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**Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households. An Analysis of the Material Culture. Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, Monograph 42.* Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2004. Pp. xvii, 225; figs. 114, tables 74. ISBN 0-917956-96-6. \$40.00.**

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The volume under discussion is an adapted version of a PhD thesis from the department of archaeology at the University of Sidney (1994) updated with recent studies on the functional analysis of domestic space. Substantial parts of the book have been published as separate articles over the last 15 years, which means that many of the conclusions are already known to the academic public. Still, it is extremely gratifying to see this final synthesis.

In her introduction, Penelope Allison writes that this "only represents a sampling of the ways in which artifact assemblages can be analyzed to produce a deeper understanding of life in Pompeii." Later on, some fine-tuning seems to take place, e.g. p. 61: "It is clear from the sample of artifacts discussed here that analyses using the data compiled for this study can throw new light on the functions of many of the contents and fixtures as well as on the spatial distribution of household activities." Whereas the first statement seems overly modest, the second formulation appears overly optimistic.

In Chapter 1 ("Considering Pompeian House Contents", pp. 3-8) Allison formulates the main purpose of the study: the household assemblages of thirty Pompeian residences have been described and analysed in order to present an overview of domestic activities in these houses. This allows for study of the state of affairs in the town towards the end of its history. Asking new questions to existing sets of excavation data inevitably forces Allison to deal with the Pompeii premise, of all artifacts remaining in their original positions of use (see: L.R Binford 1981, Behavioural archaeology and the "Pompeii Premise", *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, 195-208). In the past, loose finds have been studied insufficiently within their context, and the architecture of buildings was the "main key to comprehending the activities carried out therein" (p. 3). Furthermore, finds have been excessively used to illustrate written sources. Allison, instead, argues in favour of a "holistic approach to the Pompeian remains, which includes investigation of the distribution of house contents." She believes that in that way it would be possible to make a house-to-house study of the last decennia of the town.

Chapter 2 ("Nature of the Evidence", pp. 11-26) starts with a critique of traditional research into Pompeian atrium houses and of ideas on depositional processes. Written sources have been too much the starting point for studying material culture and have caused interpretations of the names of spaces -- and the activities therein -- to become too fixed. This leaves little room for changes in the use of areas throughout the ages. The author thus chooses to leave the Latin names for the areas completely aside (see *infra*).

Allison then argues that the chronologies for building materials and wall paintings are overly based on stylistic analysis, which she disallows as a basis for examination of Pompeian

material. She thus leaves aside an important source of information, which has yielded interesting results in the last decades.

Allison's next point of critique regards the last phase of the town's existence, between the documented earthquake of AD 62 and the eruption of 79. She rightly opposes the notion of a single earthquake, but here her study suffers from the long interval between PhD and book. Since the 90's of the 20th century the concept of ongoing seismic activity between 62 and 79 AD has become commonly accepted (e.g., Th. Fröhlich/L. Jacobelli (eds.), *Archäologie und Seismologie. La Regione Vesuviana dal 62 al 79 d.C. Problemi Archeologici e Sismologici. Colloquium, Boscoreale 1993*, Munich 1995), and although Allison mentions the relevant literature, she still presents the idea as a new element to the academic discourse.

Finally, depositional processes after 79 are discussed. Parts of this section could have been abbreviated through references to recent literature. Allison does, however, justly resist the suggestion that inhabitants who survived the disaster would have been able to trace their houses. The layer of *lapilli* was originally too thick for this and only bedded down later.

The main points that are dealt with in this chapter resurface throughout the book, especially in chapters 5 to 8, in context of studying particular findings. Dealing with the points at those instances alone would have avoided unnecessary and occasionally irritating repetition.

The selection criteria for the chosen atrium houses are mentioned in Chapter 3 ("Data collection and Interpretative Procedures", pp. 29-41). All have a surface of between 200 and 2000 square meters and include a garden courtyard (the Casa dell'Ara Massima excepted). For all houses, modern archival material, such as *Giornali di scavo*, has been assembled and all the *in situ* archaeological material inventoried. It is a great merit that so much material -- 863 rooms and 6300 artefact entries -- has been assembled and incorporated into databases. These are not included in the book itself, but to a linked [website](#). The book includes a summary of the characteristics of the rooms and artefacts databases. Chapters 4 to 8 deal in detail with analyses.

Chapter 4 ("Functions of Finds and Fixtures", pp. 43-61) starts with a discussion of the fixtures, including the recesses. This, too, is a recurrent observation which would have been better dealt with once, following chapter 5. Among recesses, Allison recognises two low types. She doubts earlier interpretations of the recesses as sleeping alcoves, judging recesses alone not to be sufficient to identify a specific room function, at least not for the later years of the town's existence, which is the focal point of this study.

The important diachronic aspect is thus left aside: the moment at which placing the beds has been abandoned could be determined -- even if only approximately. The mural painting in the niche establishes a *terminus post quem*. At least up to the moment at which the painting was produced and probably also longer, the niche will have been used as a sleeping alcove. Sometimes the recess has been bricked up and repainted at a certain moment, in which cases the new painting supplies a *terminus ante quem* for the use of the recess as sleeping alcove. These points could have been used for a more diachronic analysis of the material. In turn, adaptations and the moment at which they took place could illustrate more clearly some of the choices made by the inhabitants of the houses in the last decades and hence be fruitful for Allison's dealing with the material.

Regarding the loose finds, Allison engages with the problems brought about by modern Italian naming of objects. Thus, context seems to make clear that "*forme di pasticceria*" (baking tins) must sometimes have been toiletries, but there is a real risk of arriving at circular arguments.

In Chapter 5 ("Room Use according to Architectural Type", pp. 63-123) Allison divides the selected houses into three categories (front hall area, main garden area and other areas) and distinguishes within those categories 22 room types, which are all described and analysed separately. This is the core of the research and -- at least according to this reviewer -- its great strength. Allison draws some remarkable conclusions, which do however leave some scope for discussion. I will limit myself to some observations.

Regarding type 3, characterised as 'Front Hall', the area commonly described as atrium, the rarity of strongboxes in the sample -- a typical element in the layout of atria -- is striking. As a result Allison qualifies the alleged representative character of "Front halls"/atria, at least where the sample is concerned. She describes the function as "fairly utilitarian". One could, however, raise the argument that contents reflect the changing functions of the area throughout the day. That would make it possible for the room to be used for the *salutatio* in the morning -- at which time it would be more representative -- and be "fairly utilitarian" later in the day. The two need not be mutually exclusive.

A second observation concerns the rooms of type 6, "medium/large rooms off the corners of front halls". These, according to Allison, should not be seen as winter dining rooms, as they have been traditionally, since little to no traces of dining room furniture have been found. It was not winter, however, when Vesuvius erupted, and some rooms of this type could easily have functioned for storing domestic material (see also p. 132) in summer, whilst the furniture could be found as proper mobilia in a more seasonally fitting place.

The sample furthermore shows that the image of gardens (type 9) and ambulatories as purely representational ought to be modified. Often there are traces of other activities (industrial, commercial, bulk and domestic storage). Yet to argue on the basis of cistern mouths in gardens that "there was unlikely to have been a spacial separation between display and utilitarian or even personal activities here", is going too far. Again, like in dealing with type 3 ("front halls") a possible plurality of functions throughout the day has been ignored.

It is tempting to generalise from Allison's findings. She for instance notes that on the whole in the front areas of these houses no food preparation and dining took place. But in insula V in Herculaneum, a dining room was built next to the entrance in the Casa Sannitica, and a kitchen in the Casa di Nettuno e Anfitrite.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that when analysing rooms, or deducing their function, small finds in general do not matter very much. Attributing a function is, in the majority of cases, based on architecture and the larger fixed design elements.

Chapter 6 ("Distribution of Household Activities", pp. 125-158) looks at the spatial distribution throughout the house of activities and wonders whether there is evidence for "segregation within Pompeian houses according to status, age, and gender". Allison's analysis is clear, though I wonder if the "wide distribution of jewelry and luxury toilet objects might support a lack of segregation along gender lines". Again, the temporal aspect is absent. The same applies to cloth production, which she deems a "highly visible activity" (p. 146-148) and

"an important part in the 'public' activities in the household." At the end of the chapter, Allison focuses on the groups of users, first "visitors" and then "enslaved and free", to clarify what artefact assemblages can teach us on those points.

Analysis shows that it is nearly impossible to differentiate according to age or gender, and that slaves are difficult to trace. Allison concludes (p. 157): "The seemingly limited results attained through analysis of artifact assemblages, however, should not be dismissed as uninformative." The question is whether the assembled material allows such questions.

In Chapter 7 ("Textual Nomenclature for Spaces", pp. 161-177), Allison confronts the found artefact assemblages per type room with the ancient names given to those rooms in modern times. In light of the above, her conclusion is expected: on the basis of the assembled material it is impossible to apply ancient names to the rooms under discussion. Perhaps treating all terms, apart from *latrina*, as problematic is too sceptical. In that case, one could even question the extent to which artefact assemblage support the latter name. Here, one would say, the name can be deduced from architecture and fixed elements, but that is not to say that the toilet was still in use as such in AD 79. It had been better if the whole discussion of labelling rooms with ancient terms had been discussed at this point alone. (Cf. for a critical discussion on ancient names for rooms in Roman residences: J.A. Dickmann, *Domus frequentata. Anspruchsvolles Wohnen im pompejanischen Stadthaus*, Munich 1999, 23-39).

Chapter 8 ("Conditions before and after the eruption in AD 79", pp. 179-198) discusses ongoing seismic activity and the changes visible in room function that these caused. Allison further indicates that absence of finds is too often connected to "post-eruption disturbance". Amongst other aspects, she discusses hoarding, which has often demonstrably taken place before the eruption. Also, the absence of building- or decorating material in rooms with unfinished decorations shows that (long) before the eruption these rooms had changed their domestic function.

In Chapter 9 ("Conclusions", pp. 201-203) the conspicuous conclusion is that: "Pompeii itself does not conform to the eponymous ideal" (p. 202). Here, too, points that have been discussed several times recur. Allison's conclusion as to the different types of information from archaeological data and written texts is that: "Neither is more valid than the other. They are just different and the relationship between them is often difficult to grasp." That might be too sceptical, and invites further reflexion.

The book closes with Appendix A, supplying the plans of houses (204-224), an extended bibliography (225-255) a glossary (245-246) and an index (247-255).

It is laudable that Allison has collected the information from her earlier loose publications into a monograph. The many older articles on the same subject have, however, lessened the potential 'scoop' value of the volume. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that most of the observations were already known, the synthesis is an enormous accomplishment. On the downside, the website is not very accessible and, more importantly, the volume limits itself to analysing separate spaces, without paying much attention to the functioning of households as a whole, notwithstanding the ambitious title of the work. One could rightly wonder whether our material allows for analysis of Roman life at that level -- even in a Pompeian residence.

Yet the book offers enough to become a must read for everyone dealing with artefacts in a Roman residential context. It perfectly demonstrates the possibilities and impossibilities of

artefact analysis in a prime site of Roman archaeology, making it a useful example of research elsewhere.