

**MARCEL DANNER, *Wohnkultur im spätantiken Ostia*.** Kölner Schriften zur Archäologie volume 1. Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden 2017. € 78,-. ISBN 978-3-95490-128-9. 342 pages with 133 figures and 27 tables.

By choosing the “Residential Culture of Ostia in Late Antiquity” as the subject of his doctoral thesis, submitted to the University of Cologne in 2012, Marcel Danner applied himself to an extraordinarily interesting and topical theme. The first chapter, on “Excavation and Research History” (pp. 3–8), explains why. The first section (pp. 3–5) describes how earlier archaeological investigations in Ostia, carried out in the 1930s and ’40s, were a race against time to uncover as much of the ancient city as possible and restore the surviving ruins before the World Exhibition planned for 1942, where the project was intended to showcase the prestige of Italian archaeology. For well-known reasons, the exhibition did not, in fact, take place. The circumstances of the excavation, however, meant that the requirements of scientific research took a back seat, with the result that today, although ancient Ostia looks magnificent, with impressive ruins in which the original features can hardly be distinguished from the modern restoration, very little is known about the architectural and social development of Rome’s harbour town between its heyday in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and the period of Late Antiquity. Only in the last few years have these aspects of its history become a stronger focus of archaeological research.

In his thesis, the author also touches on another major research topic of recent years: the Roman villa. Interest has revolved around the social conditions which led to the increasing domestic luxury of villas, contrasting this with the meagre tenements occupied by the masses and, at the other end of the social scale, with so-called “palaces”. Chapter 2 on the “History and Current State of Research on Housing” provides a summary of this recent research.

Having outlined the “Research Questions and Methodological Approach” in chapter 3 (pp. 9–16), the author goes on in chapter 4 (pp. 17–22) to apply his two main areas of enquiry to 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Ostia, developing an overall picture of the metropolis at this period and illustrating it with examples of two individual properties. Unfortunately, it is difficult to locate them on the extremely small plan provided of the area of the city where they are located.

The whole of chapter 5 is devoted to “The Urban Development of Ostia from the Severan Period Onwards” (pp. 23–28). Three sub-sections divide the development of the town into three very long stages, ending with the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The caesura between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (chapter 4) and the Severan period (chapter 5) results from the author’s definition of Late Antiquity, which he defines in the introduction, as “the whole period between the third and fifth century” (p. 1). This periodisation poses a considerable problem for the reader, however, and causes repeated difficulties in understanding in the subsequent chapters. For example, the author gives a good account of the “symptoms of an economic crisis” detectable in Ostia from the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, mentioning amongst other things domestic and commercial buildings in the northern area of the city that were not rebuilt after being destroyed by fire (p. 23), but when it comes to dating individual features, he does not make clear whether a 3<sup>rd</sup>-century property dates from the first half of the century, and therefore from the Severan period of urban prosperity, or from the latter part of the century, thus representing instead the start of the Late Antique period of decline, which he has defined as his main focus of interest.

Chapter 6 discusses the “House and its Urban Context in Late Antique Ostia” (pp. 29–47). The author gives an overview of the most popular residential quarters in Late Antiquity, which he locates in the southern half of the excavated area of the city. These are shown on a general city plan, which is again, unfortunately, very small (p. 40 Fig. 7). The next section looks back at the urban structure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century when, the author argues, desirable residential areas tended

to be pushed to the edges of the city. Next comes a section entitled “The transformation of the centre into a popular residential area in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD” (pp. 37–44). The author attempts to explain this evident centripetal tendency in terms of lower plot prices in the city centre caused by a decline in population numbers, but he does not supply any evidence from contemporary sources. In his view, the trend led to the development in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries of “Luxury quarters and enclaves”, which he discusses in the fourth section of the chapter, followed by a briefly discussed decline in “readiness to invest” after the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century, when an earthquake appears to have caused major damage (p. 47).

Having addressed the development of urban architecture and infrastructure in Ostia from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the late 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, Danner turns in the seventh chapter to the “Features of Late Antique Houses in Ostia” (pp. 49–55). He pays particular attention to the external walls of the houses, as “interfaces between interior and exterior”, whose various masonry techniques he personally carefully analysed during his study period in Ostia. Another important contact zone between the houses and their surroundings were their entrances, which he classifies as main or side entrances depending on their more or less prestigious appearance. Another interesting aspect, discussed in an excursus, is “Building over streets and pavements” (pp. 54–55). Danner asks whether building on or over streets and pavements would have been against local regulations, concluding, however, that “it is impossible to tell from the features in Ostia.”

Chapter 8, devoted to the “Rooms and Spatial Arrangement” of Late Antique houses in Ostia (pp. 57–83), is mainly a study of ground plans, from which the author attempts to trace structural similarities between the houses, based on the positions of the rooms, their sizes and number, and to describe the rooms that were particularly typical of Late Antique houses in Ostia. Separate sections address the different types of room encountered in almost all the houses examined: entrance areas, tavernas, porticos and corridors, courtyards, main rooms, staircases, and upper floors. Rooms which had no significant features were usually small and not intended for interactions between larger groups of people (p. 81). In summing up this chapter, the author confirms the opinion reached by other researchers, that “the Late Antique houses of Ostia did not conform to any consistent architectural typology” (p. 81). This can partly be explained by the often-observed re-use of already-existing structures or segments of buildings.

The ninth chapter (pp. 85–116) discusses “Fixtures and Fittings” as an important source from which to reconstruct the original uses of individual rooms. Of course, this does not refer to individual finds or mobile inventory as clues to room function but almost exclusively to in situ discoveries of floor coverings and mosaic floors (pp. 85–94) and, less frequently, remains of wall decorations (pp. 94–98), elements of water supply systems and nymphaea (pp. 98–106), and, not least, kitchens and heating systems (pp. 106–108). Statuary survives from some Late Antique houses, and this is presented in the final section of the chapter. The author uses the excavation documentation to allocate statues to their original contexts (pp. 109–116). Among them are several private portraits as well as various representations of deities. No iconographic programme can be reconstructed from the latter, however, as has occasionally been possible in the case of Imperial-period villas.

In chapter 10, “The Late Antique Houses of Ostia in Context” (pp. 117–139), Danner asks whether the building complexes in Ostia which he has so far investigated are “in any way representative of the residential culture of Late Antiquity as a whole” and goes on to consider whether “it is, in fact, possible to speak of an ‘international residential culture’ for the period in question” (p. 117). To find answers to these questions, he compares six case studies of residences from different regions: the urban palaces of senators in Late Antique Rome and urban residential buildings in northern Italy, North Africa, Greece, Asia Minor, and Syria. He also reviews “Villas as rural

retreats in the west of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity” (pp. 133–136). What this selection of case studies, some of which appear rather randomly chosen, have in common, he finds, is “that most ... do not conform to a uniform international residential taste, but that regional differences must be assumed” (p. 136). He does not provide any more precise definition of these, however. In the final section of the chapter, he attempts to define the “general characteristics and regional developments” of the sophisticated residential culture of Late Antiquity (pp. 136–139). Since there appears to be no architectural typology of the “normal” house in Late Antiquity, the author argues for speaking instead of “characteristic – i. e., widely disseminated but by no means obligatory – elements” (p. 136). Moreover, the features of Late Antique houses in Ostia, discussed in detail in chapters 7–9, would already have been found in sophisticated houses from the Middle Imperial period.

In the next two chapters, the author investigates the clues to social history offered by the archaeological features. The chapter entitled “Patterns of Circulation and Types of Use” (pp. 141–162) begins with an excursus on the naming of individual areas of the house (pp. 142–144), in which the author matches the room names used, with very varied meanings, in the written sources to the archaeological features. He ascribes a highly important function to the entrance area, which was noticeably well-appointed in all the Late Antique houses investigated in Ostia. He sees this area, on the one hand, as a “filter” (p. 144), designed to impede uncontrolled movement into the interior of the house, while at the same time impressing those entering with its rich décor. From here, visual axes opened into the interior of the house and it was from here, too, that the visitor’s route to the reception area began. This route varied, depending on the individual ground plan of the house in question, but in all the examples investigated, was designed to show off to the visitor the prosperity or wealth of the house’s owner. In a sense, by concentrating his analysis on the areas of the house which were deliberately public and accessible, and only briefly discussing the house-keeping areas and the private rooms, the author goes along with the intentions of these house owners of Late Antique Ostia.

In chapter 12 “On the Semantics of Interior Furnishings” (pp. 163–174), Danner returns to the fixtures and fittings mentioned in chapter 9, with the aim of characterising the sophisticated taste of 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup>-century residential culture. A subsection is devoted to an analysis of domestic statuary as the symbol of an aristocratic ideal. In further sections, he discusses “Marble as a reflection of wealth and prestige” (pp. 167–170) and the “Importance of water-supply systems” (pp. 170–173). In general, the author observes that the various furnishing elements “emphasised particular qualities of the owner of the house in a very direct way”. This he sees as an important contrast to the traditional furnishings in Early Imperial-period villas, which were designed, rather, to convey the owner’s participation in an aristocratic lifestyle that transcended individualism (pp. 173–174).

In the final chapter of analysis, Danner asks whether the owners of the Late Antique houses in Ostia were really part of the social elite or whether they merely wished to suggest that they were through their ostentatious display of luxury (pp. 175–183). To answer this, he looks for evidence that the architecture of the houses imitated that of imperial residences or public buildings but concludes that the archaeological features in Ostia do not offer evidence either way.

In the catalogue section (pp. 189–295), all the details of the 18 houses investigated, on which the preceding chapters of analysis are based, can be found. The author adheres consistently to a self-imposed scheme for describing individual features: permalink (to the Arachne Database) – dimensions – excavation and restoration – state of preservation – building technique – construction history – inscriptions – statuary – selected research literature. In each case, a drawing of the ground plan is supplied, and in the figures section all the ground plans appear with coloured marking to distinguish different building phases. Although the author always uses the same colours to

indicate the relative sequence of building phases, this does not automatically mean even roughly similar dates. For instance, red is used everywhere for “Phase 1”, but in one case indicates “a late 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD date” (p. 191 cat. no. 1), while in another case “a late 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD date” is probable (p. 246 cat. no. 11). Since his thesis is specifically about Late Antique architecture, it would have been desirable for construction from this period to have been clearly distinguished by colour coding from earlier phases.

At the end of the text section is a detailed bibliography (pp. 297–317), along with separate indices of geographical locations and buildings (pp. 319–321), names and mythological figures (p. 321), and subjects (pp. 321–323). These are followed by picture credits, the ground plans of the 18 houses studied, and nine colour photographs of floor mosaics and wall decorations.

Conclusion: Since the excavation of Ostia was, at times, motivated more by the politics of the day than a desire to increase the sum of archaeological and historical knowledge, Marcel Danner’s methodical approach to his chosen theme, subjecting all the available excavation documentation to very careful review and analysis, is highly commendable. He is able to prove that a certain number of houses continued to be used, wholly or partly, until as late as the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, not least because of his chosen time frame and his assignment of the whole of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to “Late Antiquity” as well as his frequently somewhat imprecise use of dates, he has succeeded only to a very qualified extent in explaining the structural change which occurred in the residential culture of Ostia between the Early and Middle Imperial period and the Late Imperial period or Late Antiquity.

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**ELLEN SWIFT, Roman Artefacts and Society. Design, Behaviour and Experience.** Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017. £ 94,–. ISBN 978-0-19-878526-2 (Hardcover). XIV + 305 Seiten mit zahlreichen Abbildungen.

Ellen Swift nähert sich in dieser Studie unterschiedlichen römischen Artefaktgruppen unter dem Aspekt der Mensch-Objekt-Beziehungen. Von besonderer Bedeutung ist ihr dabei ein theoretisch informierter Ansatz, der das Design der untersuchten Objekte mit den Nutzungsformen und -erfahrungen der damaligen Gesellschaft in Verbindung bringen soll.

Zentral ist dabei das Konzept der „affordance“, wobei es schwierig ist, für diesen Begriff eine adäquate Übersetzung ins Deutsche zu finden. In der Regel wird er als „Angebots“- oder „Aufforderungscharakter“ oder als „Affordanz“ übersetzt und hat in den letzten Jahren vor allem in der Designtheorie stark an Bedeutung gewonnen. Gerade die Nutzung des Begriffes „Angebotscharakter“ unterstreicht aber eine Entwicklung in der Umsetzung des Konzeptes, die D. NORMAN in der letzten, überarbeiteten Version seines Klassikers „The Design of Everyday Things“ (New York 2013) kritisiert hat. Seiner Meinung nach ist in den letzten Jahren über die Affordanz zu einseitig in Bezug auf das Objekt und seine materiellen Eigenschaften diskutiert worden. Dabei ergibt sie sich nach ihm erst aus dem Zusammenspiel zwischen dem Objekt und dem mit ihm in Kontakt tretenden Menschen mit seinen physischen, kognitiven und kulturellen Fähigkeiten. Am Beispiel einer von Swift diskutierten Artefaktgruppe bedeutet dies, dass ein Fingerring durch seine