The Atrium and the Elite: Models of Space in Latin Literature

The study of space in literature and the archaeological record has been a matter of much

recent scholarship and frequent debate. Scholars have approached the topic using close

philological study, cognitive psychology, and archaeological methods but have been limited by

both the paucity of archaeological material from domestic contexts and few examples of insights

into the Roman conception of space in the literature. Many scholars have readily applied

Vitruvian derived room names, such as the *atrium*, to domestic spaces that seem to correlate with

Vitruvius’ descriptions. Others have argued for a complete dismissal of all room nomenclature in

favor of one based only on room assemblages and other archaeological material. This paper

combines both philological and archaeological approaches in order to analyze the cognitive

associations of Roman authors with the *atrium* in Latin literature. To do this, I located and

analyzed every occurrence of *atrium* in Latin literature. I then grouped every reference to the

*atrium* into patterns of association that included: the *atrium* as a place of ritual, a place of luxury,

and a place of conquest. These associations indicate that the conception of the *atrium*

is an upper class phenomenon and appears only in very specific socioeconomic contexts. This

evidence demonstrates the need to separate the *atrium* nomenclature for this space, and all of the

cognitive associations that go with it, from the archaeological term for the ‘*atrium*’ as a 'front

hall'. The *atrium* is not just any front room but a specific room where particular rituals and

activities of the upper class occurred. This paper underscores the need to both problematize the

use of Vitruvian room nomenclature as applied to room types and also carefully analyze the

literary record in order to discover cognitive associations that may not be present in the

archaeological material.

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