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# DOORS AND THE USE OF SPACE IN POMPEIAN *CUBICULA*

## I. Introduction

For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the functional capacity of Pompeian domestic space was viewed from a unilateral perspective. Each of the rooms in the house was thought to have been host to a single activity, in a manner similar to modern western dwellings: the *triclinium* served as a dining room, the *tablinum* as a study, and the *cubiculum* as a bedroom. Recent examinations of textual and archaeological evidence have recognised a number of flaws in this model, however, revealing that many spaces were used for a variety of purposes (Leach 1997, Allison 2004a). The multifunctional nature of *cubicula*, the term typically used to describe the small rooms located along the sides of *atria* and peristyles in Pompeian houses, has received particular attention. A. Riggsby's textual analysis of the *cubiculum*, for instance, suggests that it was earmarked for numerous activities, including sleeping, sex, and the reception of guests (1997, 37-43). P. Allison's study of artefacts recovered from *cubicula* in 30 Pompeian houses reveals that they were typically used for various types of storage (2004a, 72-76 and 94-98). These and other analyses of this room's multi-functional character have been conducted without an important consideration, however: the presence (or absence) of doors and other permeable boundaries. This oversight is somewhat surprising, given the wealth of archaeological evidence for (see Section II, below) and literary references to (e.g. Apul. *Met.* 2.30, 3.21, and 3.15; Cic. *Tusc.* 5.59; Tac. *Ann.* 3.15, 14.8, and 14.44; Suet. *Iul.* 81; Val. Max. 9.13 ext. 4) the presence of doors in *cubicula*. Utilising data collected during an architectural survey of over 190 *cubiculum* doorways in 31 houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum, this poster examines the role that these boundaries played in regulating access to this versatile space.

## II. Archaeological Record

The houses of the Vesuvian cities provide an excellent laboratory for the study of doors and other permeable boundaries. Due to the preservation of various diagnostic architectural features (e.g. thresholds, pivot sockets, door jambs) it is often possible to reconstruct the design of the boundary that was present in a given doorway. This architectural evidence is particularly important because the artefacts that might provide similar insights (locks, keys, bosses, and other fittings) often went unrecorded during the process of excavation. Of the 129 *cubicula* examined by Allison, for instance, door hardware was recorded in only 24, and much of this appears to have been associated with the doors of storage furniture (Allison 2004b).

## III. Trends

Even the most basic evidence collected during an architectural survey can reveal useful insights into door and doorway design. When the data collected during the present survey was analysed, one of the immediately conspicuous trends was quite straightforward: the doorways of *cubicula* located towards the front of the house were considerably taller (1.15 x 2.81 m) than those located in the vicinity of the peristyle (1.18 x 2.20 m). The reasons for this discrepancy are probably simple

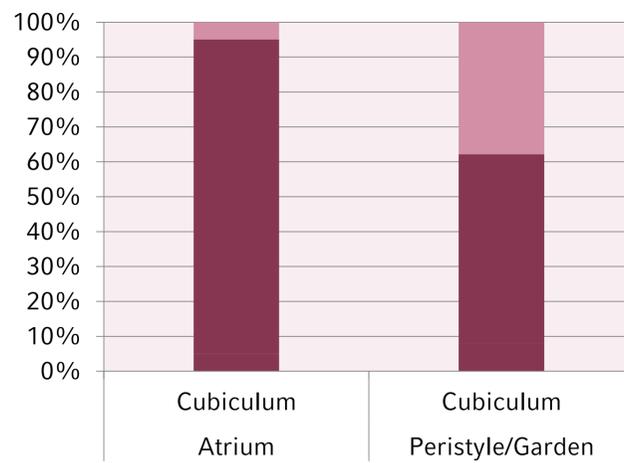


Fig. 1 Presence (purple) of *cubiculum* thresholds in doorways connecting with the atrium (n=121) and with the peristyle or garden (n=37)

enough: in many houses, the atrium and the peristyle complexes were constructed at different times. The former was often built during the Samnite period (when tall doorways were the design of choice), with the installation of the latter postdating it by nearly a century in some cases. On the other hand, it is reasonable to imagine that there was also a functional purpose for the change in design.

In traditional accounts of the Pompeian house, scholars have regularly emphasised the semi-public nature of the atrium, viewing it as a space to which non-residents were permitted a certain degree of unrestricted access (for a detailed summary of the traditional model, see Lauritsen 2011). If this interpretation is correct, then the installation of tall, imposing doorways in the atrium might be read as an attempt to enhance the grandeur of the residence and, consequently, the status of the inhabitants. Since "public" access to the peristyle and its dependencies was more restricted, the need for visible status symbols in this area was less necessary. As a result, the doorways were reduced to a more manageable size.

The design of the boundaries located in *cubiculum* doorways seems to support this interpretation. 95% of the doorways opening directly off of the atrium contained a stone threshold, the presence of which confirms the existence of a formal boundary in antiquity (Fig. 1). In most cases (82% of the total sample), this boundary took the form of double doors (*bifores*). In contrast, only six in ten *cubicula* located in the peristyle area were provisioned with stone thresholds, which indicates that the types of boundaries



Fig. 2 Clerestory windows in *cubicula*, Casa del Triclinio

employed deeper in the residence were generally less substantial (e.g. curtains).

If the *cubicula* located around the atrium were indeed utilised for sleeping and other private activities (as suggested by Riggsby) or were used for the storage of household materials (as suggested by Allison), doors would have been important to regulate both visual and physical access to these spaces. I have argued elsewhere (Lauritsen 2013) that the doors giving access onto the rooms surrounding Pompeian *atria* often remained closed, and the use of clerestory lighting in many *cubicula* suggests that such a pattern was particularly true of this room type (Fig. 2).

The times at which a door was permitted to stand open must have been determined by a number of factors, including the time of day, the season, and the type of activity that was occurring within the *cubiculum*. It is reasonable to imagine, however, that many of these doors saw considerable use; this supposition is supported by the appearance of thresholds in the Casa delle Colombe a Mosaico. In the doorways of *cubicula* surrounding the atrium, the sockets cut for the door pivots (upon which each *foris* turned) are of an unusual horseshoe shape (Fig. 3). Their appearance suggests that, after many years of heavy wear, the pivots slid out of their sockets and began to cut into the lip of the doorstop, a process that eventually prevented the doors from closing. As a consequence, the decision was taken to abandon the original design and move the doors further into the doorway.

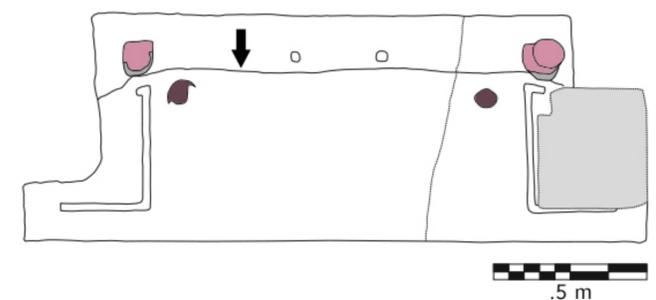


Fig. 3 Threshold in doorway 487, Casa della Colombe a Mosaico (plan). Original (pink) and secondary (purple) pivot placements highlighted; position of doorstop indicated by arrow

## IV. Conclusions

Though it has been suggested that status designations (e.g. slave vs. free) (Riggsby 1997, 44-45), decorative programmes (Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39-44), or even human barriers (Clarke 1991, 13; Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 78-81) served as regulatory mechanisms in Pompeian houses, doors and other structural boundaries represented a more effective means of controlling contact between spaces. With respect to the *cubiculum*, where the ability to alternate between sleep, reception, storage, and other domestic activities seems to have been desirable, the use of doors was particularly important. The evidence present above, when considered in light of the literary and artefactual records, suggests that permeable boundaries were necessary to maintain the functionality of *cubicula*. By regulating access between spaces and the primary circulation areas, *cubiculum* doors provided residents with the ability to, quite literally, frame physical, visual, and auditory interactions in the Pompeian house.

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