

Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii

A virtual guide to the world of the New Testament



by Peter Oakes
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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 the elite house

Problems with meeting, eating and seating

The elite Roman house was a grand construction; its architecture, décor and furnishings were designed to broadcast the power and wealth of its owner, who would have belonged to the highest ranks of society. Elite Roman men did not leave their work at the forum—their homes were their head quarters from which they conducted their affairs. Pompeii boasts a number of these houses.

“With good reason, therefore, did Livius Drusus the tribune gain in reputation because, when many parts of his house were exposed to the view of his neighbours and an artisan promised to turn them the other way and change their position for only five talents, Drusus replied, ‘Take ten and make the whole house open to view, that all the citizens may see how I live.’”

Plutarch



The House of the Menander (I.10.4)

The entrance: Follow the links to [Pompeii in Pictures](#) and [AD79](#) for maps of the house. Then follow the link for a [view from the street](#). The name for this type of entrance was the *fauces* (literally meaning ‘jaws’).

The atrium: the first room upon entering the house; the atrium was a public area where the householder’s clients and visitors waited to be received. The pool in the centre (*impluvium*) would collect rain water and store it in a space below. Scroll through [the photo gallery](#) to get a sense of the scale and colours of the space.

What does the decoration and architecture of the atrium say about the family who live here? What would catch a visitor’s eye?



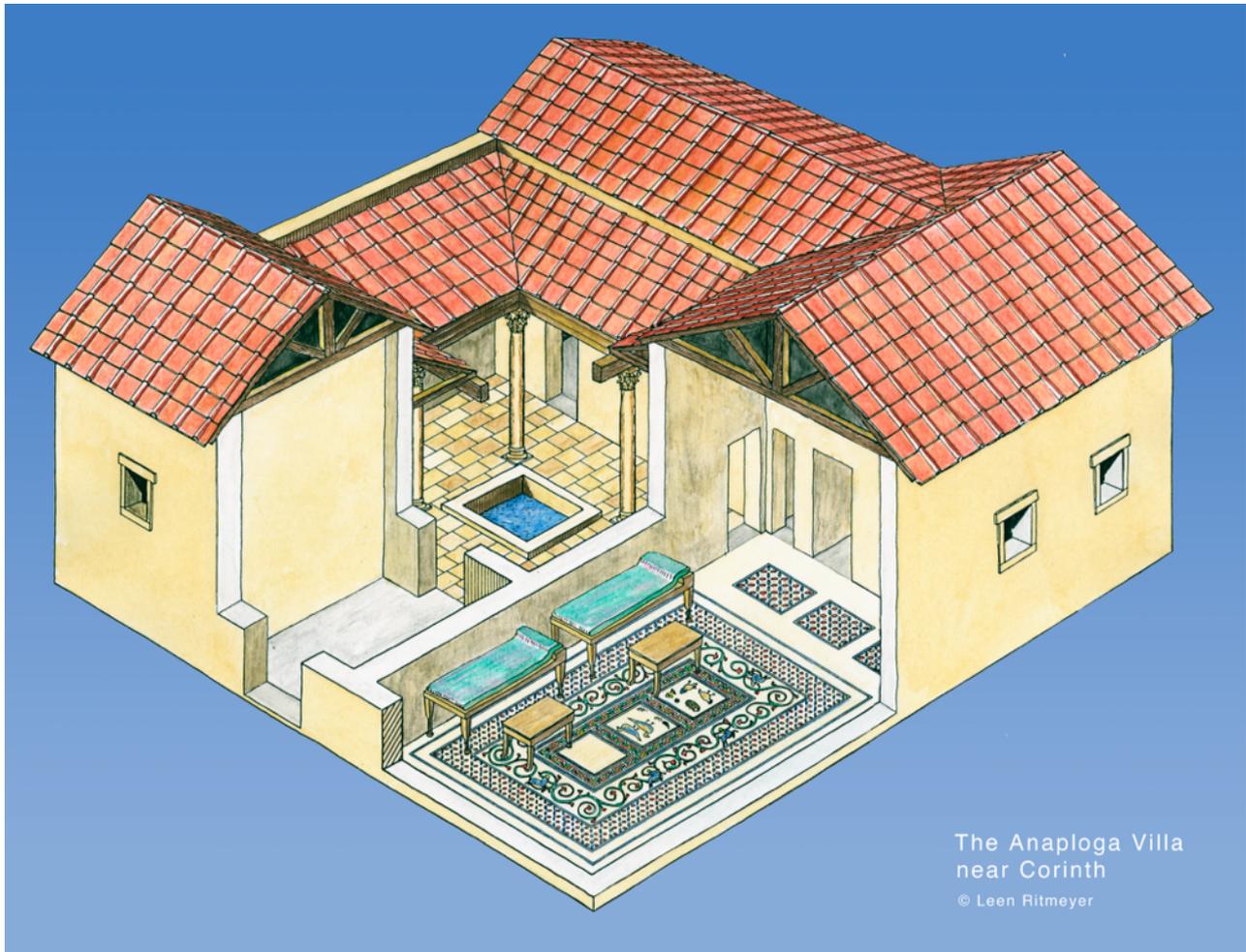
The triclinium: a dining room in the private part of the house for which a guest would need an invitation. The room would normally fit 9–15 people who reclined on three large couches around low tables in the centre (3–5 persons lying side by side on each couch). Have a look at some photos of [room 11](#) for a typical example, then at [room 18](#) for a larger style.

What kinds of people might be invited to dine here? What might happen if the space reached its capacity?



***Character cards**

- ▶ How do you think your character might feel when walking into this house for the first time?
- ▶ Could they expect to enter spontaneously or would they need an invitation?



Above: A 3-D view reconstructed by Leen Ritmeyer from the archaeological remains of an elite house at Anaploga, near Corinth. This is the house used by Jerome Murphy O'Connor in developing his theory discussed on the next page. (In the drawing, the dining room is laid out in a Greek style in which diners reclined on individual couches. As a Roman-style villa, diners there are more likely to have shared the three broader couches of a Roman *triclinium*.)

The actual remains of this house only exist to a little above floor level. However, it is enough to show that the house was like small villas elsewhere in the Roman world. Comparison with examples at better-preserved sites such as Pompeii have then been used to imagine the whole house. This is indicative of architectural similarities across much of the Roman world that enable us to use the richer evidence at Pompeii to think about housing and life in other towns and cities around the Mediterranean, such as the places to which Paul sent his letters.



Imagining a church meeting in an elite house

In another of his letters, Paul mentions all the Christians in Corinth meeting in the house of a single member.

“Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.” (Rom 16:23).

The following passage from 1 Corinthians would make good sense if the Corinthians were meeting in an elite house with an atrium and *triclinium*.

A letter to Christians in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 11:17–22

Paul has heard that there are divisions among the Corinthian Christians when they gather together to celebrate their communal meal, ‘the Lord’s Supper’. His letter suggests it was the poor members of the church who were losing out, with some going hungry while others feasted.

17 Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. **18** For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. **19** Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. **20** When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. **21** For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. **22** What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!



Banquets were places for stories, singing and debating, and could have provided a natural space for Christians to develop teachings and forms of worship. Murphy O’Connor suggests that the divisions at the Lord’s Supper could also be related to the elite house’s architecture. If a church gathering here was made up of approximately 40–50 people, and the dining room only allowed for 9–15 people, then the group could be split between the *triclinium* and the atrium.

Explore more houses

For some examples of lavish elite houses, follow the links to see the *triclinium* wall decorations in the house of [the Vettii](#), or the height of the atrium in the house of [Obellius Firmus](#). Scroll down the photo reel to find the entrance floor mosaics in the house of [Paquius Proculus](#).

Discuss more texts

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

*Character cards

- ▶ Where might your character be positioned in the situation?
- ▶ How would your character respond to what Paul writes?
- ▶ If the Corinthians did meet in the house of someone very wealthy, how would your character feel about it? How would it affect the nature of the group and the way it operated?



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Want to move from ancient to modern worlds?

Download [this activity sheet](#) to explore how different meeting spaces can affect group behaviours and identities—both in the past and in the present

