *triclinia*, and so forth allowed her to keep a watchful eye on others, and also control the terms of her visibility, the *materfamilias* would have accordingly wielded masculine power. As E. Ann Kaplan theorizes, "The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language...is to be in the "masculine" position."[97] Along this same line, Rosemary Betterton argues that, "Woman as spectator or viewer offers her the satisfaction of being associated or identified with the traditional rewards of a penetrating male

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[95] Kampen, 20.

[96] McCoullough, 7.

[97] E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Meuthen, 1983), 27.

gaze, namely power and domination."[98] Consequently, the *materfamilias's* ability to gaze back upon visitors who entered the home under the *dominus's* strategically set terms, afforded her a position of masculine authority in her home, as the so-called "viewer" would have come under the mercy of her gaze. As a result, her appropriation of male power exposed and enhanced her individuality, strength and character.

Truly this inversion of the male-over-female ideology by virtue of the *materfamilias*'s public presence and gaze in the *communia* areas, validated and promoted her own experience and established her identity as a significant contributor to family and social life. The *materfamilias* was not a figure to be forgotten, or one to be sequestered in an out of view female domain, but instead, just as the loom stood perpetually in the atrium as a symbol of womanly virtue and character, so did the *materfamilias* circulate in her own home, ever present to the public eye, as a reminder to the community of her relevance and importance.

Conclusion

Architecture has the ability to reflect social beliefs and behaviors, as well as to act upon individuals in the structuring and promotion of social patterns. As a result, one can see that the specific design and use of space in the Roman atrium-house played a significant role in cuing and reflecting the attitudes and identities of its inhabitants. Existing scholarship has thus established that Roman domestic

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[98] Rosemary Betterton, "How do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," in *Looking on Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Medi*a," ed. Rosemary Betterton (London: Pandora, 1987), 226.

architecture indeed helped to foster the social identity of the *paterfamilias*, stimulating both his power and influence in the community. However, what this paper demonstrates is that the architectural design of the atrium-house also corresponded to liberties and privileges enjoyed by the Roman matron. Particularly, the open and outward nature of the house, complete with its altogether lack of segregated gendered spheres, allowed the *materfamilias* to experience a surprising level of mobility and influence both in and out of the home. As a result, the Roman matron both regarded herself and was regarded by the community as an influential presence in society — someone who could own property, run households, exercise a certain level of rights and assume the position of an equal partner in marriage.

In addition, it is concluded here that the mechanisms for controlling visibility and lines of sight present within the atrium-house were not limited to male use, but in actuality allowed the *materfamilias* an upper-hand in the visual dynamics of the home and a way to glean masculine power. Specifically, the Roman matron was able to contrive power over guests and visitors from her ability to control when and how she was viewed and by her ownership of the gaze. Thus, the nature of the architecture of the Roman *domus* helped to structure the social identity of the *materfamilias,* promoting a degree of independence, authority, and respect in the life of the Roman matron.
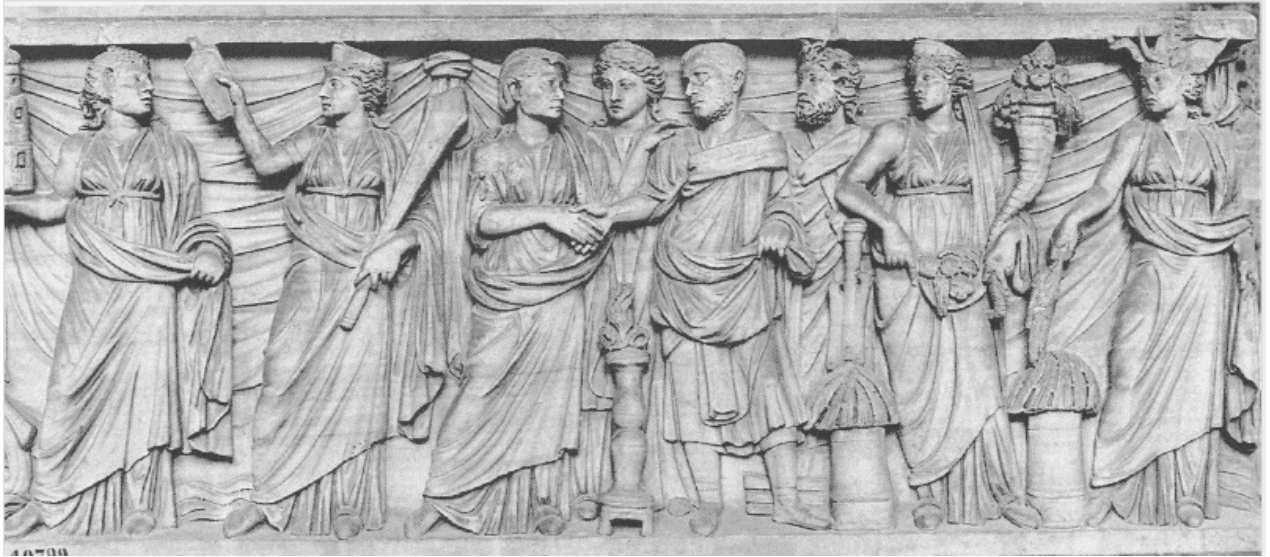
Fig. 1 *Sarcophagus of an Imperial Official and his Wife*. c. 275 CE. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano.

Fig. 2 *Funerary Relief of a Roman Couple*, Musei Vaticani, Italy.

Fig. 3 *Funerary Relief of a married Couple, with the Woman in the Guise of Venus.* 110-120 CE. Rome, Villa Medici.
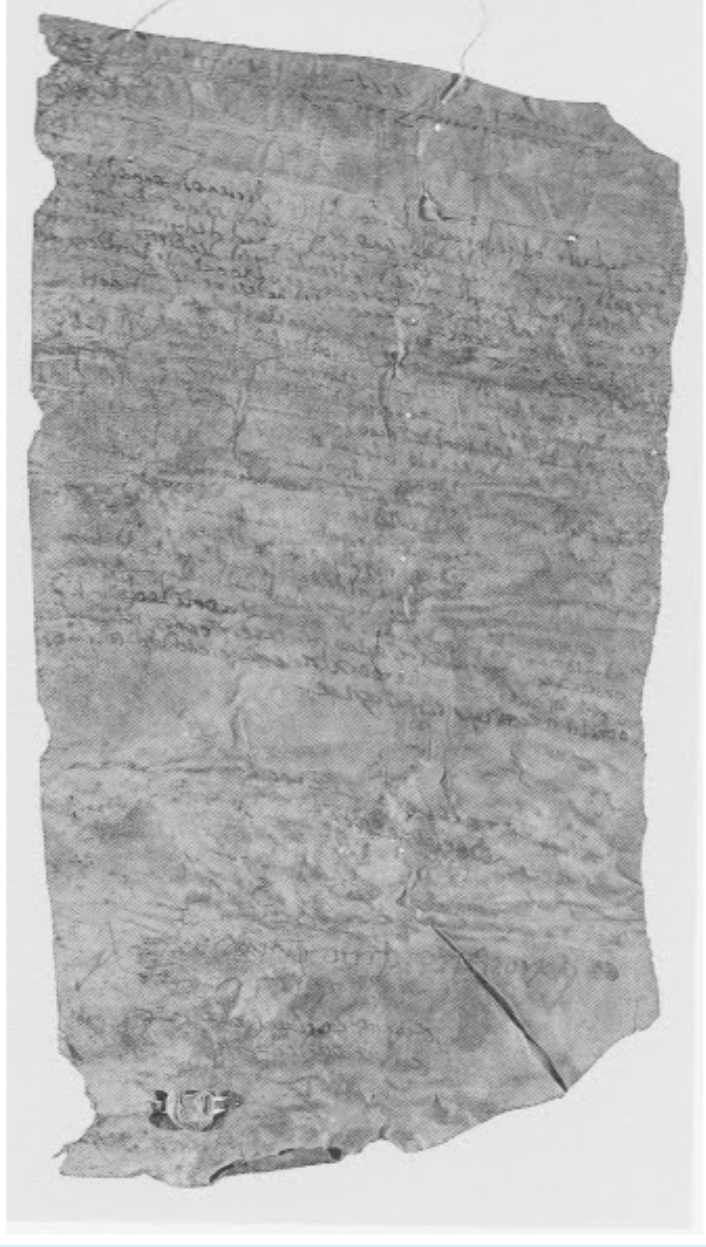
Fig. 4 Sublease Agreement of Claudia Isidora. Papyrus. 214 CE. New Haven, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. P. Yale inv. 227.

Fig. 5 Regio VII, Building of Eumachia, Pompeii, Italy.

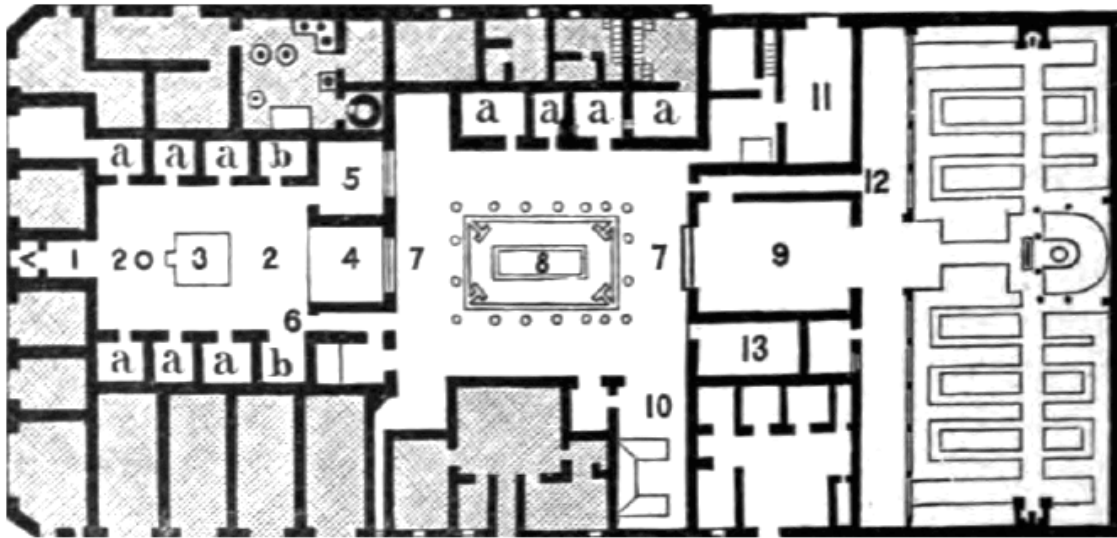Fig. 6 Statue of Eumachia, Forum, Pompeii, Italy.
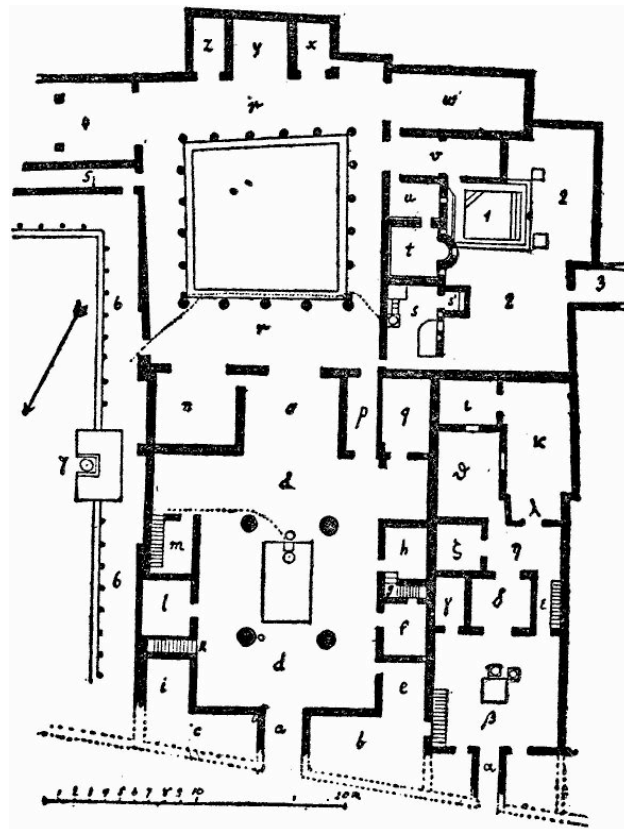
Fig. 7 Plan of House of Pansa, Pompeii, Italy.

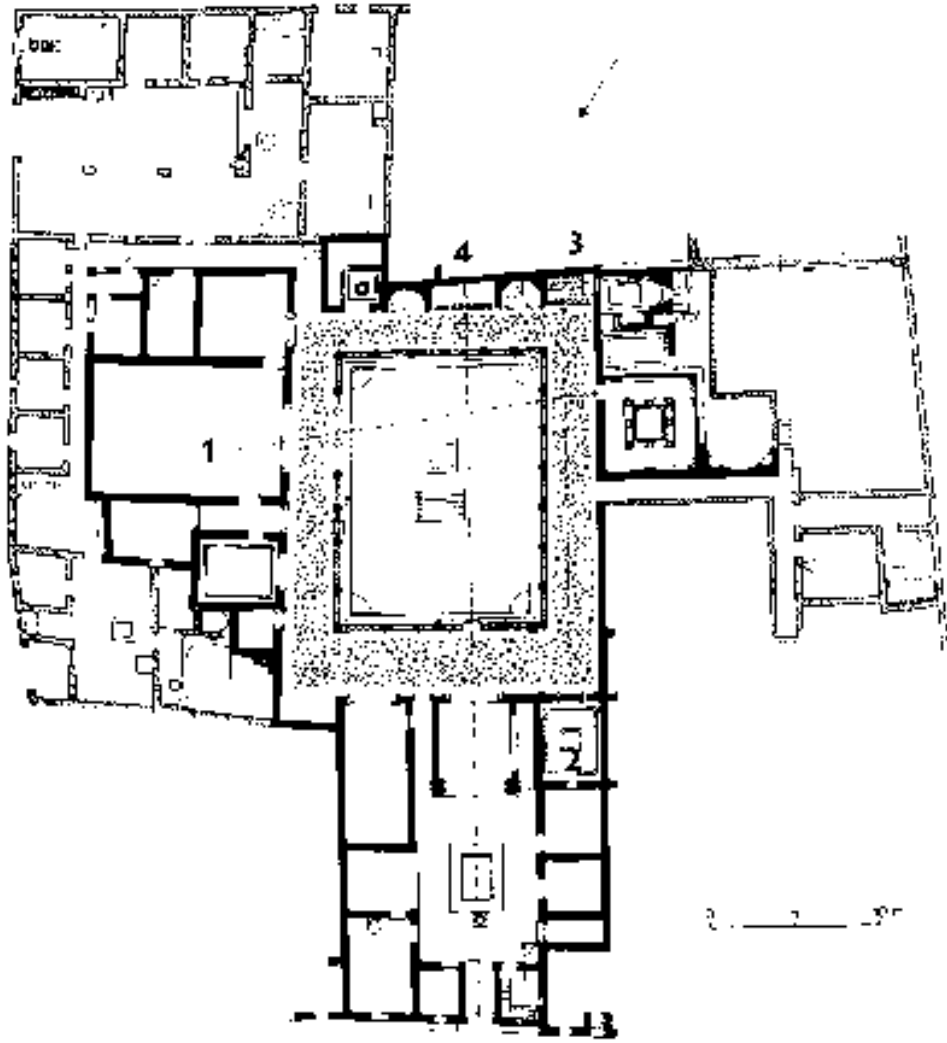Fig. 8 Plan of House of the Silver Wedding, Pompeii, Italy.

Fig. 9 Plan of House of Menander, Pompeii, Italy.

Fig. 10 Example of the "view through" in the House of Menander, Pompeii, Italy.

Fig. 11 Second-century gravestone from Arbeia depicting Regina, a Roman woman
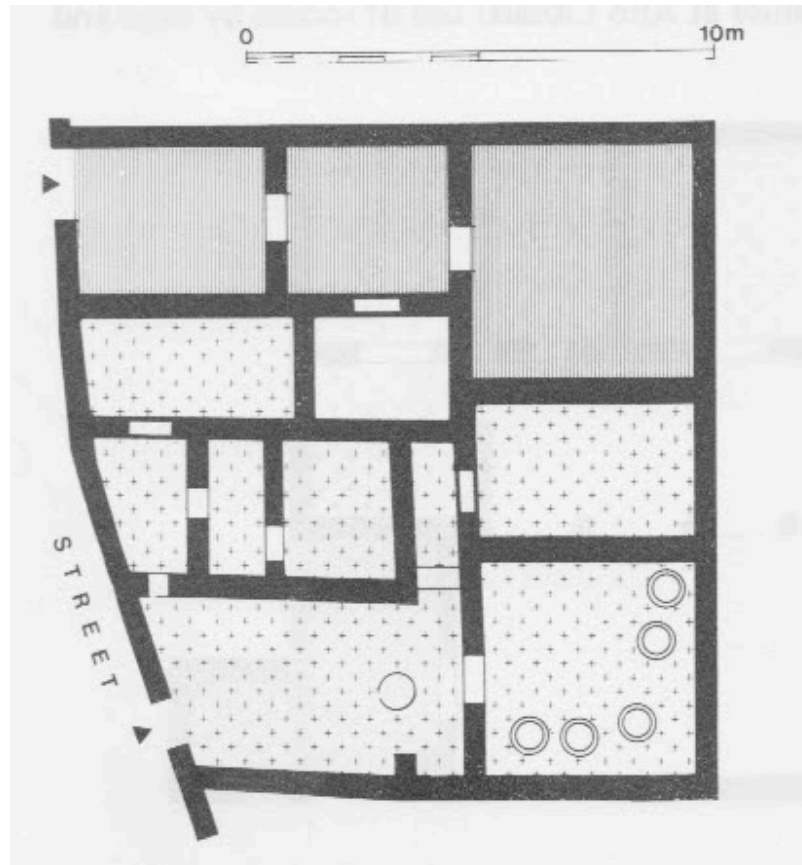as woolworker; British Museum, London.

Fig. 12   Plan of house on North Slope of Aeropagus, Athens. Areas used by women are marked +; those used by men are shaded. Entrances to houses form the street are marked with arrows.

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