

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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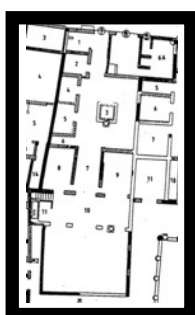
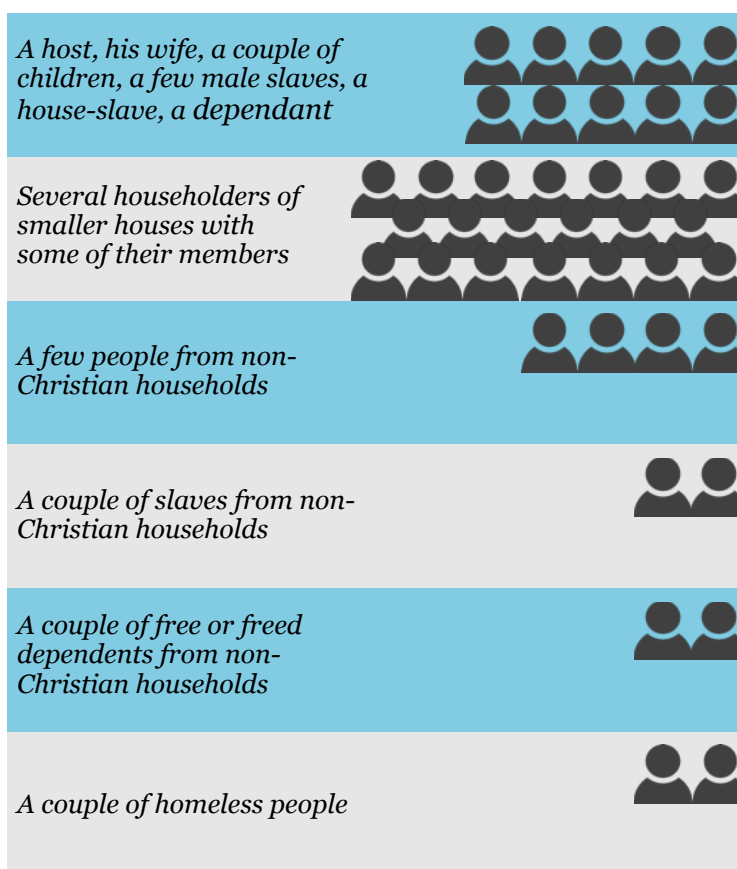
Modelling a craftworker house church

In *Reading Romans in Pompeii*, Peter Oakes presents a model of a 40-strong Christian community based on detailed analysis of the house of the cabinet-maker at Pompeii (I.10.7) and archaeological data from the town.

The profile that Oakes produces is one of significant diversity among a non-elite group. It dramatically highlights the social dynamics that a group of men and women, slaves and free, self-sufficient and dependant, would have been forced to negotiate.

Building the model:

The house of the cabinet-maker was likely occupied by a *familia* of about 10 people and could fit about 30 more in the dining rooms, atrium and garden. But what kinds of people would have belonged to this group?



Peter says: “To create the model I began with three assumptions. **1.** Christians would meet in the largest house available, so other householders in the group would have houses smaller than the cabinet-maker. **2.** We need to build in NT (and other historical) evidence that household members tended to follow their householder’s allegiances, but didn’t always do so. **3.** The socio-economic make-up of a Christian group should reflect that of a place as a whole, as long as we modify that to allow for the first two assumptions.

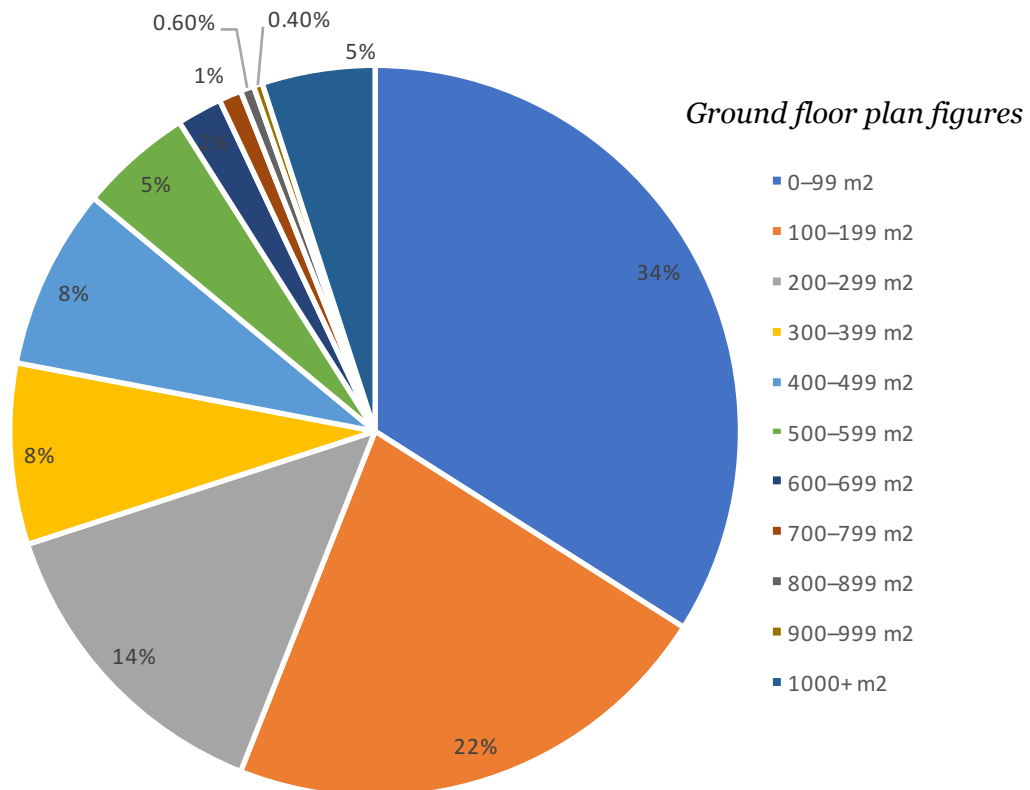
“I used Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s survey of Pompeian house sizes to construct the socio-economic profile of a random group of 30 Pompeians. I then used his data again to construct a model house church consisting of the cabinet-maker’s household and complete households of people from houses smaller than the cabinet-maker’s house. Because of the NT evidence that some households contained both Christians and non-Christians, I produced my final model by moving a little way from the complete-household house church model towards the random group



of Pompeians. This produced a model in which the Christians were mainly grouped in households, but with exceptions.

“Remember, this is a model. The exact numbers don’t matter. It’s a simplified representation of the historical evidence, designed as a tool to help us understand early Christian groups more accurately and usefully than if we saw them as an undifferentiated mass.”

The distribution of ground floor space in Pompeii



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- Map of the house of the cabinet-maker, adapted from Ling 1997, fig. 24 (drawn by S. Gibson, J. S. Gregory, R. J. Ling, D. Murdoch), with thanks to Roger Ling for permission to reproduce this plan
- Oakes, Peter. 2009. *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level*. London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Pompeian houses by cleprovost, from Pixabay; https://pixabay.com/users/cleprovost-3881971/?utm_source=link-attribution&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=image&utm_content=2688362