

## Unlocking the Past: the Keys of Gabii

The city of Gabii is an ancient Roman town in Latium, occupied from the Iron Age through the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. Eight seasons of excavation (2009- 2017) have been undertaken by The Gabii Project, run by the University of Michigan and the University of Missouri, to understand the nature and processes of city planning, expansion and abandonment in ancient Latium, as well as Italy at large (Mogetta and Becker 2014). During the 2012-2017 excavation seasons, a total of eighteen keys were discovered. This is the most complete assemblage of keys from contexts in Roman Italy to be studied together, though some work has been done on museum collections in Alpine Italy and Austria (Raffaelli and Bassi 1996). Most of the keys are from 2<sup>nd</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE contexts, a time in which we see dramatic contraction in the inhabited areas of Gabii (Farr 2014). In this paper I will examine the ideas of access, privacy and property as well as the symbolism of keys themselves and will discuss what they can reveal about privacy and property among the early Imperial inhabitants of Gabii.

The key holds a special place in Roman religion, and is carried by a number of gods and goddesses, from Hecate to Janus to Ceres. The key becomes a symbol of power as it is closely connected with the door, which metaphorically represents the boundaries between worlds, life and death. Many of the gods who are depicted with keys have connections to Oriental cults, though the existence of the *Portunalia* festival among the Romans indicates that the importance of the key was not necessarily an import. What we see is the connection between keys and liminality in religion, but a practical aspect must have existed for keys as well. The two areas I will examine for this are privacy and personal property in the Roman world.

When discussing concepts of privacy and personal property in Roman society, there are several important points to consider. First, the Romans did not share the same sense of a 'right to

privacy' as it is codified today (Periñán 2012). What we see instead is a system of privacy that is based on levels of access, both to individuals and to inner spaces, as is reflected in Roman architecture (Nevett 2010; Allison 2007). This raises questions about the use of keys to maintain privacy within the Roman home. Since guests could penetrate all the way into the bedrooms of a house, the use of the key may be more for the protection of personal property than the protection of an inner self.

In terms of property, we see the key presented as a status symbol, with a correlation between the number of keys needed and the amount of property owned (Allen 1996). This status is displayed through the practice of visibly carrying around one's keys in public. In a wealthier household the keys were carried either by a steward or the mistress of the house, and we know from the Twelve Tables that the returning of the household keys was a form of divorce. Questions of ownership come into play here: by the time the Gabii keys were deposited, Roman women had gained the ability to own property of their own, leading to a rise in personal goods that women would want to protect against theft (Dixon 1985). Consequently, the examination of the Gabii keys must take into account not only the archaeological contexts themselves, but also the context of what was occurring in Roman society as a whole around the time they were buried, in order to draw conclusions about the usage and symbolism of the Gabii keys.

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