

## Shedding Light on Roman Social Practice: Artifact Assemblages at Pompeii and Karanis

Much scholarship on Roman art and archaeology primarily addresses a small segment of society, the elites. Inquiry is often similarly limited to the capital city of Rome and relies on elite literary sources. Recent work has called attention to this issue, especially through the study of monuments built by and for freedmen, as well as increased attention to the decoration and organization of non-elite homes, particularly those from the well-preserved city of Pompeii. It is now important to ask further questions; the decorative schemes and house plans cannot reliably tell us much about the people themselves. It is also necessary to assess Pompeii's utility as a test case for domestic life through comparison with other communities throughout the empire.

In this paper, I will look at material from both Pompeii and Karanis, a small town in the Fayyum region of Egypt, focusing on a much neglected but valuable source of information about day to day life: movable objects left behind by the people who lived and worked in these houses. Artifactual evidence has not been used to its full potential in the study of Roman domestic life. In past excavations, at Pompeii and elsewhere, artifacts were catalogued, preserved, placed into typologies, and considered with various technological or economic questions in mind. This work is valuable, but it should be considered a means to further analysis, rather than an end. Examining the finds from Pompeii and Karanis, in addition to house decoration and layout, allows us to challenge our assumptions about Roman domestic life and to detect regional variations and continuities.

Pompeii's importance to this endeavor is understandable, given its unique preservation, and much has been learned from the site. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (1994) shifted focus to the social use of space, including in his study all types of domestic spaces from one-room workshops to the sprawling Casa del Menandro. Penelope Allison (e.g. 2004) corrected false assumptions in Pompeian research, redirected the focus of such research to the house-by-house level, and called attention to the illuminating source that can be found in artifacts. Others have followed suit, both in attention to daily life (e.g. Clarke 2007) and in artifact assemblage analysis (e.g. Berry 1995).

Despite these innovative contributions, problems remain. First, the site of Pompeii is often mischaracterized and its wealth of potential evidence is misused; it was neither an average Roman city, nor is it a frozen picture of daily life. In addition, archaeological research has concentrated almost exclusively on elite "atrium houses" and much work has relied on incorrect assumptions about room use, habitation, and ownership drawn from analogy and literary reference. Perhaps most importantly, we need to question any wide application of patterns from Pompeii to the interpretation of domestic sites in other areas of the empire. Not to do so is to perpetuate the focus on the center of the Roman world to the exclusion of its cultural and geographical peripheries.

I will examine several houses from both Pompeii and Karanis. The assemblages discovered in each room may be used to identify the activities that potentially took place therein, allowing any spatial patterning of activities within the house to be uncovered. In addition, the inclusion of material from Karanis will provide sources unseen at Pompeii such as papyrus documents and rare artifacts such as children's toys, allowing for a fuller picture of Roman life. Comparison between the two sites will allow me to identify variation across the Roman domain, as well as similarities. For instance, most Pompeian

houses include a space comparable to the elite atrium: an open, well-lit area which was used for a variety of public, domestic, and sometimes industrial activities, while allowing access to other spaces. Although the courtyards of Karanis were generally shared by multiple houses, they appear to have served similar purposes: they were the location of communal food preparation as well as housework. While we tend to picture the atrium as the defining element of the elite house, the reality was that they often served utilitarian purposes and that a version existed at most levels of society. The presence of such spaces at Karanis shows that the residents of the town had well-developed ideas about space as well.

#### Works Cited

- Allison, P. (2004). *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture*. The Cotson Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Berry, J. (1995). *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii in A.D. 79: A Case-Study of Houses 11 and 12, Insula 9, Region I*. Papers of the British School at Rome, v. 65.
- Clarke, J. (2007). *Roman Life: 100 B.C. to A.D. 200*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1994). *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. Princeton University Press.