

# The Art of an Entrance: Ambiguity and Experience in the Decorative Programs of Roman Doorways

The ambiguity and danger of doorways, thresholds, and portals was a long-standing belief among the ancient Romans. To mitigate this danger Roman public buildings, domestic spaces, and funerary structures were outfitted with various types of protective imagery meant to ensure safe passage for all who moved through. In this paper I aim to explore the extent to which the architectural forms and decorative elaboration of Roman domestic doorways were conceptualized as, and utilized to engage with, the perception of doorway spaces as dangerous, transitional, and ambiguous. In particular, I will consider the work of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and John Clarke, who have taken two different, yet not opposing, approaches to the study of Roman domestic display, to suggest that doorways were highly charged, yet flexible and multivalent spaces and symbols.

Key to my project is the observation that the architectural and decorative elaboration of doorways range from wall painting to mosaic, and together form a cohesive program. While previous scholars have addressed this phenomenon using isolated examples of protective imagery or portal morphology, I consider the art and architecture of Roman doorways comprehensively to highlight the important visual nature and experience of passing through a portal in the Roman world. To accomplish this I draw on theories of urban space, and the phenomenology of the Roman city to understand the lived experience and visual symbolism of Roman portals. As a part of this approach, I will study doorways both as entrances and exits, to determine whether or not significant differences occur in the decoration and forms of portals based on one's direction of approach.

In this paper I will present the preliminary findings of my study and intended methodology, which includes the survey of a representative sample of domestic doorways in Pompeii to track any patterns or trends in doorway decoration. I hope to demonstrate not only the significance and multivalence of doorways as space and symbol, but also the particular dangers of ambiguous space, and the importance of examining the lived experience of the decorative program of the Roman *ostium*.

Works Consulted:

- Clarke, John R. 1991. *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.c.-A.d. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
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- Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew. 1988. "The Social Structure of the Roman House." *Papers of the British School at Rome* 56: 43-97.
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