

Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii

A virtual guide to the world of the New Testament



by Peter Oakes
& Benedict Kent

This learning resource is intended for members of the public and for students interested in early Christianity and the New Testament. It uses the remarkable remains of Roman buildings at Pompeii to reconstruct the social world of early Christian communities. Peter Oakes is Professor of New Testament at the University of Manchester. These materials are based on his extensive research on Pompeii and early Christianity and the publications that have come out of it. Benedict Kent has a PhD in New Testament studies from the University of Manchester.

Feedback: These materials are available for free download. The one thing we ask is for users to consider providing feedback to help us understand how the resources are being used, how useful they are, and how they could be improved. Please follow the links at the bottom of our homepage to complete our short online questionnaire after using the resource. It's even more valuable to us if you can complete both our 'before' and 'after' questionnaires. If materials have been used as part of a study group, we'd also welcome feedback from group leaders.

Come again: We're also interested in the benefits this material might have for users. If you'd like to return in the future and tell us about any effects the learning has had, we'd love to hear about it. Follow the relevant link at the bottom of our homepage to leave a comment.

Additional resources: For a guide to Pompeii, downloadable maps and many further valuable resources about all the key sites in the region, visit the official Pompeii web-site, <http://pompeiiisites.org/en/>. For house summaries, visit [AD79](#). For extensive photo collections of the houses, visit pompeiiinpictures.com.

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A church in a cabinet-maker's house

Organisation, gifts and roles



Multiple sources attest to Christians meeting in the houses of craftworkers and artisans. Paul refers to Christians at Ephesus meeting in the house of a couple, Prisca and Aquila (1 Cor 16:19). The book of Acts identifies these hosts as tent-makers who came from Rome to Corinth and later relocated with Paul to Asia Minor before returning to Rome (Acts 18:2–3; 18–19; Rom 16:3–5). There is also a story of Christians at Philippi meeting in the house of a cloth-dealer, Lydia (Acts 16:11–15).

The cabinet-maker's house in the insula of the Menander (I.10.7)

The 1930s Italian archaeologists named this *casa del fabbro*, 'the house of the smith' but it more likely belonged to a cabinet-maker. It could have housed a *familia* of about 13 people and was probably rented from the owner of the elite house next door.



Elite features

Like the house of the Menander, this property has an entrance corridor, an atrium with an *impluvium* and decorated dining rooms, though it is less than a third of the size of an elite house. The rooms of the house are decorated (mainly modestly but a couple elaborately) and there was an upstairs dining room that overlooked the garden. Among the remains of the bedrooms were found money and jewellery which shows that, although the occupants were not elite, they were far from living in squalor. It had more space than 70% of other houses in Pompeii.

Practical function

The reception areas of this house were used for storing products rather than for display. The cabinet-maker probably used the courtyard garden at the back of the house for craftwork. A collection of medical tools discovered in one of the rooms suggests that multiple skills were practised among the household.

What might the items found in the house suggest about the social status of the craft-working familia who lived there?



Peter Oakes' craftworker church

Oakes suggests that a church of about 40 people could meet in a house like this, filling up the garden, portico and rear-facing dining rooms. Relationships in this model of church would still be those between friends, family members, neighbours, customers, suppliers, casual employees, apprentices and informal clients. The craftworker host would be located part-way up the social structure of the town, being a client to his wealthy landlord and a patron to the church members and to his own freed slaves or apprentices.

Church profile

- the host, his wife, children, slaves, dependants
- several other householders and their *familiae*
- a few members of non-Christian households
- some slaves and dependants of non-Christian owners
- a couple of homeless people

*Character cards

- ▶ What benefits could your character gain through belonging to this kind of expanded household? What drawbacks could there be?
- ▶ How would your character relate to others in this church? Who would they normally see as having greater or lesser status?
- ▶ Who would be most likely to occupy leadership positions in this kind of church?



Explore more houses

Visit next door (1.10.8) for a similar sized craftworker house, with impressive wall decorations.

Discuss more texts

Click [here](#) to download more discussion activities on what Paul writes next.

A letter to Christians in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 12:4–11

Paul's response to the Corinthians' treatment of spiritual gifts acknowledges that members of the Christ-movement were not uniform in their gifts and roles. God had given particular tasks to particular people.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.



*Character cards

- ▶ Who might be tempted to claim they had a superior gift?
- ▶ What would happen in the group if someone began exercising a spiritual gift that involved acting in a way unusual for their social position?
- ▶ How would your character respond to Paul's instructions?

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