A COMPANION TO THE
ARCHAEOLOGY OF RELIGION
IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World

Edited by Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke

 Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World presents a comprehensive review of a wide range of topics and archaeological materials relating to the practices, expressions, and interactions of religion in antiquity. Chapters are primarily focused on "lived religion"—religious experience rather than belief—in the Graeco-Roman world, and take their point of departure in concepts, aspect, and empirical material related to central themes within the archaeology of religion.

Containing 35 contributions from leading scholars, researchers, and theorists from a variety of relevant fields, chapters are structured around themes that include archaeology of ritual, embodiment, performance, creating spaces of experiences, engaging and appropriating sacred space, and reimagining public space, expressiveness, and public transformations.

Collectively, chapters serve to shape our understanding of the role of objects in cultural practices of constructing religion and encountering and appropriating such religion as objectified representations of the sacred. Combining the best current scholarship with a wide-ranging geographical scope and chronological span, A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World offers illuminating insights into everyday religious life and ritual practice during antiquity.

THE EDITORS

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<td>Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung</td>
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PART IV

Creating Spaces of Experiences
CHAPTER 16

At Home

Kimberly Bowes

Religious experience in the ancient home has often been termed “private” religion. The tendency to equate the home with private space, and thus home-based ritual with private ritual, is hard to avoid, for the modern idea of “home” as refuge from work and the pressures of public life is synonymous with the “private”. And yet the tendency to label ancient domestic religion “private” presents considerable problems. Ancient houses turn out not to be “private” at all but permeable to all kinds of non-family persons while, conversely, the “public” religion of temple, synagogue and church affected domestic practices in complex ways. In most of the periods considered here, textual information on domestic practices has been privileged over material remains, in many cases reinforcing the notion of a public/private binary. Roman legalese describing the division between sacra publica and sacra privata, a single Greek text that insists the worship of Zeus Ktesios was attended only by immediate family— all seem to indicate a separate place for “private”, presumably home-based, religious rites.

This chapter describes the archaeologies of domestic rituals in classical Greek, Roman, Early Christian and Jewish households. In doing so, it relies principally on material culture to outline the kinds of spaces, communities and activities that comprised religiosity in the home. It argues that, like the home itself, ancient Mediterranean domestic religion was not “private” in any modern sense of the term. It encompassed communities that extended far beyond the nuclear family; it referenced and often imitated rituals carried out in communal forums; and in some periods, it was situated in spaces designed to be part of the home’s outward-looking status apparatus was, by modern definitions, quite public. This essay will also explore the ways in which the home helped to shape religious impulses and activities that were particular to the home itself. By paying careful attention to the physical remains and spaces of domestic rituals, it will examine how the individuality of family life and house space gave rise to idiosyncratic, individualized practices and how the imitation of public rituals in domestic space might involve important
changes to those rituals. Ancient worship at home, it will be shown, was not "private", but it often bore the unmistakable, and often individualized mark of the home and the family.

Finding Religion at Home

Finding the material traces of religion in the home is challenging at every level. Indeed, the first problem is one of levels — walls levels, which are typically preserved to foundation height or just above in most archaeological sites. If the house shrines of Pompeii and Ephesus are any indication, much house-based ritual could have been centered in wall niches, placed some 1 meter or more above the ground. These levels are missing in the vast majority of ancient house sites and with them we miss the potentially richest, or at least most durable, source for domestic practices. Large masonry altars, significant sacrificial deposits or other large-scale evidence of cult are relatively rare in domestic contexts, a fact which is itself worthy of comment (see below) but which also makes identification difficult.

Archaeologist of religion Timothy Insoll has suggested that the material potential of all ancient cultures is true in domestic contexts: Are the bird-bath shaped basins, or louters, found in Greek houses necessarily used for the rituals of purification and pre-nuptial bathing, as described in the sources? Or were they just early versions of sinks? If we follow the Roman textual sources, the entire home is a sacred space, with a titular deity guarding the threshold, the doors, panels, even the household broom. Reading "religion" in domestic spaces and artifacts is tricky, not least because the home is a space where, as will be argued below, the intentions and agency of individuals and families might transform everyday objects and spaces into sacred ones; at some moments, the louter was a sacred vessel used to wash away the household miauna or pollution caused by death or birth; at others, it was just a sink. Individual or familial religious intention was composed of a mélange of cultural norms shared by their society, by particular family traditions and by the intentions of individuals — the latter two of which are hard, if not impossible to recover archaeologically.

We should thus expect not only difficulty in parsing the "religious" in domestic archaeology, but should also expect more than the usual variety in every aspect of religious expression, from the deities worshipped to sacred orientation. Archaeologists of religion have naturally assumed that shared cultural norms and the repetitive quality of ritual produce a repetitive, identifiable material footprint (cf. Renfrew 1985); pagan altars are placed beside temples, Mithraic sanctuaries have facing feastings couches, Christian churches are oriented east or west, and so on. In the home, the need for religious expression to reflect the individual family yielded far more variety in both practice and its material expression. The challenge of the archaeologist is to trace the commonalities that allow us to identify shared domestic religious practices, but also to allow for potentially enormous variation.

The case of Pompeii provides a useful illustration. The houses of Pompeii, preserved in many cases up to second-floor level, contain dozens of examples of domestic shrines. Often painted with images of two dancing youthful gods, identified as the Lares or household-hearth gods, a togate figure identified as the familial Genius or ancestral spirit, and occasionally holding small statuettes of these and other deities, these shrines have been termed lararia — a neologism used to describe what is held to be a normative form of Roman domestic religion, dedicated to the gods of the hearth and home. More careful readings of these shrines, however, have noted huge variety in what Roman authors thought the Lares represented, in what other deities were also represented, and in the location of these shrines — found in atria, kitchens, hallways, and gardens. Outside central Italy the variety of domestic practice expands. It is often assumed that all "Roman" houses, be they in Britain or Syria, should also have contained a domestic shrine for worship of the Lares. Yet even in provinces as "Romanized" as Spain or southern Gaul, statuettes of the Lares are relatively rare. In Egypt statuettes of the baby Horus, or Harpocrates, are commonly found in houses along with a multitude of other traditional Egyptian deities (Nachtgea 1985). While the so-called lararia of Pompeii are a starting point, they represent only the tip of a vast and complicated iceberg of domestic practice, whose variation was echoed in the individual practices of individual houses.

Reading Domestic Space and its Rituals

Ancient Mediterranean housing exhibited enormous diversity, from the rabbit Warren of Palestinian villages to the high-rise apartments of the Roman city. What almost these all shared, however, was an open courtyard space which served as the central organizing unit, admitting light and air. Most houses also had a separate space that contained the household cooking fires or hearth. It is in these two spaces — the courtyard and the kitchen/hearth — that much ritual activity was also centered, either in actual fact or notionally. But ancient houses also shared a startling mutability in the function of rooms: rooms that might serve as dining spaces in one instance might be used for storage in another. As the functions of rooms in ancient houses might change according to need, so too might ritual activity take place in any number of spaces.

The majority of classical Greek houses presented a fairly closed face to the passerby. Entrance often took place through a narrow corridor or other device which limited views inside, and there were few exterior windows. Once inside, however, the space gave on to a central courtyard that served as the central organizing unit. Rooms might be shielded from that courtyard by a masking porch but, in general, the courtyard served as a kind of panopticon into the other domestic spaces. Portability of activities and changeability of given spaces' function depending on need and time of day seem to have characterized these modest houses. The one exception was the andron where the all-male symposium or drinking was held; set on one side of the courtyard and often provided with benches.

The archaeology of domestic religion from classical Greece is particularly thin and the little scholarship is heavily reliant on textual evidence. The combined evidence of finds combined with texts suggests the courtyard was one of the main spaces of ritual practice. It is often there that, as in the well-preserved town Olynthos, the few preserved stone or masonry altars are found and very often the stone louters which, as described above, might have either ritual or ordinary uses (Galill 2002). The textual sources specifically mention Zeus Ktesios, or the Zeus of Possessions, and Zeus Herkeios, the Zeus of the Courtyard, as having been worshipped in courtyard spaces. The courtyard was the space most visible to the rest of the house, and thus in which the greatest number of inhabitants
might be involved. While Isaeus (8.16) describes courtyard rituals to Zeus Kteisios as explicitly prohibiting outsiders, other texts find non-family members present (Antiphon 1.1.5–9), suggesting worshipping communities might vary. In any case, the use of the courtyard, and indeed the fact that Zeus Herkseios took his name from that space, and that an Athenian's claims to legitimate citizenship were made with reference to this cult (Aristotle, Constitution of the Athenians 55), suggests that the courtyard space could, in those moments, serve as a cultic synecdoche for the family itself.

The Roman-period houses of Jewish families share a ritual emphasis on the courtyard, but within a spatial and social ambit so distinct that it forces us to realize how much space impacted ritual and ritual communities. Behind a closed façade the village houses of the Galilee open into an enclosed central courtyard. Yet many rooms were placed at some remove from the courtyard, and virtually no sight lines permitted views into adjacent rooms. These houses were rarely discrete units, but ran together with neighboring properties to such an extent that it is rarely possible to tell where one house-unit ends and another begins. The small courtyards around which they were set were shared spaces for baking, weaving, and agro-industrial activity. As Cynthia Baker has observed (2002), the Jewish home complex was a kind of anopetion, where individuals and family groups sharing a common courtyard could feel shielded from communal gaze while monitoring the communal courtyard. That courtyard was often the site — or at times the entry point — for the purpose-built ritual bath or mikveh, used for ceremonies of ritual purification after menstruation, sex, birth and death (Meyers 2003). Like the louteron of the Greek house, mikves (bath) could simply be portable baths, but wealthier houses built permanent ones, often set just off or within the common courtyard. The fact that these spaces of ritual purification were built within view of the family or multi-family aggregate unit speaks to the importance of the communal gaze in enforcing domestic ritual purification.

In many other areas of the Roman world, however, to stand outside a house was to be asked to look into its very heart. The careful sightlines established between entrance portal, the atrium and the colonnaded peristyle garden beyond provided a carefully controlled view through the entire house. Houses laid out in this fashion, which can be found from Pompeii through Britain and North Africa, are the material expression of one aspect of Roman self-fashioning — the transparent individual with nothing to hide. As Livius Drusus said to his architect, “You should apply your skills to arranging my house so that whatever I do should be visible to everyone” (Velleius Paterculus 2.14.3). Such transparency, of course, was a carefully crafted and socially acceptable lie: political scandal was hatched in homes just as surely as the sightlines of those homes only provided a tantalizing, carefully controlled glimpse of what their owners wished outsiders to see.

However, this habit describes a desire for self-presentation that impacted domestic rituals as well. Many household shrines were located in atria or courtyard spaces (Bakker 1994; cf. Fröhlich 1991). From Pompeii, the house of the Obellius Fennis provides a good example. Immediately upon entering the atrium to the right was a small built shrine. The tall base and open sides made it interior visible, where three statues were on display — a herm and two male busts whose identity was uncertain, but must have represented deities important to that family. A miniature altar, a coin and an incense burner were also found inside, while below in a niche was a lamp. The shrine was thus visible and accessible to any of the house's visitors, the statues advertising the family's favored gods, while the ritual implements were likewise on display and ready for use.

But courtyards, permeable or impermeable to public gaze, were not the only spaces of ritual practice and religious importance in ancient houses. The hearth was an ancient locus of ritual activity, and in Bronze Age houses the great central hearth may have served as one of the principal loci of religious activity. By the Greco-Roman period, the importance of the hearth is above all antiquarian, a memory of ancestral practice and of deities associated with an ancient past. Hestia, for instance, is the Greek goddess of the hearth and household, and is credited with having invented houses! The Lares, Roman gods of hearth and home, were likewise regarded as ancient even by Republican-period writers, who could not make up their mind as to the gods' origins and functions (Orr 1978). The physical traces of these hearth gods, while fragmentary, suggest both the continued importance of the idea of hearth and its transmutations into more "modern" settings.

In the Classical Greek house, rituals of birth, marriage and death are said to be set at the hearth: the anaphidromia, where a newborn baby is circled around the hearth at a run, may have been tied to Hestia, but in any case uses the hearth as synecdoche for home/family to which the new babe was now integrated (Rose 1957: 10). The bridal procession began and ended at the hearths of the bride/groom, respectively while, at least in some communities, sweepings from the home were deposited on the hearth as a dedication to Hestia in order to purify the miasma of death. Yet these traditions of hearth-based ritual were carried out in homes where permanent hearths had become a thing of the long-distant past. The majority of Greeks homes had no permanent built hearths, but probably used portable braziers (Jameson 1990). In Olynthus, where permanent cooking fires are more common, these were set within a cloister-like floor — a cramped space not ideal for the rituals. The finds from these flues have yielded ashes, broken ceramics and animal bones — waste which might equally be domestic or ritual (Cahill 2002: Chapter 4.4.2). Built hearths are sometimes found in these rooms, but yield no cooking pots or burned bones, pointing to other uses — heat or perhaps ritual. Given that portable braziers were probably the most common kind of "hearth", we must imagine these rituals were portable as well.

To an even greater degree, the Roman Lares were dissociated from their traditional hearth. As noted above, shrines painted with images of the Lares are found in some Pompeian atria, where their veneration could take place in an appropriately public setting and contribute to the status apparatus of their owners. More common, however, is their appearance in kitchens: the majority of all identifiable shrines in Pompeii and Herculanum are located in kitchens and other service quarters (Fröhlich 1991; see Figure 16.1). Yet unlike in Greek households, these kitchen spaces were overwhelmingly used by slaves and thus we should imagine that much hearth-based ritual in Pompeian homes was practiced by slaves. Indeed, one kitchen shrine may depict a whole collegium or voluntary association of slaves and ex-slaves, parading before the Lar. The kitchen as ritual space, then, actually represents a distinct part of the extended household — the family slaves — who, at least in Pompeii, seem to have adopted an important role in the family's religious life (Ross 1997).

Courtyards and kitchens are perhaps the quintessential household spaces. As an important reminder that the ancient "house" and its cultic apparatus need not even be bounded by walls, it is useful to consider the rural Roman villa. The term "villa" comprised a (frequently large) house, its disparate, often non-contiguous parcels of land, and
the people who worked that land, an assortment of slaves, tenant farmers, seasonal workers and overseers. The religious spaces of the estate thus extended from house to fields. The boundaries of the estate were set by the ritual placement of property markers, each consecrated with a sacrifice; a Iatretos ritual purified the land by sacralizing its boundaries. An inscription and crude herm to Jupiter Terminus, Jupiter of Boundaries, found near Amelia in Italy, provides a rare glimpse of how such boundaries were ritualized and overseen by divine agency. In France, Spain and Britain, freestanding, often large, temples were a frequent sight on villa lands. The location of these temples, typically some distance from the villa buildings and often on access road, likewise points to a worshiping population comprised of the estate working population and passersby, and to attempts to claim the spaces of the estate via the gods. While cultic artifacts from these temples are often sparse, the most common finds – rough votive altars and terracotta images of Venus-type figures – describe the rituals of the estate’s rural peasantry. The Roman villa as both physical space and human unit was thus given ritual form.

Whether permeable or impermeable to the outside gaze, most ancient houses bore some sacred protection around their boundaries. Recesses near the street-side door of many classical Greek houses have been identified as shrines to Hermes and/or Hekate (Jameson 1990); over the doors of Pompeian houses it is often found an image of a phallus; and on the windows and lintels of the late Roman houses of the Syrian uplands are inscribed prayers and curses – invoking pagan and Christian deities alike – to protect the inhabitants within against the evil eye (Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers 1989). All these attest a concern with the boundaries of the house, and thus to what public scrutiny it might also carry with it: jealousy and covetousness. These were imagined not simply as social problems but as divine attacks that could cause grain to spoil, babies to miscarry and other grave matters of life and death. The points at which the house did its important work as conveyer of status and identity – the windows, doors and entry spaces – were also the lowest points of its defenses and it is here that the majority of such apotropaic imagery and inscriptions are found. Hermes and Hekate were guardians of boundaries, protecting against harmful incursion; the phallus’ raw power fought off evil; while the image of an eye attacked with spears might actually beat off the evil eye (cf. Gell 1998). These protections alert us to the dangers that might accompany the public gaze and to the importance ancient people credited to the house as a sacred, protective unit.

Public Religion and Domestic Ritual

While the house may have had a protective envelope, its sacred world was never particular to itself. As discussed above, “private” religion is a difficult term to apply to rituals that were very often in dialogue with rituals taking place in communal contexts outside the home. Indeed, it is this near constant referencing to communal religion that has led some scholars to dismiss domestic cult as a separate object of inquiry. Again, attention to the physical evidence for domestic ritual is helpful here, as it reveals both the close connections with collective, “public” rituals and also the subtle and important ways in which householders make those rituals their own (cf. Smith 1998).

The Greek home is an interesting case in point, as recent arguments and have relegated all ritual therein to simply an extension of “polis religion” (Sourvinou-Inwood 2000; cf. Farante 2008). Although the evidence is often one of silence, there are noteworthy differences between polis rites and domestic ones, the principal of which is animal sacrifice. While some texts describe domestic animal sacrifice (Herodotus 6:67.3–69), above all to Zeus Keosios, one wonders how frequent and large-scale animal sacrifice in homes really was. It is only in Olynthus that permanent altars are found and those are rare, while small-scale, portable altars are far more common. The relatively confined spaces in the home, and the absence of evidence for ritual deposits, ash pyres or other leavings all leave the impression of small-scale rites, using small animals and probably a predominance of non-meat sacrifices of grain and cakes, the pouring of libations and other gestures. This shift of material and scale matters; much ink has been spilled on the centrality of animal sacrifice to the polis’ collective relationship with the gods. If domestic ritual was largely a bloodless one, it represented a subtly different set of human-divine relationships. It is also the case that the Greek domestic deities seem to have been rarely represented in human form, or at least we have very few divine images from Classical Greek houses. From the possible herms at the house doors to Zeus Keosios represented as a pot, it is not too far a stretch to suggest that the anthropomorphism that dominated in many public temples may have given way somewhat in the home.

The Roman relationship between public and domestic religion was similarly complex. Consider the case of the Roman house shrines of Pompeii. Their form – small columned structures atop a plinth – seems to echo that of the public temples. But they generally lack altars, have no interior equivalent of a cela, and bear much closer resemblances to what little we know of neighborhood shrines on street corners to which the Lares were also attached. There is therefore many “publics” which might be referenced in the home, and in this case, it is useful to imagine the relationship as a continuum between public and domestic rather than the public “original” and its domestic referent.

In the case of Christian buildings inserted into homes, it is only at the end of our period, in the sixth century CE, that they occasionally take the form of public basilicas. The so-called Theater House in Ephesus has all of those forms in miniature – a single apse with rows of clergy benches, a tiny sanctuary and miniature altar. And yet, as with the Greek house, the references to public rites are reshaped by the small spaces of the home. The clergy benches are shrunken past their usefulness, while the sanctuary barrier could have no purpose in space with such a small community. Indeed, it is rather unlikely the space could have accommodated a typical Eucharistic ritual with its emphasis on processions. Rather, the family in this instance seems to have appropriated and miniaturized the language of public church architecture to stand in place of those rituals instead of the full panoply of the public mass, they have a stand-in in stone (Bowes forthcoming).

At the same time that the monumental, public religion might be miniaturized and re-adapted for domestic rites, the most banal household objects were also often mobilized for ritual use. Indeed, as described above, one of the many challenges in finding domestic religion is parsing the ritual from the everyday. For the ritual apparatus of the household were everyday objects – choice food items, pitchers, plates, lamps and jars – which in moments of religious intention took on ritual power.

Careful excavation has revealed some tantalizing examples. Athanassiou claims that the image of Zeus Keosios is made of a kadosh, a small jar, stuffed with food and garlanded with wool. Not only is this domestic Zeus radically different from his great anthropomorphic statues in the public temples, but his image is literally that of a storage vessel,
that is, he embodies his own nature as god of possessions. In Nea Halos, in Boetia, a vessel was found sunk below the floor next to a built hearth and contained two snake figurines (Ault 2006: 77). The snake, as described in more detail below, has an ancient association with households and household cult and may have become another symbol of Zeus Kesios. Thus, the Boetian deposit may not simply have been a votive deposit to Zeus; in its humble everyday form, it may have been Zeus himself.

The rites that protected the fabric of the house, noted above through reliefs and inscriptions, might also empower everyday objects. In a number of Roman villas in northern Spain and coastal Gaul were found deposits of birds and birds’ eggs, typically placed in pots and then placed either under the door or at some distance from the villa buildings, seemingly at some sort of perimeter (Tabre, Forest, and Kotarba 2008; Caas and Ruiz De Arbulu 1997). While contemporaneous textual evidence usually finds birds used in rituals to the dead, these deposits seem to be marking the boundaries of the living, calling upon the apotropaic power of both living and unborn birds to protect the homes of humans. The building of a house also seems to have been an occasion at which ritual protection was called down into everyday objects. At Lullingstone villa in southern Britain, a whole series of deposits – from a horse skull carefully laid in straw ticking and comes from a Mediterranean Umbrella Pine to an assemblage of ceramic fragments placed inside a wall – ritually marked the moment of construction (Meates 1979). Such foundation deposits, which can be comprised of anything from pots to coins, are hard to interpret: like the bird deposits, they probably have an apotropaic function, but they also mark a moment in time – construction or boundary marking – and thus, like some of the other domestic rites we have examined above, serve to ritualize major family moments.

Perhaps the most potent everyday object in the family’s arsenal of ritual power was the lamp. From humble terracotta to elaborate bronze versions, lamps were both the major source of light in houses which, outside the courtyard, offered very little in the way of natural light (Ellis 2007). They were also a frequent ritual implement, particularly in those rituals that marked the end of the day. In Greek and Roman houses, evenings were marked by the lighting of “the beloved lamps” and short greetings to Sol and other deities. In Jewish houses, the lighting of the lamps on Friday marked the starting of the Shabat. Christians continued these traditions, lighting lamps and crossing themselves or offering prayers to mark the setting of the sun and ushering in the “light of Christ” (Bowes 2008). It is tempting to assume that lamps that bear religious imagery – a cross, a menorah or Sol – might have served in these rituals, but they may have equally simply been used for daily functions, or both. Lamps were also a common companion to the most important of all rituals of family members. In the house of consul Astalos in Athens, an image of the consul was labeled as “servant to the goddess” beside which stood a niche, presumably containing the image of the goddess herself. Before this niche were the remains many lamps lit in honor of the householder’s chosen deity (Nilsson 1960: 206).

Families, Past and Present

As has been suggested above, the rituals that took place in the home can be understood as the expression of the household itself. As such, the household they ritually stood for was, in most cases, not limited to its living inhabitants but embraced the dead as well.

Guide to Further Reading

There are very few guides to the religious archaeology of classical Greek homes, and one must ferret out the remains from archaeological studies (Cahill 2002) or textual studies (Faraone 2008; Boeckler 2008). Still useful are the older studies of Nilsson (1954) and Rose (1957). For Roman houses the data is much richer: detailed studies of the house
shires of Pompeii (Fröhlich 1991; Foss 1997), Ostia (Bakker 1994), and Roman villas (Ferdérec 1988: 251–2; Bowes 2006) are good introductions. The textual data has now been usefully recast in recent discussions (Bodel 1997, 2008) although the old surveys (Wissowa 1912, Orr 1978) remain useful. For Jewish households, the archaeology of domestic cult has seen no comprehensive study, although the midwa‘ar have been surveyed typically in studies of gender (Meyers 2003). Again, the best view is the first-hand troll through the archaeology (Hirschfeld 1995). Christian domestic archaeology is also another new field, for which the data is just being collected (Bowes 2008; forthcoming).

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